

THE EPIC IN FRANCE

FROM

PIRON'S LA LOUISIADE (1745)

TO

CHATEAUBRIAND'S LES MARTYRS (1809)

Terrence Miles Pratt

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

The University of Leeds,
Department of French.

October, 1978

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SUMMARY

This thesis has as its object to investigate the fate of epic in France in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Piron's La Loüisiade of 1745 and Chateaubriand's Les Martyrs of 1809 are chosen to indicate the precise delimitation of the period of study. Given the incidence of epic composition during these sixty-odd years, no attempt at completeness has been made but representative works are examined in sufficient number and detail to ensure an accurate idea of the genre.

In the belief that an informed reading of epic is impossible without a knowledge of epic theory, Chapter One explores the substantial corpus of critical writing on the subject during the years under review. There is constant reference to previous critical opinion in an attempt to discover to what extent the theory of epic remained faithful to the neo-classical norm in France.

Following this necessary preliminary, Chapters Two to Four present a detailed analysis of the three major categories of this generic form. These latter comprise: the national historical epic, epics on the discovery and conquest of the New World and the biblical epic. The first and third categories represent a continuation of an established French tradition, whereas the second is innovatory and peculiar to the eighteenth century. Within these three chapters, each of which is therefore devoted to one class of epic, works are subjected to individual critical assessment and are normally treated in a chronological sequence based on subject-matter.

In order to achieve an overall picture of epic practice, Chapter Five briefly charts the general features of creative epic writing in France from 1745 to 1809. The Conclusion evaluates the genre and offers some reasons for its failure.

FOREWORD

I began work on this thesis when I was appointed to the Barbier Fellowship in the Department of French at the University of Leeds and I should first like to express my thanks to Dr. Howard Evans for his encouragement and for his patient supervision of my researches.

I should like to acknowledge three grants from the Research Fund of the University of Sheffield which enabled me to work in Paris.

I am most grateful to Mrs. Annette Roberts for typing the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is intended as a record and analysis of a much criticized aspect of French literature - namely, the heroic epic poem in the second half of the eighteenth century and the earliest years of the nineteenth.

It should immediately be admitted, however, that no ambition to reverse the critical disdain of some two centuries animates the present study and the point must clearly be made at the outset that the choice of the epic poetry of that period for discussion contains no implicit indication that it enjoys any particular literary merit.

The justification for the investigation conducted here lies not, then, in the intrinsic excellence of the poetic product itself but rather in the fact that, without according due attention to epic poetry, an accurate estimation of the literary scene in France from, say, Voltaire to Chateaubriand cannot be obtained. A survey of contemporary opinion in Chapter One, for example, establishes that during those years epic continued to receive widespread critical recognition as the supreme species of literature and the most meritorious goal of literary endeavour. Moreover, the thirty or so poems which are examined here - and which admittedly do not comprehend all the specimens of the genre between 1745 and 1809 - show that the sublime status of epic exercised an attraction which writers, despite the sobering example of their predecessors in the seventeenth century, were unable to resist.

French epic poetry in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries therefore merits serious consideration on account of the high esteem heroic epic commanded among theorists of literature and the creative activity the desire to wear the ultimate literary crown

inspired in the world of letters. In this respect, the present thesis stands as an incidental corrective to the nescience and contempt of many modern scholars.

High on the list of the misconceptions surrounding the subject must be placed the erroneous belief that the epic poem led an extremely tenuous existence in the Age of Reason. Rémy Saisselin claimed recently that "the Epic posed serious problems for eighteenth-century poets : so many, indeed, that only one tried his hand at it, and he is hardly read for that particular accomplishment."¹ Jasinski, too, has written of French literature between 1750 and 1780 that "l'épopée disparaît, nul n'osant rivaliser avec la Henriade."² Yet such assertions, however wildly they underestimate the incidence of epic composition in the period, at least demonstrate some awareness of the phenomenon, whereas the total silence in which manuals of French literary history are wont to pass over eighteenth-century epic may well betoken greater ignorance. Even the perfunctory dismissal of the genre in a few scornful sentences - the kindest fate with which it can expect to meet - betrays a fundamental failure to appreciate eighteenth-century literary values and aspirations and constitutes a striking instance of how easily the tastes and

1. R.G. Saisselin, The rule of reason and the ruses of the heart: a philosophical dictionary of classical French criticism, critics, and aesthetic issues (Cleveland : Case Western Reserve University Press, 1970), p.79.

2. R. Jasinski, Histoire de la littérature française. Nouvelle édition. 2 vols. (Paris : Nizet, 1965-66), II, 84.

preoccupations of any age can become distorted in subsequent critical opinion.

But whatever the satisfaction to be gleaned from taking to task individual twentieth-century literary historians, this thesis derives from another and less censorious motive. It has as its aim to present a detailed study of the epic poem in the later eighteenth-century in France, and thereby to fill a lacuna in the history of post-Renaissance French epic poetry.

M.P. Hagiwara has examined the various treatises on epic poetry written during the sixteenth century and compared them with some of the poems composed at the same time.³ A chapter on its sixteenth-century antecedents is also included in R.A. Sayce's illuminating book on seventeenth-century biblical epic.⁴ A former research student of his, David Maskell, has produced a comprehensive account of the historical epic in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵ Nineteenth-century French epic poetry has been equally well served.

3. M.P. Hagiwara, French epic poetry in the sixteenth century : theory and practice (The Hague : Mouton, 1972).

4. R.A. Sayce, The French biblical epic in the seventeenth century (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1955).

5. D. Maskell, The historical epic in France 1500-1700 (Oxford : University Press, 1973).

In 1936, Henri Guillemin published two works which were concerned with the genre.⁶ H.J. Hunt's superb investigation into nineteenth-century epic⁷ appeared shortly after and was later followed by Léon Cellier's volume on the French romantic epic.⁸ The heroic epic poem during the Enlightenment, however, has been considerably less favoured by scholars and O.R. Taylor's exhaustive critical edition of Voltaire's Henriade stands as the only major contribution in the field.⁹ The wealth of information it contains makes Professor Taylor's tome an indispensable tool for any researcher into eighteenth-century French epic but references to the latter part of the period are necessarily limited and are largely confined to determining the practical and theoretical influence of Voltaire's poem.

In the critical history of post-Renaissance French epic poetry, the years following the publication of the Henriade therefore remain untreated in any modern study and the desirability of repairing such a significant omission hopefully becomes self-evident. The precise

6. H. Guillemin, Lamartine : Les Visions" (Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 1936) and Le "Jocelyn" de Lamartine (Paris : Boivin, 1936).

7. H.J.Hunt, The epic in nineteenth-century France : a study in heroic and humanitarian poetry from "Les Martyrs" to "Les Siècles Morts" (Oxford : Blackwell, 1941).

8. L. Cellier, L'épopée romantique (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1954).

9. O.R. Taylor, ed. Voltaire : La Henriade, 2nd edition (Genève : Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1970).

delimitation of that literary period also appears largely to suggest itself, so that the specific dates which initiate and terminate this inquiry do not represent a wholly arbitrary choice.

Alexis Piron's celebration of the French victory at Fontenoy in his Loüisiade of 1745 marks the revival of epic in France after nearly two decades of silence¹⁰ and must obviously inaugurate this survey. The decision regarding the chronological terminus ad quem, however, was taken with rather more difficulty, in that heroic epics in the eighteenth-century manner continued to appear well into the nineteenth century. Chateaubriand's Martyrs of 1809 was finally selected because it forms the point of departure for Hunt's record proper of the nineteenth-century manifestations of epic but this date unfortunately entails some sacrifice of thematic perspective, especially in the case of the national historical epic. Although the investigation is therefore pursued into the early 1800's, the phrase, "the later eighteenth century", is not entirely inappropriate to describe the period under discussion, given the survival of the formal epic patterns of Enlightenment epic into the nineteenth century.

Within this restricted literary period, then, attention is focused on French heroic epic and clarification of the criteria of selection consistently applied in this thesis now seems required. The basic test for inclusion is simply that of genuine epic intention, whether expressed directly by the author in his title and prefatory remarks, or indirectly by his recourse to those canonical formulae

10. See Taylor, pp.214-15.

which served in France between 1745 and 1809 as distinguishing features of that particularly literary form.

As it appears in the present study, the term "epic" designates a serious narrative work of some length, in verse or in prose, which preferably relates a single notable event or exploit and in which the writer normally signals his literary intention by his use of the conventional elements of the genre. These latter comprise a proem of proposition and invocation, a division into books on the Homeric and Virgilian model or into cantos following the Italian tradition, an artificial order of events, reliance on supernatural machinery, and the introduction of such topoi as enumerations, orations, single combats and pitched battles, councils and banquets, visions, prophecies and ekphrasis. If found in combination, these characteristics will almost invariably identify a work as epic and warrant its inclusion here. However, since the notion of epic was never completely fixed and indeed evolved during the years under review, the isolated absence of even the most traditional of these distinctive traits in a given work will not inevitably oblige its exclusion but will at least necessitate some discussion of its right to consideration. From the time of the Italian Renaissance, the poems of antiquity and the practice of Virgil in particular had been invoked to decree that these devices were proper to the genre and so epic composition in France from Voltaire to Chateaubriand can accurately be styled neoclassical.

It is hardly necessary to add, of course, that this thesis is exclusively concerned with examples of what is perhaps best called "secondary" or "literary" epic, that is, narrative poems which are the creation of the unique imagination of an individual author and which are destined for transmission to the public by the written word.

The incidence of this generic form in France in the period under study is very considerable, the opinion of modern critics notwithstanding, and it would be futile to attempt to offer here an exhaustive catalogue of epic production during those sixty-odd years. Rather, the three major categories of the type have been selected for detailed analysis and some thirty epics of the later eighteenth century are examined both as individual productions and as groups of poems. This number seems more than sufficient to convey an accurate idea of the essential nature of epic in France from the publication of La Louisiade up to that of Les Martyrs.

Reprinting of the French epic poems written between 1745 and 1809 proved to be the exception rather than the rule and consequently first editions have been consulted in the vast majority of instances. This policy has been maintained, whenever possible, for contemporary theorists also and quotations from creative and critical writers alike reproduce the orthography and punctuation of the edition cited. In the case of earlier and foreign theorists, any accessible modern edition has been used.

CHAPTER ONE

THE THEORY OF EPIC

An examination of the theory of epic elaborated in France between 1745 and 1809 would seem to require an attempt to establish a wider historical perspective. To be appreciated fully, the substantial corpus of critical writing on epic in the period indicated cannot be considered in isolation, as a totality at once static and self-contained. Rather it should be recognized that the fundamental notions of the epic genre held between the above dates largely represent an adherence to, or reaction against, critical thought on that subject in France over a prior period of at least two centuries. Ultimately, of course, the doctrine propounded by writers from Mallet to Chateaubriand could boast of antecedents far more remote in time and place.

While it is not the purpose of the present thesis to trace the evolution over the centuries of particular articles of the epic creed, the investigation of individual rules governing the genre between 1745 and 1809 will normally include, therefore, a brief reference to earlier critical attitudes.

In addition, it seems advisable to preface the detailed study of epic theory in the period delimited above with some preliminary remarks on the tradition of critical writing on epic in France.

The Background

The birth of theoretical writing on epic in France can conveniently, if not completely accurately, be retraced to the publication in 1549 of

Du Bellay's Deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse, in which the author devoted a whole chapter to a consideration of the genre.¹ To suggest, however, that some further hundred years elapsed before the true origins of eighteenth-century critical attitudes can meaningfully be sought, is not to ignore the existence of the various treatises which followed Du Bellay's in the sixteenth century.² Rather it is to recognize that it was in the fourth decade of the seventeenth century that French classical literary theory proper began to crystallize and that it was not until 1652 that the French critic Mambrun composed, and that in Latin, the first work to treat exclusively of epic.³

To assert that the foundation of this French classical criticism lay in Aristotelianism rather than in Aristotle himself is to make a subtle but vital distinction, for it was substantially through the agency of his Italian commentators of the sixteenth century that Aristotle's literary canons penetrated into France.⁴ These commentators explained and expanded

1. Book ii, chapter v, "Du long poëme francoys". J. Du Bellay, La deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse, ed. H. Chamard (Paris: Didier, 1948), pp. 127-36.
2. For an analysis in chronological order of the various treatises dealing with epic poetry in sixteenth-century France, see M. P. Hagiwara, French epic poetry in the sixteenth century: theory and practice (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 14-47.
3. P. Mambrun, Dissertatio peripatetica de epico carmine (Paris: Cramoisy, 1652).
4. For the influence of Italian theorists in France, see R. Bray, La formation de la doctrine classique en France (Paris: Hachette, 1927), pp. 34-48. The same author deals with the cult of Aristotle in France on pp. 49-61.

the conclusions of the Greek critic⁵ and erected, allegedly on his authority, the basic structure of the awesome edifice of precepts and formulae that literary critics had constructed in France by 1660.

For no literary genre more than epic did French classical critics delight to prescribe and legislate⁶ and from the plethora of learned disquisitions on epic two of the most famous might be singled out for mention. Boileau's comments on epic in the Art poétique (1674)⁷ at least make some reference to potential critical response but no more extreme example can surely be proposed of the aridly intellectual approach of much contemporary criticism than the ultra-formalistic treatise by Le Bossu,⁸ in which the components of epic are defined, dissected and debated with little or no regard for aesthetic considerations.

Boileau and the more extreme Le Bossu may justifiably be numbered among the most enthusiastic representatives of that body of critical opinion in seventeenth-century France which regarded supreme success in the theory and practice of literature as being the unique achievement of the men of letters of ancient Greece and Rome. In the same way that these devotees of antiquity venerated the accomplishment of Homer and Virgil in the field of epic, so they exalted the literary judgements of ancient critics, par-

5. The influence of Aristotle's Poetics on the growth of classicism in Italian Renaissance criticism is analysed in J. E. Spingarn, A history of literary criticism in the Renaissance: with special reference to the influence of Italy in the formation and development of modern classicism (London: Macmillan, 1899), pp. 136-48.
6. See Bray, pp. 99-113 for a general discussion of the importance of rules in French classicism and pp. 336-49 for an account of the rules peculiar to epic.
7. L'art poétique, chant iii, ll. 160-334. See N. Boileau, Oeuvres complètes, ed. F. Escal (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1966), pp. 172-77. Boileau's evident debt to Horace in this work is allegedly untypical of French classicism which, according to Bray, owed little to the Roman critic. See Bray, pp. 59-61.
8. Père R. Le Bossu, Traité du poëme épique, 2 vols. (Paris: Michel Le Petit, 1675). Subsequent references are to this edition.

ticularly Aristotle. Their concern had been to utilize the growing influence of rationalism in literary matters to buttress the sovereignty of Aristotle's aesthetic evaluations.⁹ The eventual divergence between these dual sources of authority, Aristotle on the one hand and rationalism on the other, made a fundamental contribution to that acrimonious literary dispute, the Querelle des anciens et des modernes.

It was not initially in terms of a conflict between reason and ancient authority, however, that the controversy manifested itself but, at the risk of over simplification, it may be said to have originated rather more obscurely in the campaign launched by Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin against pagan mythology and, ultimately, pagan literature itself. Of the numerous aesthetic issues raised during the various phases of the quarrel,¹⁰ not a few touched, to a greater or a lesser degree, on the particular case of epic and none more obviously so than the argument in the second decade of the eighteenth century over the literary merit of Homer.

The immediate cause of this second French phase of the Querelle was La Motte's translation of the Iliad¹¹ which, since the author knew no Greek, was an abridged and versified version of Madame Dacier's own prose translation of the poem.¹² The text was prefaced by a Discours sur Homère, in which La Motte attacked Homer on artistic grounds, and a curious ode entitled

9. Bray deals with the growth of rationalism in the French classical doctrine on pp. 114-39.
10. This study adopts Rigault's division of the quarrel into three principal phases: the first French phase in the seventeenth century, involving Desmarets, Perrault and Boileau; an English phase; a second French phase in the eighteenth century, with La Motte opposed to Madame Dacier. See H. Rigault, Histoire de la querelle des anciens et des modernes (Paris: Hachette, 1856), p. iv.
11. A. H. de La Motte, L'Iliade, poème, avec un discours sur Homère (Paris: Dupuis, 1714).
12. Anne Dacier, L'Iliade d'Homère, traduite en françois, avec des remarques, 3 vols. (Paris: Rigaud, 1711).

L'ombre d'Homère, in which Homer's ghost purportedly begged La Motte to undertake a French translation of his epic which would eliminate the primitive aspects of the original.

Madame Dacier was not reluctant to assume the mantle of Homer's champion and in the bitter and seemingly interminable squabble that ensued much critical attention was focused on epic.¹³ It was at this point that the more "geometric" spirits among the moderns most strongly asserted the prerogatives of reason, in contradistinction to ancient classical authority, to determine contemporary critical attitudes.

In the forefront of this veritable crusade against the attitude of traditional respect and admiration was Abbé Terrasson who, rejecting summarily any argument that continued esteem for a work constituted infallible proof of its intrinsic worth, resolved to make the principles of literary judgement dependent upon the supreme dictates of reason. The "geometric" approach to literature is nowhere better defined than in Terrasson's prefatory statement of intent in his Dissertation critique sur l'Iliade d'Homère: "Ma vûë principale est de faire passer jusqu'aux belles lettres cet esprit de Philosophie, qui depuis un siècle a fait faire tant de progrès aux Sciences naturelles. J'entens par Philosophie une supériorité de raison qui nous fait rapporter chaque chose à ses principes propres & naturels, indépendamment de l'opinion qu'en ont eû les autres hommes".¹⁴

It must unfortunately be recorded, however, that the advantages allegedly

13. A detailed account of the theoretical writing on epic in this period can be found in O. R. Taylor, ed. Voltaire: La Henriade, 2nd. edition (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1970), pp. 91-121.

14. Abbé J. Terrasson, Dissertation critique sur l'Iliade d'Homère, où à l'occasion de ce poëme on cherche les regles d'une poëtique fondée sur la raison, & sur les exemples des anciens & des modernes, 2 vols. (Paris: Fournier, 1715), I, iii.

attending the application of this rationalist method to the natural sciences failed to materialize in the case of epic poetry. Terrasson's innovatory perspective yielded few tangible benefits and his formulations were depressingly similar to the prescriptions of the traditionalist standpoint he affected to despise. Certainly there was little effective diminution in the number of rules Terrasson proposed for the genre and the net result of his treatise was that the potentiality of epic continued to be severely circumscribed.

Lest it be thought that the polemical discourses spawned by the Querelle were all as sterile in their implications for epic as was Terrasson's Dissertation, a brief reference must be made to a work which, although it postdated the quarrel proper, was clearly inspired by it: the Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture of Du Bos, published in 1719.¹⁵ In view of Du Bos's substantial and significant contribution to the development of eighteenth-century aesthetics (a contribution which was fully recognized only belatedly, it must be admitted), merely the most concise indication of those theories which had especial relevance for epic can be given here.¹⁶

Both directly and indirectly, Du Bos did much to rehabilitate Homer, whose status had been under severe attack from the moderns. Firstly, Du Bos refuted the modernist doctrine of continual progress in the arts by postulating a cyclic pattern of progress¹⁷ and placing in classical antiquity

15. References are to Abbé J.-B. Du Bos, Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture, 2 vols. (Utrecht: Neaulme, 1732).

16. For a full treatment, see A. Lombard, L'abbé Du Bos: un initiateur de la pensée moderne (1670-1742), (Paris: Hachette, 1913).

17. Du Bos, II, 175.

no fewer than two of the four periods of supreme artistic achievement he claimed to distinguish in human cultural activity.¹⁸ Secondly, Du Bos rejected the pretensions of universal reason to be the sole arbiter of artistic merit,¹⁹ by making the aesthetic impression a poem produced on the reader determine its literary value.²⁰ Furthermore, Du Bos argued that an accurate assessment of the literary merit of a work could be gained only if the reader consciously sought to adopt the critical reactions of the audience for which it was initially destined²¹ and he indicted the lack of historical perspective in the literary criticism of his time as the reason for the falseness of many aesthetic judgements.²² The following passage may be quoted as a convenient illustration of Du Bos's insistence on the necessity for a relativist standpoint in critical assessment: "Il ne suffit pas de savoir bien écrire pour faire des critiques judicieuses des Poësies des anciens & des étrangers, il faudroit encore avoir connoissance des choses dont ils ont parlé. Ce qui étoit ordinaire de leur tems, ce qui est commun dans leur patrie, peut paroître blesser la vraisemblance & la raison à des censeurs qui ne connoissent que leur tems & leurs pays".²³

The principal arguments of the Réflexions were reiterated with specific reference to epic in Voltaire's celebrated treatise on that subject, the Essai sur la poésie épique of 1733,²⁴ which was essentially a revision

18. Du Bos, II, 74.

19. Cf. Terrasson, I, iv.

20. Du Bos, II, 199.

21. Du Bos, II, 292.

22. Du Bos, II, 291.

23. Du Bos, II, 296.

24. To be found in F.-M. Arouet de Voltaire, Oeuvres complètes, ed. L. Moland 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877-85), VIII, 305-63.

by the author of his Essay ... upon the epick poetry of the European nations from Homer down to Milton, published in England in 1727.²⁵

Like Du Bos, Voltaire stressed the importance in literary criticism of the emotional response of the reader. He alleged that almost all art forms, and poetry in particular, were trammelled by a multiplicity of useless or incorrect rules and he especially scorned those commentators who laboriously composed treatises on a few fanciful lines of verse.²⁶ He castigated the majority of critics for expatiating weightily on what should more properly have afforded them a transcendent aesthetic experience²⁷ and stipulated that a prerequisite for the true appreciation of poetry was a capacity for sentiment and a propensity towards enthusiasm.²⁸ Thus Voltaire could argue that "ceux qui ne peuvent pardonner les fautes d'Homère en faveur de ses beautés sont la plupart des esprits trop philosophiques, qui ont étouffé en eux-mêmes tout sentiment".²⁹

In the wake of Du Bos, Voltaire, too, strongly advocated a relativist approach in matters of criticism. The preliminary chapter of the Essai was devoted to an investigation of the divergences in taste between one nation and another³⁰ and paved the way for a stout defence of Homer on historical grounds: "L'Illiade, qui est le grand ouvrage d'Homère, est plein de dieux et de combats peu vraisemblables... De ces deux sujets qui remplissent l'Illiade, naissent les deux grands reproches que l'on fait à

25. For a perceptive comparison of the English and French versions of this work in the evolution of Voltaire's relativism, see D. Williams, Voltaire: literary critic (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1966), pp. 194-243.

26. Voltaire, VIII, 305.

27. Voltaire, VIII, 306.

28. Voltaire, VIII, 319.

29. Voltaire, VIII, 319.

30. "Des différents goûts des peuples", Voltaire, VIII, 305-314.

Homère; on lui impute l'extravagance de ses dieux, et la grossièreté de ses héros: c'est reprocher à un peintre d'avoir donné à ses figures les habillements de son temps. Homère a peint les dieux tels qu'on les croyait, et les hommes tels qu'ils étaient".³¹

Thus, through Du Bos and Voltaire, with their appreciation of the emotional impact of a work, together with their nascent historical perspective, the early eighteenth century promised some redress of the rigorously formalistic approach which had dominated critical writing on epic in France for over a century. It would now seem appropriate, after this preliminary survey, to proceed to a detailed investigation of the theory of epic as it was propounded between 1745 and 1809.

The Status of Epic

That there was widespread recognition of the pre-eminence of epic among literary forms is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from an examination of critical pronouncements made in France between 1745 and 1809. This belief that epic was the supreme species of literature is one which the period held in common, therefore, with the seventeenth century.³²

Tributes to epic as the foremost literary form flowed regularly from the pens of critics and poets alike. Gaillard turned to the animal kingdom to find an analogy for the status of epic: "Le Poëme Epique tient parmi tous les autres Ouvrages de Poësie, le même rang que le Lion & l'Aigle

31. Voltaire, VIII, 315.

32. Bray, p. 337; R. A. Sayce, The French biblical epic in the seventeenth century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 6; D. Maskell, The historical epic in France 1500-1700 (Oxford: University Press, 1973), p. 19.

tiennent parmi les Animaux. C'est le Roi des Poèmes, le Poème par excellence".³³

In 1756 Teulières, an "avocat au Parlement de Toulouse", stated more prosaically but equally firmly that "l'Épopée tient le premier rang parmi les poèmes"³⁴ and it was thus with epic that he began his award-winning examination of the comparative merits of the Ancients and modern French authors in the various literary genres.

Louis Racine maintained that "le Poème Epique parfait est le chef-d'oeuvre de l'Esprit Humain"³⁵ and saw the genre as "... la plus rare production de l'esprit humain".³⁶

Marmontel hailed the epic as the most noble of all poems³⁷ and in 1757 an anonymous critic declared: "Le Poème Epique est l'un des plus grands efforts de l'esprit humain".³⁸

Sulzer postulated that "la grande épopée est, sans contredit, la plus noble production des beaux-arts" and he urged: "Assignons donc à l'épopée le rang suprême entre les productions de l'art; & au poète épique, s'il est grand dans son genre, la prééminence sur tous les artistes".³⁹

33. G.-H. Gaillard, Poétique françoise, à l'usage des dames, 2 vols. (Paris: Brocas, 1749), I, 34.
34. B.-A. Teulières, Dissertation qui a remporté le prix, au jugement de l'Académie Royale des Sciences, des Belles-Lettres et des Arts de Rouen, en l'année 1755 (Montauban: Teulières, 1756), p.5.
35. L. Racine, Le paradis perdu de Milton. Traduction nouvelle, avec des notes, la vie de l'auteur, un discours sur son poème, les remarques d'Addisson [sic]; & à l'occasion de ces remarques, un discours sur le poème épique, 3 vols. (Paris: Desaint & Saillant, 1755), I, lx.
36. Racine, III, 467.
37. J.-F. Marmontel, article "Epopée" in Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, 28 vols. (Paris: Briasson, etc., 1751-72), V, 825-31, p. 826.
38. Journal des sçavans, March 1757, p. 76.
39. J. G. Sulzer, article "Epopée" in Nouveau dictionnaire pour servir de supplément aux dictionnaires des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, 5 vols. (Paris: Panckoucke, 1776-77), II, 826-30, p. 830. Hereafter cited as Supplément.

In 1802 Chateaubriand asserted the superiority of epic over other literary genres⁴⁰ and the same year Pagès argued that "un beau poème épique est le chef-d'oeuvre de l'esprit humain".⁴¹

In the preface to his own epic poem, *Le Suire* reminded the public that "un Poème Épique, dans notre langue, est regardé comme le Grand Oeuvre"⁴² and in 1809 another epic poet, Roure, acknowledged that he was attempting "... le dernier effort de l'esprit humain".⁴³

That epic continued to enjoy a supreme reputation in France between 1745 and 1809 is, therefore, incontestable and the reasons for the esteem in which it was held were various. Sayce's incisive analysis of the sources of the reverence for epic in seventeenth-century France⁴⁴ retains its validity for the period under study and his conclusion may usefully be quoted here: "On the whole, then, the high position of the epic in France was due to a literary tradition in France itself, to the success of Tasso's

40. F.-A. de Chateaubriand, Génie du Christianisme, ou beautés de la religion chrétienne, 5 vols. (Paris: Migneret, 1802), II, 3-4.
41. F.-X. Pagès, Nouveau traité de littérature ancienne et moderne, 3 vols. (Paris: Testu, 1802), II, 290.
42. R.-M. Le Suire, Le Nouveau Monde, ou Christophe Colomb. Poème. Nouvelle édition, entièrement refondue et corrigée, 2 vols. (Paris: L'Auteur, an VIII), I, vi.
43. P. Roure, La Cortésiade, ou le Nouveau Monde, poème en douze chants, enrichi de notes historiques, géographiques et d'histoire naturelle sur le Nouveau Monde (Paris: Renouard, 1809), p. 1.
44. Sayce, pp. 6-8.

Jerusalem, reinforced by his own theoretical statements, and to the views of the Italian critics who enjoyed the greatest vogue in France. Ultimately all these sources may derive from one - the great reputation of Homer and especially Virgil. But of immediate sources the influence of Tasso, in theory and practice, stands out as the most important".⁴⁵

Underpinning the high regard for epic in neoclassical France is the fact that the elevated position of epic in the hierarchy of literary forms stemmed ultimately from critical recognition of the difficulties inherent in the genre. A few examples will suffice to prove the continuance of the notion of the arduous and demanding nature of epic composition.

Mallet called epic poetry a "... genre qu'on peut appeller l'écueil de l'esprit humain, puisque tout ce que nous avons d'excellent à cet égard est encore mêlé de défauts très-grands".⁴⁶ According to Gaillard: "C'est une mer féconde en naufrages. Heureux qui peut achever cette route brillante sans se briser contre les nombreux écueils dont elle est semée; c'est un avantage bien rare".⁴⁷ In 1782 a periodical noted that "de tout tems un poëme épique a été la plus périlleuse entreprise que les muses puissent inspirer; & nos moeurs & nos usages en ont doublé les difficultés".⁴⁸ For Boufflers, too, epic was "... ce stade où les chûtes sont si communes

45. Saycé, pp. 7-8.

46. Abbé E. Mallet, Principes pour la lecture des poètes, 2 vols. (Paris: Durand, 1745), II, 149.

47. Gaillard, I, 35.

48. Journal encyclopédique, February 1782, p. 448.

et les palmes si rares...."⁴⁹

To explain this generally-acknowledged difficulty of epic, theorists offered a number of diverse reasons. Most often cited was what might be termed the "inclusiveness" of the epic genre. In Chapter xxvi of the Poetics, Aristotle had preferred tragedy to epic because it not only incorporated all the elements of epic, but also displayed additional features of its own. Chateaubriand was sufficiently concerned to refute Aristotle's claim explicitly and at some length but in his assertion of the supremely comprehensive nature of epic he joined with many earlier critics.⁵⁰

Méhégan explained in 1755 that "le Poëme Epique tient le premier rang dans le Poësie; ou plutôt il en renferme presque toutes les parties, & demande encore plusieurs autres genres. Il doit avoir l'action & la variété du Roman, l'unité & le pathétique de la Tragédie, les graces de l'Idile, la force de l'Ode, l'utilité de la Morale, le feu & la majesté de l'Eloquence, & avec tout cela, un sublime & une harmonie qui lui sont particuliers".⁵¹

Sulzer also supported the belief that epic comprised all other poetic genres: "Le poëte épique a réellement en son pouvoir l'effet qu'on peut

49. S. Boufflers, Discours sur la littérature, prononcé à l'Académie des Sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Berlin, le 9 août 1798 (Paris: Pougens, 1800), p. 16.

50. Chateaubriand, II, 3-4.

51. G.-A. de Méhégan, Considérations sur les révolutions des arts (Paris: Brocas, 1755), p. 218.

attendre de toutes les branches des beaux-arts. L'épopée réunit tout ce que les divers genres de poésie ont chacun de bon en soi. Tout ce que les arts de la parole ont d'utile & d'instructif, le poème épique peut l'avoir dans un degré supérieur".⁵²

A literary form of such variety would clearly make unprecedented demands on an author and the necessity for sublime genius on the part of the poet was also commonly held to account for the peculiar difficulty of epic. A practitioner of the genre was required to exhibit supreme inventive gifts⁵³ but also to combine in himself two distinct faculties, the creative and the critical.⁵⁴ Moreover, the epic poet had to overcome the strain of sustaining a lofty tone: "Les grands Génies peuvent seuls s'élever si haut, mais la foiblesse humaine ne peut longtemps se soutenir dans un pareil vol".⁵⁵

Additionally, immense and profound study was held to be a prerequisite of success in the field of epic. Boufflers explained: "Car qui doit tout peindre, doit tout connoître, et qui doit tout connoître, doit tout étudier".⁵⁶ That epic demanded a prolonged period of composition was therefore universally recognized and Chateaubriand warned that an epic poem was "... un

52. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 830.

53. Père J.-A. La Serre, Poétique élémentaire (Lyon: Périsse, 1771), pp. 347-48.

54. Boufflers, p. 17.

55. Racine, I, lxvi-lxvii.

56. Boufflers, p. 18.

monument qui demande les labours de toute une vie".⁵⁷

A final indication of the status accorded to epic between 1745 and 1809 might conveniently be provided by the following analysis of the unique attributes of the genre which appeared in 1757: "Effacer, pour ainsi dire, sous nos yeux le Monde que nous connoissons, nous enlever aux objets humilians qui nous environnent, créer un nouvel Univers, de nouvelles scènes, de nouvelles combinaisons, nourrir notre sensibilité, nous présenter toujours à nous-mêmes au milieu de l'illusion, embellir le mensonge par les caractères de la vérité, répandre la chaleur & la vie, allier le sublime au touchant, tempérer l'énergie par la naïveté, triompher d'une langue rebelle, & la conduire sur des détails qui lui avoient toujours échappé, ce sont-là les avantages qui distinguent la Poésie Héroïque, & nous ne les citons point tous encore".⁵⁸

The Subject-Matter of Epic

While themes from the Bible were tacitly accepted, if not often explicitly advocated, it was secular material that was regarded as more suitable for epic treatment in the period covered by this study. Moreover, like their predecessors, theorists of the genre generally preferred the subject of this profane epic to be historical.⁵⁹

57. Chateaubriand, II, 4.

58. Journal des sçavans, March 1757, p. 76.

59. Cf. Dulard's comment: "La vérité historique doit faire le fond de l'Epopée. C'est-là une loi à laquelle tous les Poètes épiques se sont assujettis." P.-A. Dulard, Oeuvres diverses, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Arkstée & Merkus, 1758), I, 16.

Batteux, however, believed that the argument of epic could be completely fabricated⁶⁰ and so provided tardy support for Marolles who, in opposition to the prevailing opinion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had claimed in 1662 that the subject of epic could be wholly invented.⁶¹

Domairon conceded that the event celebrated in epic need not actually be recorded by history, but was acceptable if consecrated by national tradition or even if only credited by public opinion.⁶²

That the epic poem should be historical in character had been argued persuasively by Tasso in Book I of the Discorsi del poema eroico of 1594, principally on the grounds of verisimilitude. The epic poet was to pursue the verisimilar and it was not likely, Tasso reasoned, that an illustrious deed such as he necessarily treated would not have been recorded by history. Tasso also alleged that the reader was more likely to become involved in a story he held to be wholly or partially true.

In addition to the authority of Tasso and the practice his theory helped to create in France, Voltaire found a further reason why an eighteenth-century French poet should use truth rather than fiction for epic. In the Essai sur la poésie épique, Voltaire insisted that it was in order to conform to the precise and judicious spirit of contemporary France that he had chosen

60. Abbé C. Batteux, Cours de belles lettres ou principes de la littérature. Nouvelle édition, 4 vols. (Paris: Desaint & Saillant, 1753), II, 14-15.

61. Bray, p. 341.

62. L. Domairon, Poétique française (Paris: Deterville, 1804), p. 382.

authentic subject-matter for his personal attempt at epic.⁶³

But while the epic poet was recommended to take his subject from history, he was not required to follow authentic historical fact in any more than its essentials. If he was dissuaded from flatly contradicting well-known accounts in the interests of verisimilitude,⁶⁴ he was equally permitted to modify and invent in non-vital areas, provided that he remained faithful to that same rule of plausibility: "Un poëte n'est pas historien: l'ordre des temps & des lieux ne le regarde qu'à un certain point. On peut tout feindre, tout oser dans un poëme, du moment qu'on ne nuit pas à la suite des événemens de l'histoire; qu'on n'est point démenti par une opinion générale; qu'on ne suppose rien qui ne puisse avoir été fait".⁶⁵

The liberties that the poet was allowed to take with his historical material argue that the subject of epic was required merely to have a basis in history. Further substantiation of this supposition is to be found in the fact that a certain admixture of fiction was held to be not only admissible, but even necessary in epic. This element of fabrication, it was generally agreed, provided one of the principal yardsticks by which the epic poem might be distinguished from history proper or versified history.⁶⁶

63. Voltaire, VIII, 363.

64. L. de Jaucourt, article "Vraisemblance (Poésie)" in Encyclopédie, XVIII, 484.

65. Abbé S.-A. Trailh, Querelles littéraires, ou mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des révolutions de la république des lettres, depuis Homère jusqu'à nos jours, 4 vols. (Paris: Durand, 1761), II, 329.

66. Cf. Batteux, II, 14-15.

The acknowledged need to embellish legitimate history with fabricated material had occasioned certain recommendations as to the historical remoteness of subjects suitable for epic treatment. The advice was offered mainly with a view to granting the poet maximum freedom to invent. Ronsard had proposed a minimum time lapse of three or four hundred years between an event and its celebration in epic⁶⁷ but Tasso in Book *ii* of the Discorsi warned against subjects either too remote in time or too recent. Tasso particularly commended the era of Charlemagne to his contemporaries but Du Bos felt that a poet should not go further back into French history than the time of Charles VII to find a subject for epic.⁶⁸ The later eighteenth century appears to have been less forthcoming in offering such precise advice, though Méhégan analysed the inherent disadvantages of a subject that was either too modern or too well known and thereby explained the lack of variety in the Henriade.⁶⁹

It was often suggested to would-be writers of epic that they should select a subject of particular national appeal, a view to which Chateaubriand subscribed in 1802: "Or, c'est un autre principe de toute vérité en critique ... que si l'on choisit une histoire moderne, on doit toujours chanter sa nation". And Chateaubriand was consequently forced to admit that the discovery of the New World, one of the only two good subjects he felt were open to a contemporary epic poet, was defective in this respect for a French author.⁷⁰

67. Bray, p. 342.

68. Du Bos, I, 99.

69. Méhégan, pp. 221-22.

70. Chateaubriand, II, 6.

Epic Structure

There was broad agreement on the structure of regular epic, despite some variation in the terminology used to describe it. It was generally conceded that epic comprised three principal divisions of unequal length. The first element in this tripartite structure was the exposition, which could itself be further divided into the proposition, invocation and the avant-scène.

The proposition, which came first in the Virgilian pattern favoured by French critics of the period, simply amplified the title of the poem, indicating the protagonist, the nature of the enterprise and its result in a style which, following Horace and Boileau, it was recommended should be simple, if grave and noble. Abbé Mallet explained cogently why the proposition should avoid the ornate and the high-flown: "Le Poëme Epique est un ouvrage de longue haleine, qu'il est par conséquent dangereux de commencer sur un ton difficile à soutenir".⁷¹

There followed the invocation or appeal to a Muse or other supernatural being for divine assistance in the telling of the tale. The plea was uttered in the interests of both veracity and style but was envisaged particularly as an authentication of the content. Such a request for super-human knowledge appeared logical and proper in a genre which traditionally alleged divine intervention in the events it described and, as justification of its continued existence in enlightened times, Papon claimed that the invocation legitimized all that philosophy might consider extravagant in sublime poetic fictions.⁷²

71. Mallet, II, 145.

72. Père J.-P. Papon, L'art du poëte et de l'orateur, nouvelle rhétorique à l'usage des colleges. Edition corrigée & augmentée (Lyon: Périsse, 1768), p. 69.

For Batteux, the invocation conferred on the petitioner startling poetic gifts, although it must regretfully be admitted that there is little evidence of this in the epic poems of the period! The poet allegedly underwent a metamorphosis, existing as much in heaven as on earth, and being filled with a divine spirit which made his utterances resemble less a historian's than a prophet's.⁷³

Marmontel, however, restricted invocation to epic poems supposedly revealing secrets unknown to man and he endorsed Lucan's decision to dispense with it when treating subject-matter with which he was fully conversant personally.⁷⁴

That the invocation should be delivered in a lofty, forceful and dignified style was universally stipulated. Nor were invocations, it was agreed, necessarily confined to the proem of epic but were to be employed in the body of the narrative whenever the author felt in need of particular inspiration or wanted to emphasize the reliability of his account.

The object of the final section of the exposition, the avant-scène, was to provide the reader with adequate information concerning the state of affairs prevailing at the beginning of the narrative and the whereabouts of the principal character. From Horace's original advice that the poet should omit the remote antecedents of his story, a rule had been forged which decreed that, as a distinguishing feature of epic, the natural order of events should be abandoned in favour of an artificial sequence which began the tale

73. Batteux, II, 121.

74. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 827.

in medias res and consigned earlier incidents to a subsequent recital by the hero. There had been some disparagement of epic poets who followed a chronological time sequence and Voltaire had conformed with the recommended practice in using a recital by Henri IV to Queen Elizabeth of England (Chants ii and iii of the Henriade) to treat the origins of the civil wars in France up to the siege of Paris by the kings of France and Navarre, the point at which he began his tale.

Marmontel, however, while he recognized the dramatic advantages of a narrative which opened in the middle of the action, felt that the order in which the theme was treated was irrelevant to the identity or ultimate success of epic: "... c'est la chaleur de la narration, la force des peintures, l'intérêt de l'intrigue, le contraste des caracteres, le combat des passions, la vérité & la noblesse des moeurs, qui sont l'ame de l'épopée, & qui feront du morceau d'histoire le plus exactement suivi, un poëme épique admirable".⁷⁵

The second principal element of the tripartite structure of epic was the main body of the poem, commonly called the intrigue or noeud. Papon provides a convenient definition: "On entend par intrigue ou noeud, l'enchaînement des faits ou des incidents dont l'embarras suspend quelque temps les progrès de l'action. Ainsi les difficultés qui s'opposent aux desseins d'un Héros dans un Poëme, sont, à proprement parler, ce qu'on appelle noeud; ce qui tient le spectateur en suspens & pique sa curiosité jusqu'au bout par le balancement des raisons, des mouvements, des intérêts & des passions qu'il renferme".⁷⁶

75. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 827.

76. Papon, p. 31.

It was sometimes specified that epic required one principal noeud and several subordinate ones, which could be multiplied to meet the needs of the poem, always providing that the rule of vraiesemblance was observed.⁷⁷

In 1757, an anonymous reviewer of Madame Du Boccage's Colombiade explained that the piquancy of epic stemmed from the obstacles encountered by the hero and he further claimed that the interest of the reader was gained and maintained by the clash between the personal merit of an outstanding individual and a myriad difficulties.⁷⁸

Marmontel complained that the intrigue was the most neglected part of epic, whereas it had been brought to an increasing level of perfection in tragedy. He urged that, just as all the events of tragedy were interconnected, the various incidents and situations contained in epic narrative should be interlinked to form a coherent, well-knit whole.⁷⁹

The final structural element of epic was, as in tragedy, the dénouement, which terminated the action of the poem. In epic this normally entailed the hero's triumphant overcoming of the principal obstacle confronting him and the success of his mission.⁸⁰ By common consent, the dénouement could be achieved internally or externally, although a dénouement resulting from the action itself was considered superior to one which required the introduction of an outside agent or machine.

77. Cf. Batteux, II, 33-34.

78. Mémoires de Trévoux, February 1757, pp. 547-48.

79. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 827.

80. But see the discussion on the nature of the dénouement proper to epic on p. 61.

Epic Action

The neoclassical critics in France had adopted Aristotle's dictum that the subject of epic should constitute an action and theorists between 1745 and 1809 continued to promulgate the rule. Marmontel legislated for both tragedy and epic when he declared: "Le sujet doit être une action, c'est-à-dire, un effet procédant de sa cause".⁸¹ Louis Racine was equally adamant when he summed up his analysis of epic action in 1755: "De ce que j'ai dit, on doit conclure que tout Poëme, quelques beautés particulières qu'il renferme, s'il n'est point l'imitation d'une Action, n'est point Epique"⁸²

As for the meaning of the term, Domairon offered an apparently simple explanation of epic action as comprising "... une entreprise faite avec dessein ..." ⁸³ but he thus echoed an earlier controversy over the alleged "inaction" of the Iliad which had resulted in Terrasson's proposing a new definition of epic as a work recording the accomplishment by the hero of a premeditated plan.⁸⁴

Domairon's contention that the action of epic entailed a specific mission or cause is one with which contemporary critics largely agreed and Marmontel merely embroidered on this basic notion in this rather more elaborate statement: "L'action ... est le combat des causes qui tendent ensemble à produire l'événement, & des obstacles qui s'y opposent".⁸⁵

81. J.-F. Marmontel, Poétique française, 2 vols. (Paris: Lesclapart, 1763), II, 136.

82. Racine, III, 361-62.

83. Domairon, p. 382.

84. Terrasson, I, 39-40.

85. Marmontel, article "Unité" in Supplément, IV, 990-994, p.990.

Occasionally the word "fable" was introduced into a discussion of epic action and the precise delimitation of these two terms was not always clearly established. One attempt to differentiate between the two concepts was made by Sulzer who provided the following interpretation: "La fable fournit le sujet de l'action. L'action elle-même est ce qui donne à la fable une existence réelle." Acknowledging that other critics were somewhat vague about the difference, Sulzer obligingly continued: "La fable est proprement l'événement même dont l'artiste se représente dans l'ordre successif, le commencement, le progrès & la fin. L'action est ce qui rend la fable possible, ce qui lui donne son commencement, son progrès & sa fin".⁸⁶ All of which was presumably intended to argue that the epic fable was a more comprehensive term, subsuming the basic action of the hero's particular exploit and also incorporating any episodic matter the poet might have included. In other words, fable must be taken to denote the whole tale related by the poet.

Unity of Action

The action of epic was universally required to observe the principle of unity, although there was rather less unanimity over the practical consequences of the requirement. It can be stated with confidence, however, that the concept of unity was invariably held to be more exacting than that of completeness, which merely demanded that the poem should have an unmis-

86. Sulzer, article "Action" in Supplément, I, 160-61, p. 160.

takable beginning, middle and end and form a composite whole.⁸⁷ Moreover, the question of the unity of action had aroused considerable controversy in the history of epic criticism.⁸⁸

Sulzer stated categorically that unity of action was essential in the epic poem and maintained that the perfection of the action was in direct proportion to its simplicity. The genius of epic, he argued, was entirely opposed to the romanesque and to a multitude of strange adventures which touched only the imagination.⁸⁹ Marmontel, however, admitted that the authority of Aristotle and the examples of Homer and Virgil were counter-balanced by the popular success of Ariosto's chivalrous romance, Orlando Furioso, which clearly infringed unity of action.⁹⁰ While he did not deny the title of epic to a poem embracing several actions, Marmontel finally opted for unity of epic action for the aesthetic reason that duplicity or multiplicity of action divided the interest of the action and consequently weakened it.⁹¹

The definitions of unity of action that were formulated in the period under review reveal a considerable variety of interpretation. Marmontel's was general and inclusive: "L'action d'un poëme est une, lorsque du commencement à la fin, de l'entreprise à l'événement, c'est toujours la même

87. Cf. Racine, III, 358-59.

88. See Bray, pp. 240-52 for an account of the development of this rule in epic theory.

89. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 828.

90. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 253.

91. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 254.

cause qui tend au même effet."⁹² Calvel explained that the epic poet should limit himself to a single, unique enterprise and never lose sight of the hero whose task it was to bring it to a successful conclusion. Any temporary neglect of the hero on the part of the poet should be designed to direct the attention of the reader back to him with increased interest.⁹³ For Batteux, unity of action had both external and internal implications: "L'action est une quand elle est indépendante de toute autre action, & que toutes ses parties sont liées naturellement entre elles."⁹⁴ Batteux contended that the unity of action in its twin aspects stemmed from the very proposition of the subject, where the poet announced his intent and specified the scope of his material.⁹⁵ But a few pages later, Batteux deemed it wise to define his terms more rigorously and, recognizing that a unified subject could still contain innumerable actions, he recalled that he was properly speaking of the proposition of an action.⁹⁶

A point made by a number of critics was that unity of action did not in any way exclude breadth of action and this latter quality was alleged to constitute one of the essential differences between epic and tragedy. Marmontel maintained that the action of tragedy was formed by a single tableau, whereas epic action embraced a whole series of tableaux which could easily be multiplied without danger of confusion.⁹⁷ In 1777 in the Supplément, the same author claimed that epic had a vaster field of action than tragedy and that it was their respective breadth that determined the number of incidents each could contain. He proceeded to establish a triple equation

92. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 825.

93. Abbé E. Calvel, Encyclopédie littéraire ou nouveau dictionnaire raisonné et universel d'éloquence et de poésie, 3 vols, (Paris: Costard, 1772) I, 248-49.

94. Batteux, II, 20.

95. Batteux, II, 20-21.

96. Batteux, II, 23-24.

97. Marmontel, Poétique françoise, II, 260.

between historical, epic and tragic action which argued that one episode of an event in history was sufficient to form the action of epic but a single incident of epic action itself sufficed to constitute tragic action. Nor for him did this state of affairs imply a lack of unity in either the historical or the epic action. This reasoning enabled Marmontel to postulate a difference between unity of action and simplicity of action in that the system of cause and effect of which he saw epic action basically composed could be simple or complex without endangering the unity of the action. To his mind, the Iliad enjoyed unity of action but not a simple action, yet Marmontel felt that the effect of Homer's poem was weakened by an excess of characters and events and he consequently judged it of importance that, even in epic, the action should be simplified and restricted.⁹⁸

There was some discussion as to whether the rule of unity of action could allow as the argument of epic the whole career of a hero. In 1714 La Motte had questioned his own stipulation that the essential characteristic of epic was to narrate an action and wondered whether the life of a hero, carefully treated in a poetic manner, could provide fit subject-matter for an epic poem.⁹⁹ The chorus of replies in the negative which this reflection had provoked at the time¹⁰⁰ was echoed later in the eighteenth century.

Abbé Mallet proclaimed in 1745 that "... le Poëte doit se borner à une seule & unique entreprise illustre exécutée par son Héros, & ne pas

98. Marmontel, article "Unité", Supplément, IV, 990.

99. A. H. de La Motte, Oeuvres, 10 vols, (Paris: Prault, 1754), II, 15.

100. Cf. Terrasson, I, 41-42.

embrasser l'histoire de sa vie entière".¹⁰¹ Gaillard stated firmly in 1749 that "quelqu'un qui feroit l'histoire de la vie entiere d'un Héros, ne feroit pas un Poëme Epique régulier, il faut qu'il choisisse dans cette vie quelque événement particulier qui soit d'une certaine importance, & dont la durée ait une étendue raisonnable".¹⁰²

But it was Batteux who gave perhaps the most reasoned analysis of the unsuitability for epic of the sum total of a hero's exploits. Among the objections he raised were the very breadth of a human life, which could not be encompassed at a single glance, the inevitable banality of part of even a hero's life and the diversity of the facts of the existence of a hero, which were not necessarily so interlinked as to tend towards a unifying climax.¹⁰³ In another comprehensive treatment of the subject, Calvel agreed that a poet treating the life of a hero would have difficulty in reducing the bizarre assemblage of the events of a lifetime to order and unity.¹⁰⁴

Episodes

In view of the importance attached to the unity of action in epic criticism, it might seem paradoxical that particular stress was also laid on the need for epic action to be complemented by episodic matter. La Harpe lamented that La Beaumelle had revealed his ignorance of such things by disagreeing that episodes were essential to the epic genre and he presented as a critical commonplace his own view that episodes were invariably a defect in drama but an integral part of epic.¹⁰⁵

101. Mallet, II, 109.

102. Gaillard, I, 55.

103. Batteux, II, 19.

104. Calvel, I, 250.

105. J.-F. de La Harpe, Lycée, ou cours de littérature ancienne et moderne 16 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1821-22), VIII, 182-83.

Definitions of episodes are to be found in abundance. For Gaillard, "ce sont certains événements qui ne sont pas nécessairement liés avec l'action principale, mais qui en naissent naturellement, & en font partie par le rapport qu'ils ont avec elle".¹⁰⁶ Batteux informed his readers that "... nous prendrons le terme d'épisode pour signifier une partie qui aide à l'action principale, mais qui pourroit s'en détacher, sans l'empêcher d'arriver à sa fin".¹⁰⁷ Papon offered the following explanation: "L'Episode est une partie ou une circonstance de l'action étendue & amplifiée d'une manière vraisemblable".¹⁰⁸ Finally, Legeay argued that "l'épisode est une petite action qui suspend le cours de l'action principale, mais qui s'y rapporte néanmoins".¹⁰⁹

Some of the rules governing the use of episodes can be gleaned from these definitions. It is already obvious that episodes were required to originate in the central action and to have a visible link with the main narrative, while not making a vital and indispensable contribution to it. To this prerequisite that episodes be subordinate to the main argument, Batteux added that their length was to be proportionate to their relevance to the principal subject and that, although their content should introduce some thematic variety, their tone was to be commensurate with the general atmosphere of the work.¹¹⁰

106. Gaillard, I, 55-56.

107. Batteux, II, 26.

108. Papon, p.28.

109. J.-P. Legeay, Traité élémentaire de l'art poétique, ou la Poétique de Boileau développé et appuyée des exemples tirés des meilleurs auteurs français (Paris: Ducauroy, 1802), p. 85.

110. Batteux, II, 26-27.

Strict adherence to the above conditions, it was generally agreed, ensured that the necessary use of episodes did not infringe the unity of the action. Indeed, Louis Racine even declared: "Tout ce qui rompt l'unité est condamnable, & les Episodes, loin de la rompre, doivent l'établir. Ce sont des membres qui, comme ceux du corps, composent le Tout ..." ¹¹¹ Marmontel, for his part, waxed lyrical in his explanation of how episodes integrated into the main narrative formed a whole complying with this particular rule. He proposed "... l'image du fleuve dont les obstacles prolongent le cours, mais qui dans ses détours les plus longs ne cesse de suivre sa pente. Il se partage en rameaux, forme des îles qu'il embrasse, reçoit des torrens, des ruisseaux, de nouveaux fleuves dans son sein. Mais soit qu'il entre dans l'Océan par une ou plusieurs embouchures, c'est toujours le même fleuve qui suit la même impulsion". ¹¹²

The presence of episodic material in epic was not urged gratuitously but for a variety of artistic and technical reasons. In observing in his definition quoted above that episodes retarded the plot temporarily, Legeay made oblique reference to their usefulness as a regulator of the pace of the narrative. But it was Gaillard who pin-pointed the most common function of episodes, when he extolled their practicality as a means of informing the reader of events prior to the action proper of the poem, without infringing the unity of the action. ¹¹³ Such a procedure was indispensable

111. Racine, III, 356-57.

112. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 259-60.

113. Gaillard, I, 73-74.

when the poet did not follow the historical order of events and, in practice, it usually entailed a recital by the main protagonist of his immediate past history to some interested party. The archetypal recital is the account Aeneas gives of his adventures to Dido in Books ii and iii of the Aeneid.

Various other functions were also attributed to episodic matter. For Calvel, episodes "... servent à répandre un nouveau jour, & un plus grand intérêt dans la poésie, ou à l'embellir."¹¹⁴ Or they could be used, in the words of Abbé Batteux, "... pour délasser le lecteur par une variété étrangère à celle du sujet même".¹¹⁵

Critics of the period thus regarded the proper use of episodes as indispensable in epic and the origins of this high regard can be retraced to one of the principal sources of the French neoclassical canon, Tasso, who in Book ii of the Discorsi had even advised that the basic historical action of epic should not be so extensive as to endanger or preclude episodic ornament.

Qualities of Epic Action

As perhaps the most important single element in any definition of the genre, it was the action of epic which was required to exhibit a significant number of those qualities considered to be properly epic. The need for epic action to be interesting itself covered a wide field of application, as the

114. Calvel, I, 252.

115. Batteux, II, 24.

following assertion by Calvel shows clearly: "Il faut que l'action épique soit intéressante. Elle peut l'être par son importance, par les caractères des personnages, par les situations dans lesquelles ils se trouvent, par les événements, par la manière de les raconter."¹¹⁶

In an analysis of the inherent interest of potential epic subjects, Du Bos had, in the Réflexions critiques (1719), distinguished the general or universal interest from the particular and national and had advocated a subject of at once universal and national attraction.¹¹⁷ Du Bos's recommendation was incorporated into his own theory by Abbé Batteux, who discerned two basic types of interest. The first, which Batteux termed "le touchant", because of its emotive effect on the reader, allegedly stemmed from the nature of the action and its object and embraced national, religious and general human appeal. Batteux advised that, if possible, these three sorts of appeal should be united in each epic poem, though he recognized that the first two were ephemeral while the third alone was eternal and would consequently ensure the immortality of a work. The second class of interest which Batteux identified, he called "le singulier" and argued that it arose from the obstacles to be overcome by the hero and the resultant curiosity aroused in the reader as to how this would be achieved.¹¹⁸

Calvel has been seen above to postulate that its own intrinsic importance could enable the action of epic to satisfy the criterion of interest.

116. Calvel, I, 255.

117. Du Bos, I, 40-44.

118. Batteux, II, 27ff.

Sulzer claimed that enterprises and events on which depended the fate of a whole nation were likely to supply the most interesting actions.¹¹⁹

Marmontel, however, warned against actions limited to a purely national appeal and contended that the action of epic was important only if it was of universal interest and was not so narrowly partisan as to engage the attention of just one particular race: "L'action de l'épopée doit donc avoir une grandeur & une importance universelles, c'est-à-dire indépendantes de tout intérêt, de tout système, de tout préjugé national, & fondée [sic] sur les sentimens & les lumieres invariables de la nature."¹²⁰

The interest and importance of epic action was commonly held to be partly engendered by the elevated rank and personal qualities of the protagonists, most of whom had traditionally been of royal status. This line of thought is exemplified by this comment from Louis Racine: "L'Action du Poëme Epique doit être grande, & sa grandeur vient de celle des Personnages, qui sont ordinairement des Héros, ou des Princes, dont les actions causent des révolutions dans un Etat".¹²¹

But while he conceded that the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in the Iliad would not have been interesting had they been ordinary soldiers, in that the consequences would not have been the same, Marmontel was unwilling to restrict the epic to characters of noble birth. For him, greatness of action alone was required and Marmontel accepted as sufficiently important for epic an action in which a plebeian like Marius, or private individuals like Cromwell or Cortes, accomplished great exploits for either the good or ill of the human race.¹²²

119. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 828.

120. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 826.

121. Racine, III, 358.

122. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 826.

Calvel agreed with Marmontel that epic could dispense with characters illustrious by their birth provided that its protagonists had sufficiently sublime merits to permit them to undertake and execute great deeds.¹²³

In something of the same vein, Sulzer maintained that greatness of epic action was constituted by a large number of individuals of varied characters displaying their particular talents and developing in a manner likely to interest and satisfy the reader.¹²⁴

In his examination of the interest and importance of epic action, Marmontel adopted an unusual educative standpoint when he equated memorability and interest of action with the effect the latter produced on the reader. As such, he made the greatness and importance of epic action depend upon the quality of the moral example it contained.¹²⁵

The Supernatural in Epic

More than the requirements of interest, importance or greatness discussed above, it was the question of the marvellous nature of epic action that excited critical argument. Indeed, the use of the supernatural was undoubtedly the most consistently contentious element in the history of theoretical writing on the epic in France.¹²⁶ Serious controversy over the merveilleux commenced with the first phase of the Querelle and for the purposes of the present study it will be sufficient to consider it as originating essentially in a disagreement between Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin and

123. Calvel, I, 254.

124. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 828.

125. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 826. For a discussion of the moral aim of epic, see below, pp. 59-63.

126. The most complete study of the theoretical discussions of the merveilleux in France is to be found in R. C. Williams, The merveilleux in the epic (Paris: Champion, 1925). See also, V. Delaporte, Du merveilleux dans la littérature française sous le règne de Louis XIV (Paris: Retaux-Bray, 1891).

Boileau over the proper and most effective source of supernatural agents in the epic poem. Their particular dispute, in which Desmarets championed Christianity and Boileau advocated pagan mythology, is usually held to have ended in triumph for Boileau but the subject recurred in the later stages of the opening phase of the Querelle and was again debated, though to a lesser extent, in the second French phase, which centred more particularly on Homer. Voltaire's restricted employment of the supernatural in the Henriade and his comments in the Essai engendered considerable discussion and consequently ensured that this vital question of epic technique retained its topicality. The problem of the merveilleux had thus received significant critical scrutiny over a substantial period of time and will now be seen to attract no less attention during the years covered by this survey.

The basic conception of the merveilleux is adequately conveyed by the definition given by Abbé Mallet in 1745 that "par le merveilleux, on entend ordinairement certaines fictions hardies; mais cependant vraisemblables, qui étant hors du cercle des idées communes, étonnent l'esprit ..." ¹²⁷ In practice, this notion continued to entail most frequently the introduction into the poem of supernatural beings who, after the terminology of the theatre, were then known as "machines". Since Homer had first recorded divine intervention in the affairs of men, epic poets had traditionally stressed supernatural involvement in human heroic action as proof of the greatness of their subject and the importance of their protagonists. So Sabatier de Castres could reasonably propose the following analysis of the marvellous in epic: "Le merveilleux consiste à dévoiler tous les ressorts inconnus des grandes opérations; à montrer non-seulement les hommes qui agissent, mais encore la main de la Divinité qui les guide, ou qui les porte où elle juge à propos;

127. Mallet, II, 116-17.

... de maniere que l'Epopée est, en même tems, l'histoire de l'humanité & de la Divinité, & des rapports mutuels de l'une avec l'autre, en un mot, l'histoire des Dieux, des Hommes & de la Religion."¹²⁸

Critics of the seventeenth century had proscribed an injudicious mixture of the two principal forms of epic supernatural machinery, namely Christian and pagan agents,¹²⁹ and their interdiction was upheld in the later eighteenth century. Gaillard was forceful in condemning "... le mélange monstrueux & bizarre du sacré & du profane justement reproché à Milton & à l'Arioste" and he wondered: "Comment un esprit raisonnable ne seroit-il pas choqué de voir les Furies, les Harpies, les Gorgones, les Centaures, Cerbere, Mars, Vulcain, Vénus & toutes ces autres Divinités fantastiques associées avec les Anges & les Esprits bienheureux, & les Fables du Paganisme placées à côté des respectables Mysteres de notre Religion?"¹³⁰ Later Marmontel, too, condemned the mixture of the Christian and pagan marvellous as found in Italian poets.¹³¹

The Merveilleux Païen

Unlike Boileau in the previous century, however, no critic of note actively campaigned for the exclusive use of the merveilleux païen in the epic poem in the eighteenth century. Indeed, there was a persistent call throughout the period under review for the exclusion of pagan mythology from epic poems dealing with subjects which could loosely be termed modern, in the sense that they postdated the general acceptance of Christianity as the sole true religion.

128. Abbé A. Sabatier de Castres, Dictionnaire de littérature, dans lequel on traite de tout ce qui a rapport à l'éloquence, à la poésie et aux belles-lettres, & dans lequel on enseigne la marche & les règles qu'on doit observer dans tous les ouvrages d'esprit, 3 vols. (Paris: Vincent, 1770), II, 67.

129. See Bray, pp. 297-99.

130. Gaillard, I, 84.

131. Marmontel, article "Vraisemblance" in Supplément IV, 996-1003, p.1002.

Papon, for example, stipulated that the pagan marvellous could not be employed in a poem which treated a subject taken from modern history or which concerned the Christian religion.¹³² In 1778, Palissot de Montenoy praised Voltaire because he had omitted from the Henriade"... tout cet échafaudage de merveilleux antique, qui eût paru si déplacé dans notre Religion, dans nos usages, dans nos moeurs, enfin dans un sujet si rapproché de l'âge ou nous vivons".¹³³ Four years later the Journal encyclopédique confirmed that "l'ancienne mythologie, si noble, si riche, si propre au langage poétique, outre qu'elle est usée & surannée pour nous, ne peut guere s'adapter à des faits & à des héros modernes".¹³⁴ La Harpe, too, concurred that a modern subject like that of the Henriade did not permit the use of the fables of antiquity.¹³⁵

Other critics went further, however, and demanded that modern writers of epic totally eschewed the merveilleux païen, whatever the nature of their subject-matter.

Abbé Mallet observed that epic poets of antiquity used only national credible gods whereas modern poets calmly introduced pagan divinities into their Christian poems, despite the monotheistic claims of their God.¹³⁶

132. Papon, p. 22.

133. C. Palissot de Montenoy, Eloge de M. de Voltaire (Paris: Bastien, 1778), p. 11.

134. Journal encyclopédique, February 1782, p. 449.

135. La Harpe, VIII, 62.

136. Mallet, II, 125-26.

Diderot evidently regarded the unsuitability of the pagan marvellous for contemporary composition as generally conceded in 1757; for his Dorval remarked that "un plus habile que moi vous répondra que les embellissements de l'épopée, convenables aux Grecs, aux Romains, aux Italiens du XVe et du XVIe siècle, sont proscrits parmi les Français; et que les dieux de la fable, les oracles, les héros invulnérables, les aventures romanesques, ne sont plus de saison".¹³⁷ Yet in her De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales of 1800, Madame de Staël still felt it necessary to argue passionately but logically against a practice she considered to be outmoded and irrelevant: "Si l'on vouloit se servir encore de la mythologie des anciens, ce seroit véritablement retomber dans l'enfance par la vieillesse: le poète peut se permettre toutes les créations d'un esprit en délire; mais il faut que vous puissiez croire à la vérité de ce qu'il éprouve. Or, la mythologie n'est pour les modernes ni une invention, ni un sentiment. Il faut qu'ils recherchent dans leur mémoire ce que les anciens trouvoient dans leurs impressions habituelles. Ces formes poétiques, empruntées du paganisme, ne sont pour nous que l'imitation de l'imitation; c'est peindre la nature à travers l'effet qu'elle a produit sur d'autres hommes."¹³⁸

But it will perhaps be most useful to examine the argument against the use of pagan mythology by eighteenth-century authors as it appeared in the Encyclopédie, not only because of the prestige enjoyed by that particular

137. D. Diderot, Oeuvres complètes, ed. J. Assézat & M. Tourneux, 20 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1875-77), VII, 153.

138. A.-L.-G. de Staël, Oeuvres complètes, 17 vols. (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1820-21), IV, 481-82.

publication, but also because it provoked a direct refutation by a major critic who permitted a restricted employment of the pagan supernatural by modern authors.

The author of the article "Merveilleux" in the Encyclopédie¹³⁹ contended that poetry had necessarily to create complete illusion in the reader and could do so only if the content of a poem conformed to the popular ideas and national beliefs of the age in which it was written. On the grounds that the supernatural machinery of an epic poem needed to reflect the religious attitudes of the contemporaries of its author, he therefore categorically denied Christian poets recourse to the pagan marvellous: "La décadence de la Mythologie entraîne nécessairement l'exclusion de cette sorte de merveilleux dans les poèmes modernes."¹⁴⁰

In the corresponding article in the Supplément, however, Marmontel referred specifically to this call for the complete proscription of pagan mythology by modern authors and developed the theory he had already put forward in the Poétique française of 1763 into a rebuttal of the underlying argumentation of the thesis in the Encyclopédie.¹⁴¹ Rejecting as fallacious the premise that poetry had to achieve total illusion to produce its effect, Marmontel postulated that the merveilleux of epic did not need to be an article of faith for the reader but merely a theological system to which credence was given at the time and place of the action of the poem and which the reader could reasonably be expected to accept during his perusal of the work. Marmontel's requirement that the marvellous element of epic should be consistent with the opinions prevalent, not at the time of composition,

139. Encyclopédie, X, 393-95. R. C. Williams is incorrect in ascribing this article to Marmontel. (Williams, p. 110, note 1). On p. iii of volume I of the Supplément, it is revealed that Marmontel worked on the Encyclopédie from letters C to G only. Marmontel himself confessed that he ceased work on the project after volume VII. See J.-F. Marmontel, Mémoires, ed. M. Tourneux, 3 vols. (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1891, II, 364.

140. Article, "Merveilleux", Encyclopédie, X, 394.

141. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux" in Supplément, III, 906-908.

but in the historical and geographical setting of the plot, meant that for him pagan mythology and magic could legitimately be used by modern authors in subjects where contemporary public opinion endorsed them: "La seule attention qu'on doit avoir est de saisir bien au justel'opinion des peuples à la place desquels on veut nous mettre, afin de ne pas faire du merveilleux un usage dont eux-mêmes ils seroient blessés."¹⁴²

In thus condoning the introduction of mythology into modern epic poems treating ancient, pagan subjects, Marmontel endorsed the earlier view of Du Bos.¹⁴³ Marmontel's ideas were later supported by Chateaubriand who, in the Examen des Martyrs of 1810, stated his position quite unequivocally:

Si l'on veut traiter un sujet épique tiré de l'histoire moderne, il faut nécessairement employer le merveilleux chrétien, puisque la religion chrétienne est aujourd'hui la religion des peuples civilisés de l'Europe. ...

Si nous ne voulons pas faire usage de ce merveilleux, il faut ou renoncer à l'épopée, ou placer toujours l'action de cette épopée dans l'antiquité.¹⁴⁴

The Merveilleux Chrétien

Though less often than against the merveilleux païen, objections were also voiced against the use of the merveilleux chrétien in the modern epic. Its most celebrated opponent in France, Boileau, had completely disqualified the Christian supernatural on both religious and literary grounds. Boileau argued that inflexible scriptural truth was debased by association with the

142. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux", Supplément, III, 907.

143. Du Bos, I, 118-19.

144. F.-A. de Chateaubriand, Examen des Martyrs in Les Martyrs, ou le triomphe de la religion chrétienne, 3 vols. (Paris: Le Normant, 1810), I, 23-92, p. 29.

fiction which constituted an indispensable ingredient of epic.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, he felt that pagan mythology was superior poetically to the Christian marvellous, which he found ridiculous or lugubrious.¹⁴⁶ Diderot's Dorval agreed that "... nos diables sont d'une figure si gothique ... de si mauvais goût ...".¹⁴⁷ and Marmontel echoed Boileau's complaints about the insipid nature of the merveilleux chrétien.

While theoretically allowing a contemporary author to introduce Christian supernatural machinery into a suitable subject, Marmontel noted: "Mais ce qui manque au merveilleux moderne, c'est d'être passionné. La divinité est inaltérable par essence, & tout le génie des poètes ne sauroit faire de Dieu qu'un homme, ce qui est une ineptie ou une impiété. Nos anges & nos saints, exempts de passions, seront des personnages froids, si on les peint dans leur état de calme & de béatitude, ou indécemment dénaturés, si on leur donne les mouvemens tumultueux de coeur humain".¹⁴⁸ Marmontel further contended that, although Christian devils were more poetic in that they were at least capable of passion, the unmitigated evil of their nature severely restricted their potential for being made into rounded characters.¹⁴⁹

Support for the use of the meveilleux chrétien, however, came from some of the major writers of the time. Clément, although he warned that it must be handled circumspectly, insisted that the Christian marvellous should be introduced into a modern epic subject with the same aim and method of application that its pagan counterpart had enjoyed in the epics of antiquity.¹⁵⁰ La Harpe disagreed with those who argued that a recent,

145. Boileau, II, 199-204 and 235-36.

146. Boileau, II, 205-208 and 209-16.

147. Diderot, VII, 155.

148. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux", Supplément, III, 907.

149. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux", Supplément, III, 907.

150. J.-M.-B. Clément, Première (-neuvième) lettre à Monsieur de Voltaire, 3 vols. (Paris: Moutard, 1773-76), II, 61.

historical subject precluded the employment of Christian fictions and analysed in some detail the divine involvement he considered necessary for the action of epic: "L'intervention des substances célestes, celle des héros et des saints qui ne sont plus, les bons et les mauvais anges, ces puissances intellectuelles, ennemies ou protectrices des habitants du monde physique, et de cette puissance première dont elles ne sont que les instruments, l'Être éternel qui voit et conduit tout, voilà ce qui doit composer la machine épique."¹⁵¹

But it is almost certainly Abbé Batteux who professed the most lofty concept of the supernatural element in epic to be found in the period under discussion. Batteux contended that a second Homer would find in the history of Christianity subject-matter worthy of his genius but more important and unusual was his notion of a God-orientated epic in which the Christian deity transcended the traditional role of machine to become, as the unique instigator of human affairs, the central protagonist of the poem: "Est-il un plus bel objet, plus grand, plus convenable à un génie presque divin, que de montrer dans un long ouvrage l'enchaînement & la subordination des causes, & l'homme, ou plutôt tout l'univers qui se remue sous les yeux & dans la main de l'Être suprême? Peut-on mieux rappeler la Poésie à son origine?"¹⁵²

Chateaubriand, however, argued that the focal point of successful epic had to be human beings and human passions and he concluded that "... tout poème où une religion est employée comme sujet et non comme accessoire, où le merveilleux est le fond et non l'accident du tableau, pèche essentiellement par la base"¹⁵³. He reproached both Milton and Dante with using the supernatural as more than a machine, yet felt that much of the sublime beauty of

151. La Harpe, VIII, 63.

152. Batteux, II, 54.

153. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 5.

Paradise Lost stemmed essentially from the Christian religion.¹⁵⁴ Likewise, he charged Klopstock with the mistake of making the Christian marvellous the subject of his poem. For Chateaubriand, the fact that Klopstock's principal character was divine was alone sufficient to destroy any tragic interest in the poem, although he found features to praise in the Messias also, including the grandeur of the supernatural element.¹⁵⁵

The key to Chateaubriand's divergence from Batteux on the question of the orientation of the reader's attention is contained in Chateaubriand's contention that "... il ne faut plus attribuer au christianisme la langueur qui règne dans les poèmes entièrement chrétiens; le vice en est dans la composition".¹⁵⁶ The Génie du Christianisme was intended to rehabilitate Christianity in the eyes of Chateaubriand's countrymen and the author's reservations about the primordial position Christianity occupied in some modern epics were clearly inspired by his concern to avert from his faith blame for the singular lack of success of most Christian epics, particularly those written in France in the seventeenth century.

Chateaubriand appears more positively as a Christian apologist, though, in his campaign against the traditional belief in the literary value of the merveilleux païen and the view of some critics that it was poetically superior to the merveilleux chrétien. To this end Chateaubriand devoted a substantial section of the Génie to a discussion of poetry in its relation with the pagan and Christian supernatural.¹⁵⁷ Before examining Chateaubriand's conclusions, however, it will be of interest to look briefly at some of the statements which were uttered in praise of the pagan marvellous, together with the

154. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 11.

155. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 33-34.

156. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 5.

157. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 217-96.

evidence to the contrary that Chateaubriand advanced.

Louis Racine declared that Homer's extensive use of the supernatural had enhanced the whole of nature in his poem.¹⁵⁸ Madame de Staël, despite her passionate belief in human progress and perfectibility, admitted in her De la littérature that the poetry of the Greeks had never been surpassed for its imaginative powers and she attributed this pre-eminence in no small measure to their primitive religious system: "Le paganisme des Grecs étoit l'une des principales causes de la perfection de leur goût dans les arts; ces dieux, toujours près des hommes, et néanmoins toujours au-dessus d'eux, consacroient l'élégance et la beauté des formes dans tous les genres de tableaux. Cette même religion étoit aussi d'un puissant secours pour les divers chefs-d'oeuvre de la littérature."¹⁵⁹

Chateaubriand's general counter to such arguments was the claim that "le plus grand et le premier vice de la mythologie, étoit d'abord de rapetisser la nature et d'en bannir la vérité".¹⁶⁰ The "incontestable" proof he adduced for this view was that poetry of genuine nature-description as practised in eighteenth-century Europe, was unknown to antiquity.¹⁶¹ The ancients, Chateaubriand alleged, had been blinded to the beauty of the natural world by their theological beliefs which peopled it with mythological figures at once elegant and deceptive.¹⁶²

No critic of the eighteenth century in France had exalted the pagan supernatural at the expense of the Christian more clearly or more publicly

158. Racine, III, 410.

159. Staël, IV, 77.

160. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 218.

161. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 218.

162. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 221.

than Marmontel and many of Chateaubriand's arguments in this section could almost have been marshalled with him in mind. Marmontel's criticisms of the dramatic limitations of the merveilleux chrétien have already been noted¹⁶³ and he had especially regretted the loss to an epic poet treating a modern subject of the poetic resources of the pagan marvellous, lamenting that "... on seroit insensé de croire pouvoir substituer, sans un extrême désavantage, le merveilleux de la religion à celui de la mythologie".¹⁶⁴ Of pagan mythology Marmontel had written: "Rien de plus favorable aux arts, & sur-tout à la poésie. La mythologie, sous ce point de vue, est l'invention la plus ingénieuse de l'esprit humain."¹⁶⁵

Chateaubriand, however, asserted that the seeming dramatic superiority of pagan mythological deities over Christian supernatural beings proved, on closer inspection, to be slight indeed. As a first point he indicated the divergent concepts of the Christian God, the philosophical abstract Being of Saint Augustine and the poetic Jehovah of David or Isaiah, but both superior to Homer's Jupiter. Chateaubriand denied the validity of the claim that Christian divinities were devoid of passion, pointing out the conflicting moods of the God of the Old Testament, the pity of Christ for human suffering and concluding that the Christian heaven was more concerned with men than was the Greek Olympus.¹⁶⁶

As further proof that Christianity was not poetically inferior to paganism, Chateaubriand noted that the gods of mythology shared the same loves and hates and that, even if they sometimes found themselves in opposition

163. See above, p. 41.

164. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux", Supplément, III, 907.

165. Marmontel, article "Vraisemblance", Supplément, IV, 1002.

166. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 237.

through their involvement in human affairs, they were soon reconciled. But Christianity, he reasoned, had revealed the eternal separation of good and evil and thus provided a source of potential literary beauty in the conflict between spirits of darkness, in constant machination for the fall of the human race, and spirits of light, concerned only with saving it.¹⁶⁷

Chateaubriand's conclusions in the Génie on the respective merits of the Christian and pagan supernatural systems can conveniently be summed up in the following poetical comment: "Chez les Grecs, le Ciel finissoit au sommet de l'Olympe, et leurs Dieux ne montoient pas plus haut que les vapeurs de la terre. Le merveilleux chrétien, d'accord avec la raison, l'astronomie, et l'expansion de notre ame, s'enfonce de monde en monde, d'univers en univers, par des successions d'espace, où l'imagination effrayée frissonne et recule."¹⁶⁸

And in the Examen des Martyrs of 1810, Chateaubriand forcibly and graphically underlined his attitude for those who agreed, as Marmontel had done, that the Christian marvellous was alone available to the epic poet celebrating modern history but who nevertheless regretted the loss of pagan mythology: "Voilà deux lyres, l'une antique, l'autre moderne. Vous prétendez que la première a de plus beaux sons que la seconde; mais elle est brisée, cette lyre; il faut donc tirer de celle qui vous reste le meilleur parti possible. Or, je veux essayer de vous apprendre que cet instrument moderne, selon vous si borné, a des ressources que vous ne connoissez pas; que vous pouvez y découvrir une harmonie nouvelle; qu'il a des accens pathétiques et divins; en un mot, qu'il peut, sous une main habile, remplacer la lyre antique, bien qu'il donne une suite d'accords d'une

167. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 246.

168. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 255-56.

autre nature, et qu'il soit monté sur un mode différent."¹⁶⁹

Use of the Merveilleux

Whether the pagan or the Christian marvellous was employed in epic, however, there was general acquiescence among critics that a poet should make only a restricted use of divine intervention. Batteux explained that, if introduced too frequently, supernatural beings could eclipse human participants in the action and be difficult to use with sufficient variety. Furthermore, it was more dignified to make the divinity responsible for the initial instigation of the action and suppose that, having discharged his function as a primary cause, he had foreseen the result.¹⁷⁰

Batteux also put forward a rule to which many of his contemporaries would have subscribed, when he ordained that, in order to preserve its dignity, divine help should be introduced only in important enterprises, or even just at the most critical points of those enterprises and when, without supernatural aid, men might turn aside from their divinely-ordained task.¹⁷¹

Allegory

In addition to the pagan and Christian aspects of the merveilleux proper, there also existed a minor form of the epic supernatural: allegory. In his treatise of 1675, Le Bossu had contended that the gods of ancient epic were conceived allegorically and he had allegedly distinguished in them

169. Chateaubriand, Les Martyrs, I, 30.

170. Batteux, II, 48-49.

171. Batteux, II, 65.

three categories of allegory, theological, physical and moral. However dubiously the eighteenth century viewed Le Bossu's theory of the allegorical nature of the pagan deities of classical epic, allegory was widely recognized as a legitimate element of epic and, indeed, Voltaire had used moral allegory in the Henriade to the almost total exclusion of any other supernatural device.

In the Essai sur les fictions (1795), however, Madame de Staël took a firm stand against the use of allegory, alleging that allegory weakened the thought content of a work, even if it succeeded in making it more comprehensible to the ordinary reader. She further argued that a need for allegory as an aid to understanding indicated intellectual deficiencies in the reader, while a work that lent itself to allegory necessarily lacked subtlety.¹⁷²

Such intransigent opposition to recourse to allegory in poetry was not typical and the more usual view is represented by Clément, who denied that allegory was too frivolous for epic and felt that it would be needlessly severe to deprive epic poets of this device.¹⁷³ Yet it is also true that nearly all critics and theorists of epic in the period under discussion urged that discretion be exercised in the use of allegory and recommended more or less stringent conditions to govern its employment.

Chateaubriand differentiated between moral and physical allegory. He admitted only the former, exemplified by the Prayers in Book ix of Homer's Iliad, which he claimed was beautiful at all times, in all countries and all religious systems. But the sort of physical allegory which equated Juno with the air, he saw as offending against both logic and good taste.¹⁷⁴

According to La Harpe, there were distinctions to be made even within the realm of moral allegory. He warned against the introduction of coldly

172. Staël, II, 172-73.

173. Clément, II, 69-70.

174. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 225-26.

allegorical characters like Discord and advised that personified beings should be linked to strong human passions and not fall into the category of purely abstract allegory: "Il est de la poésie épique de substituer des images sensibles aux idées spéculatives ..."¹⁷⁵

Batteux stipulated that allegorical divinities should be presented only once by the author, and that in passing, because it would be ridiculous to allot a substantial role to what was essentially nothing but an oratorical device.¹⁷⁶

Marmontel, too, argued that in epic, allegory should be merely incidental and momentary.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, he disqualified allegory as the principal source of supernatural intervention in epic on two counts. Firstly, he alleged that the character of an allegorical protagonist was static and consequently dramatically inferior to the composite, diverse and changing nature of a human being or of Homer's gods. Secondly, he denied that allegory could achieve sufficient reality, since it had never figured as the religious system of any nation and hence suffered from a lack of credibility in any setting.¹⁷⁸

As a conclusion to this detailed examination of the various forms of supernatural intervention available to the eighteenth-century poet in France, it might be of value to note some general statements as to the necessity or superfluity of the merveilleux in a modern epic poem.

175. La Harpe, VIII, 63.

176. Batteux, II, 60.

177. Marmontel, Poétique française, I, 428.

178. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux", Supplément, III, 907-908.

The need for the Merveilleux

There were many who supported the almost unanimous view of the seventeenth century that the merveilleux was an integral element of epic.¹⁷⁹ In 1757 the Mémoires de Trévoux declared that the action of epic was necessarily marvellous in the sense that supernatural intervention was essential.¹⁸⁰ A decade later, Vaubrières agreed that epic united the supernatural with the natural¹⁸¹ and Clément was soon to deny the Henriade true epic status because of the deficiencies of its marvellous component.¹⁸² Domairon claimed in 1804 that "le merveilleux est essentiel à l'épopée"¹⁸³ and in the Examen des Martyrs (1810) Chateaubriand did not envisage the modern epic without the marvellous.¹⁸⁴ Batteux rejected various criteria commonly proposed as exclusive distinguishing features of epic and concluded that divine intervention in the action was the only infallible characteristic of the genre.¹⁸⁵

179. See Sayce, p. 12; Maskell, p. 20; Delaporte, p. 357.

180. Mémoires de Trévoux, February 1757, p. 551.

181. Vaubrières, Dissertation succincte et méthodique sur le poëme dramatique concernant la tragédie et la comédie, où l'on fait précéder le poëme épique, etc., 2 vols. (Nuremberg: Lochner, 1767), I, 4.

182. Clément, II, 14.

183. Domairon, p. 384.

184. Chateaubriand, Les Martyrs, I, 29.

185. Batteux, II, 51.

Louis Racine claimed that the presence of the merveilleux was a prerequisite for the permanent success of an epic poem and contrasted the short-lived triumph of Glover's Leonidas (1737), which omitted the supernatural, with the steady growth in fame of Paradise Lost, in which the marvellous occupied a substantial place.¹⁸⁶

Total opposition to the introduction of the supernatural into epic was rare, although instances can be cited. Palissot de Montenoy called for the exclusion of both the pagan and the Christian marvellous from the epic¹⁸⁷ and Diderot likewise disqualified pagan mythology,¹⁸⁸ while rejecting its substitution by the Christian supernatural on the grounds that the latter was not credible in an incredulous world.¹⁸⁹ The author of the article "Merveilleux" in the Encyclopédie also banished both forms of the full supernatural from the modern epic and accepted only the personification of human passions, which he refused to class as the merveilleux proper.¹⁹⁰

An intermediary position was adopted by Marmontel, who declined to exclude the merveilleux from the epic but was equally unwilling to require it.¹⁹¹ He suggested, however, that human virtues and passions were an adequate form of the supernatural in epic, as they were in tragedy,¹⁹² and he stated his case for the sole employment of this merveilleux humain with considerable

186. Racine, III, 351-52.

187. C. Palissot de Montenoy, Observations sur le poëme intitulé Malthe ou l'Isle Adam (Rhodes, 1749), p.22.

188. Diderot, VII, 153.

189. Diderot, VII, 155.

190. Article "Merveilleux", Encyclopédie, X, 395.

191. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 829.

192. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 324.

conviction: "Cependant comment suppléer aux personnages surnaturels dans l'épopée? Par les vertus & les passions, non pas allégoriquement personnifiées, (l'allégorie anime le physique et refroidit le moral), mais rendues sensibles par leurs effets, comme elles le sont dans la nature, & comme la tragédie les présente. L'épopée n'exige donc pour personnages que des hommes, & les mêmes hommes que la tragédie; avec cette différence, que celle-ci demande plus d'unité dans les caracteres, comme étant resserrée dans un moindre espace de tems."¹⁹³

Madame de Staël later endorsed Marmontel's predilection for the merveilleux humain in her Essai sur les fictions, claiming that "il faut un talent bien supérieur pour tirer de grands effets de la nature seule; il y a des phénomènes, de métamorphoses, des miracles dans les passions des hommes; et cette mythologie inépuisable ouvre les cieux, creuse aussi des enfers sous les pas de ceux qui savent l'animer ..."¹⁹⁴

The Unities and Other Rules

In view of their importance for the theatre in France, it would seem logical to begin a brief investigation of the implications for epic of the more general articles of the neoclassical literary creed with an examination of those most Gallic of all rules, the unities.

193. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 829.

194. Staël, II, 165.

Of greatest import for epic was undoubtedly the requirement that the genre should observe the unity of action. As has already been noted,¹⁹⁵ this particular stipulation normally limited the tale to the account of a single enterprise, which disqualified as a legitimate subject for epic the whole life of a hero but did not restrict the breadth of the picture the poet painted. Additionally, there was an agreed need for episodic ornamentation to be so incorporated as not to impair the unity of the action.

Except for that governing the action, however, the unities were not held to exercise notable restraints on the epic poem. Unlike the seventeenth century, when Saint-Amant among others had claimed it as a rule of epic,¹⁹⁶ there appears to have been no attempt to impose the unity of place on the genre. Equally, there was a relaxation of the various restrictions which had earlier been placed on the duration of the action of epic.¹⁹⁷

Abbé Mallet stated that the unity of time did not operate in epic¹⁹⁸ and Gaillard, too, claimed that the length of epic action was not fixed.¹⁹⁹ Louis Racine also explained that no time limit was prescribed for epic action but admired a poet like Homer who could endow an action of short duration with a breadth proportionate to its importance.²⁰⁰ In 1763 Marmontel denied that, apart from plausibility, there was any precise rule governing

195. See above, pp. 24-31 for a survey of contemporary ideas on the unity of action.

196. Bray, p. 287.

197. See Bray, pp. 285-87.

198. Mallet, II, 110.

199. Gaillard, I, 54.

200. Racine, III, 359-61.

the length of epic action: "Que l'action dure tant qu'il est naturel & vraisemblable qu'elle a duré; mais que le rapport des faits, des lieux & des tems ait cette justesse précise d'où dépend l'air de vérité".²⁰¹ In 1777, however, he followed Tasso (Discorsi, Book iii) in making memory the criterion: "Dans le poëme épique, l'unité de tems n'est réglée que par l'étendue de l'action, ni celle-ci que par la faculté commune d'une mémoire exercée; en sorte que l'action épique n'a trop d'étendue & de durée que lorsque la mémoire ne peut l'embrasser sans effort; & cette regle n'est pas gênante, car il s'agit, non des détails, mais de l'ensemble de l'action & de ses masses principales ...".²⁰² La Harpe, too, refused to make any dogmatic rule and was content to remark that "ce qu'il y a de plus essentiel à observer, c'est de ne mettre entre le point d'où l'on part et le terme où l'on va qu'un espace distribué de manière à ne pas faire languir l'action ni refroidir le lecteur".²⁰³

More vital than the unities of place and time in determining the composition of epic, however, was the rule of vraisemblance, which may truly be said to lie at the heart of the neoclassical doctrine in France.²⁰⁴ The imperious need for verisimilitude in French literature has already been seen to decree that the subject of epic should be historical, although the same requirement of plausibility conversely emancipated the poet, in that it empowered him to alter non-essential details of the plot and to supply invented but credible particulars.²⁰⁵ Papon, while he enjoined the epic poet to follow public opinion in depicting supernatural beings and urged him to conform to history or renown in describing human heroes, added the

201. Marmontel, Poétique françoise, II, 261.

202. Marmontel, article "Unité", Supplément, IV, 991.

203. La Harpe, I, 180.

204. A detailed account of this rule will be found in Bray, pp. 191-214.

205. See the discussion on the subject-matter of epic above, on pp. 15-18.

following rider, conceding this liberty to the writer of epic: "Mais comme il est rare de trouver dans l'histoire les choses arrangées de manière que sans y toucher, on puisse en faire un poëme, il est permis d'ajouter, de retrancher, de changer & de transposer, pourvu que les parties, soit feintes, soit vraies, forment un tout qui n'ait rien que de vraisemblable. Nous avons des Poëtes qui ont traité le même sujet avec des circonstances différentes. Cela est permis lorsqu'on ne change rien de ce qui est essentiel à l'action, & qu'elle n'est pas défigurée au point qu'on ne puisse plus la reconnoître."²⁰⁶

The question of the verisimilar became most problematical, of course, when it was applied to that supremely contentious area of epic theory and practice, the supernatural. Indeed, the various arguments reviewed above concerning the nature of the divine intervention, if any, to be employed in modern epic reflect as many different concepts of the universally - agreed requirement that the merveilleux of an epic poem had necessarily to be reconciled with the rule of vraisemblance.²⁰⁷

Traditionally, no basic incompatibility had seemed to exist in epic between the supernatural and the verisimilar, since celestial or infernal intervention in the ordering of human matters was held as fact in Christian society, just as divine involvement in earthly affairs had been accepted by pagan peoples. The dissension which arose in France in the seventeenth century concerned, not the propriety of introducing the supernatural into the epic poem, but the nature of the merveilleux to be employed. Serious opposition to the use of the supernatural in epic on the grounds of vraisemblance did not appear until the irreligious and incredulous eighteenth century, when it has been seen that Diderot, for example, excluded the pagan

206. Papon, pp. 17-18.

207. See above, pp. 34-52 for an account of the theories dealing with the supernatural element in epic.

and the Christian marvellous because neither was credible.²⁰⁸

Long before the very presence of the merveilleux in epic was questioned, therefore, the law of plausibility in literature had been invoked to object to the introduction of mythological agents into modern epic. And if Boileau had been able to advocate the use of pagan deities in a Christian epic poem in the face of such objections, it was because he adopted an allegorical interpretation of the supernatural beings in classical epic, which denied them any reality and made of them mere stylistic devices, whereby each god personified a natural force or moral quality.²⁰⁹ Louis Racine was one of the few critics in the period under discussion to follow Boileau's thinking on the purely stylistic role of the merveilleux païen, although he did restrict the poetic usage of the names of pagan divinities to epics dealing with non-Christian subjects.²¹⁰ Generally, theorists agreed with Abbé Mallet, who disapproved of the introduction of pagan gods as a poetic device because the supernatural agents of antiquity no longer held for the Christian poet the powerful suggestive connotations they had had for his pagan counterpart.²¹¹

More often, then, the case for or against the use of the pagan supernatural in modern French epic was argued from a standpoint which viewed the gods of mythology as real, active agents in the action. If the author of the article "Merveilleux" in the Encyclopédie called for the total proscription of the merveilleux païen by contemporary poets on grounds that were virtually those of plausibility,²¹² Marmontel used the same reasoning to legitimize the use of the mythological marvellous in modern poems

208. Diderot, VII, 153 and VII, 155. See above, p. 51.

209. Boileau, ll. 160-92 and passim.

210. L. Racine, Réflexions sur la poésie in Oeuvres, 4 vols. (Paris: Desaint and Saillant, 1747), vols. III and IV, III, 47.

211. Mallet, II, 127-28.

212. Encyclopédie, X, 394. See above, p. 39.

celebrating ancient, pagan subjects.²¹³ The application of the rule of verisimilitude to the question of the supernatural in epic thus failed to produce a consensus among theorists and the relationship between vraisemblance and the merveilleux in critical thought was decidedly uneasy.

Another article of the neoclassical doctrine which continued to influence the theory of epic in France in the later eighteenth century was the rule of the bienséances and, in particular, their implication for the internal aspects, or caractère and mœurs, of the characters who participated in epic action.²¹⁴ The importance of the maxim of correctness can be gauged by the fact that Sulzer was not the only critic to hold that characterization was one of the principal distinguishing features of the epic genre and to argue that the poet's success in the detailed portraits found in epic provided an accurate indication of his genius.²¹⁵

Before examining the precise demands the bienséances made on the epic poet in the area of characterization, it will be useful to quote some relevant contemporary definitions. Racine made the following distinction: "J'appelle mœurs ces inclinations communes qui dépendent de l'âge, du sexe, de la condition, des pays, & des tems. J'appelle caractères, les inclinations particulières à chacun de nous, & qui nous distinguent les uns des autres."²¹⁶ Batteux confessed that the terms were virtually interchangeable but noted that "... il semble que par le mot de Caractère on doit entendre une disposition naturelle, qui porte à agir d'une manière plutôt

213. Marmontel, article "Merveilleux", Supplément, III, 907; article "Vraisemblance", Supplément, IV, 1002. See above, pp. 39-40.

214. Bray deals at length with the bienséances on pp. 215-30. See especially pp. 216-24 for the "bienséances internes" or "théorie des mœurs".

215. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 829.

216. Racine, Réflexions, III, 197.

que d'une autre; & que celui de Moeurs signifie plus proprement une disposition acquise par la répétition des actes, soit que la nature nous y ait portez, ou l'éducation, ou l'exemple, ou la raison".²¹⁷

In the name of the bienséances, various exactitudes were required of the epic poet when he came to draw his characters. Batteux ordained that each participant in the epic tale should conform in both words and deeds to his traditional public image.²¹⁸ In the case of a protagonist who was not known through history or fable, he advised the poet to establish the character of his hero early in the work and subsequently to maintain consistency of treatment.²¹⁹

Indeed, consistency of characterization was widely acknowledged to be of paramount importance in epic composition. Racine claimed that "l'imitation d'un grand caractère toujours soutenu, est le chef-d'oeuvre de la Poësie. C'est par elle que les Poëtes Epiques & Dramatiques sont au-dessus de tous les autres Poëtes ...".²²⁰ Marmontel considered consistency in character depiction to number among the unities and demanded that it be extended even to persons whose chief characteristics were inconstancy and changeability: "L'unité des moeurs consiste dans l'égalité du caractere, ou plutôt dans son accord avec lui-même; car un caractere peut être inégal, flottant & variable, ou par nature, ou par accident; alors son unité consiste à être constamment inconstant, également léger, changeant ...".²²¹

217. Batteux, II, 87-88.

218. Batteux, II, 90-91.

219. Batteux, II, 93.

220. Racine, Réflexions, III, 228.

221. Marmontel, article "Unité", Supplément, IV, 991.

There was also agreement among theorists that the moeurs of the characters in epic should be appropriate to the diverse factors of their existence. Racine distinguished a variety of circumstances which conditioned humanity and among these he included age, sex, social rank, geographical location and historical setting.²²²

The Moral Object of Epic

It was in the seventeenth century that the belief in the moral mission of literature had come to the fore in France.²²³ Although Aristotle had not allotted to epic poetry any specific object and Horace had declined to give usefulness priority over pleasure, the moral purpose of the epic poem was increasingly stressed during the course of the century and was enshrined in Le Bossu's Traité du poëme épique of 1675. According to Le Bossu's allegorical theory of the epic, the first and foremost task of the poet in his function as moral philosopher was to select some general moral precept to impart and only subsequently would he search for a suitable historical tale to convey his maxim in an allegorical fashion. For Le Bossu, epic was at once a poem and a fable in the manner of Aesop and, although this particular theory had fallen out of general favour by the beginning of the period covered by this study,²²⁴ the critics of the later eighteenth century were no less convinced than their predecessors of the basic utilitarian nature of epic.

222. Racine, Réflexions, III, 198-215.

223. For a survey of this utilitarian view of literature, see Bray, pp.63-84.

224. See, for example, the refutation of Le Bossu's allegorical interpretation of epic by Abbé Batteux in Batteux, II, 67-86. Yet Abbé Mallet and Gaillard both adopted Le Bossu's definition of epic. See below, pp. 70-71.

Gaillard prescribed that "le but du Poëme Epique est ... d'instruire les hommes, & de les rendre meilleurs"²²⁵ and Louis Racine came to the same conclusion via a rather circuitous process of reasoning. Racine felt that an instructive purpose was not obligatory in poetry but conferred on it greater worth and, ultimately, charm. He therefore found it impossible to conceive that the ability to write epic, the rarest product of the human mind, should not necessarily be accompanied by an educative intent.²²⁶ Some fifty years later, Domairon agreed that in epic more than in any other genre, the author should direct his art to utilitarian, as much as to pleasurable, ends.²²⁷

If the consensus of opinion was, then, that epic composition implied a serious moral purpose, there was some divergence of thought as to how that didactic aim was to be effected. The more popular view followed Tasso (Discorsi, Book i) in arguing that the epic, unlike tragedy, achieved its end by exciting in the reader admiration for the positive virtues of its hero, displayed in the face of impossible odds. Batteux, for instance, was of the firm belief that the epic poet sought to arouse admiration in his reader and employed the heroic and the marvellous to do so: "L'Epopée intéresse tous les hommes, en leur proposant des objets héroïques & merveilleux: c'est de quoi élever l'ame par la considération des modèles. Elle attire les hommes par l'admiration".²²⁸

Marmontel, too, stressed the educative nature of epic in that he made the importance of the moral lesson contained in the action determine the very suitability of the latter for epic treatment but he added terror and pity to admiration as emotions proper to the genre.²²⁹ Marmontel declared

225. Gaillard, I, 42.

226. Racine, Le Paradis Perdu de Milton, III, 466-67.

227. Domairon, p. 411.

228. Batteux, II, 31.

229. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 826.

admiration to be the coldest of human emotions and claimed that the Gerusalemme Liberata would have been less attractive had Tasso actually put his theories into practice. He alleged that the interest of the epics of Homer, Virgil and Tasso came less from heroism and the supernatural than from the touching episodes they contained and, faithful to his Aristotelian belief in the similarity of epic and tragic subjects, Marmontel affirmed that "l'aliment de l'intérêt, soit épique, soit dramatique, est donc la crainte & la pitié".²³⁰

These varying concepts of the emotions to be engendered by the epic poem influenced in their turn decisions concerning the nature of its dénouement. The assertion that the object of epic was to move the reader to admiration forced Batteux to reason, with the majority of critics, that the outcome must be fortunate for the hero: "Ainsi le dénouement de l'Epopée sera essentiellement le succès & la joie. C'est une grande vertu qu'on donne à admirer: si elle échouoit, elle seroit plus digne de pitié que d'admiration."²³¹ This line of argument, incidentally, compelled Batteux to propose that Satan rather than Adam was the true hero of Paradise Lost in that he triumphed over the first man.²³² To take a different view of the same dénouement, Chateaubriand noted that Milton was the first epic poet to end his poem with the misfortune of the main protagonist, contrary to the generally-agreed rule.²³³

Marmontel, on the other hand, could accept as the dénouement of epic either ultimate triumph over obstacles or unmitigated misfortune²³⁴ and allow the nature of the subject treated to determine the success or failure of the enterprise.²³⁵

230. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 233-35.

231. Batteux, II, 37.

232. Batteux, II, 38.

233. Chateaubriand, Génie, II, 11.

234. J.-F. Marmontel, article "Dénouement", in Encyclopédie, IV, 831-33, p.831.

235. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 271.

There was also disagreement over the practical methods the epic poet could employ to achieve his moral obligation. For Sulzer, epic poets differed fundamentally from moralists and philosophers in the way they conveyed their lessons. The poet, Sulzer argued, made his point by means of examples, by showing how gifted and distinguished men act on great occasions. The writer of epic made no moral applications, nor did he pronounce general maxims through the mouths of his heroes but, rather than instructing his reader directly how to think and act, was content to reveal to him the thoughts and actions of great men. Sulzer affirmed that "l'influence vraiment énergique de l'épopée sur les mœurs, consiste dans les actions & la manière noble de penser des héros".²³⁶ Domairon concurred that "... le poète ne doit point en général faire lui-même la fonction de moraliste", although he did permit the epic poet occasional brief moral reflections.²³⁷

Another school of thought contended, however, that the didactic mission of the epic poet empowered, perhaps even required, him to use every means at his disposal to promote his moral aim. Mallet offered the following advice: "Or on n'y sauroit parvenir mieux que par des discours & des exemples. Maximes sages, préceptes utiles, actions grandes & généreuses, jugemens intègres, principes solides, instructions de la part du Poète, vertus de la part du Héros qu'il met en action, rien ne doit être négligé pour parvenir à cette fin".²³⁸

A more novel concept of the way in which epic could produce moral improvement in the reader appeared in Madame de Staël's treatise, De la littérature (1800). Although Madame de Staël was not making specific reference

236. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 829.

237. Domairon, p. 413.

238. Mallet, II, 112-13.

to the epic genre, there can be no doubt that it was encompassed within her claim that the intrinsic beauty of great literature was itself a positive inducement to virtue: "Les chefs-d'oeuvre de la littérature, indépendamment des exemples qu'ils présentent, produisent une sorte d'ébranlement moral et physique, un tressaillement d'admiration qui nous dispose aux actions généreuses ... La vertu devient alors une impulsion involontaire, un mouvement qui passe dans le sang, et vous entraîne irrésistiblement comme les passions les plus impérieuses".²³⁹ According to Madame de Staël's thesis, therefore, literary greatness alone was needed to achieve a utilitarian end, and that independently of any deliberate moral purpose. It may well be significant that no reader of the epic poems written in France between 1745 and 1809 appears to have recorded that he was thereby inspired to an act of virtue!

The Medium of Epic

One question which exercised theorists of epic in the eighteenth century in France more urgently than their predecessors was whether prose constituted an equally suitable medium for the genre as poetry. Such theoretical discussion as there had been in the seventeenth century on the admissibility of prose as the vehicle of epic did not engender any practical attempt²⁴⁰ and it was not until the publication of Fénelon's Avantures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse in 1699, that the issue of the prose epic assumed particular immediacy in France. Subsequently, debate on the proper medium of epic was fostered both by the dispute over the status of Télémaque itself and also

239. Staël, IV, 30.

240. Bray, pp. 346-47.

by the controversy over the relative merits of prose and verse which raged throughout the eighteenth century and engaged most of the major critics of the period.

Critical attitudes to Télémaque provide a convenient and accurate pointer to the acceptance or rejection of prose as a suitable vehicle for epic.²⁴¹ In his Approbation for the first authentic edition of 1717, dated the first of June 1716, De Sacy hailed Télémaque as not only an epic poem, but the equal of the great epics of antiquity: "Ce Poëme Epique, quoiqu'en Prose, met notre Nation en état de n'avoir rien à envier de ce côté-là aux Grecs, & aux Romains."²⁴²

In the Essai sur la poésie épique, however, Voltaire condemned the attempt to repair France's lack of a successful epic poem by according Télémaque epic status. Voltaire argued that to term a prose work a poem was to blur all distinctions between the various art forms, although he conceded that the style of this "roman moral", as he preferred to call Télémaque, was appropriate for a prose translation of Homer.²⁴³

Voltaire's attitude to Télémaque was shared later by, among others, Gaillard who in 1749 made verse a necessary component of his definition of epic²⁴⁴ and regretted that Télémaque needed only versification to be a perfect epic poem.²⁴⁵ At the beginning of the next century, Esménard agreed that Télémaque had all the important ingredients of epic, except the one essential element, the medium of verse.²⁴⁶

241. For the reputation and literary influence of Télémaque, see A. Chérel, Fénelon au XVIIIe siècle en France (1715-1820): son prestige-son influence (Paris: Hachette, 1917), pp. 24-29, 83-93, 287-99, 370-81, 445-55, 539-46.

242. In F. de Salignac de La Mothe Fénelon, Les Aventures de Télémaque fils d'Ulysse. Nouvelle édition conforme au manuscrit original, 2 vols. (Londres: Tonson & Watts, 1719), I, xxxvi.

243. Voltaire, VIII, 361.

244. Gaillard, I, 39.

245. Gaillard, I, 42.

246. Mercure de France, xxxii, 1808, p.222.

Generally, however, the concept of the prose epic increasingly gained support, as the evolving judgement of Marmontel bears witness. In the preface to the 1746 edition of the Henriade, Marmontel refused to countenance the possibility of the prose poem and found Télémaque an excellent novel but an execrable poem, because of its total lack of those qualities constituting the difficult art of poetry.²⁴⁷ By 1755, in the Encyclopédie, however, Marmontel had clearly become disenchanted with the alexandrine, the traditional heroic metre. While he did not explicitly advocate the substitution of prose for verse as the medium of epic, Marmontel's enthusiastic analysis of the "harmonie libre" of the former provides a plain, if indirect, indication of his preference.²⁴⁸ In 1763, moreover, Marmontel omitted any reference to verse in his definition of poetry,²⁴⁹ accepted Télémaque as an epic poem²⁵⁰ and stated categorically that verse was not of the essence of epic.²⁵¹

But acceptance of prose as the medium of epic was often accompanied by a recognition of the superiority of verse for the purpose of epic composition. The definition of epic offered by Pagès is a good illustration of this distinction and consequently deserves to be quoted in full: "L'Epopée est l'imitation en récit, en prose ou en vers, d'une action héroïque, intéressante et mémorable. Nous disons en prose ou en vers, car le Télémaque est un véritable poème épique en prose. Tout ce qu'on peut dire contre ce nouveau genre, c'est qu'à mérite égal d'ailleurs, le poète ou l'homme de génie qui aura traité un beau sujet en beaux vers, sera aussi supérieur à celui qui n'aura mis la même action qu'en langage ordinaire, quelque harmonieux qu'il soit, que la prose est inférieure à la poésie".²⁵²

247. To be found in Taylor, pp. 327-38, pp. 335-36.

248. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 830.

249. Marmontel, Poétique française, I, 58.

250. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 240.

251. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 317.

252. Pagès, II, 220.

Even Marmontel admitted that verse was an added merit in epic, provided that the poem did not suffer thereby.²⁵³ La Harpe, too, although his pronouncements leave some doubt about the precise strength of his feeling on the question of the prose epic, seems basically to have thought along the same lines. Early in the Lycée, La Harpe appears to demand verse on the grounds that, French versification being prodigiously difficult, he did not wish to divorce the merit stemming from la difficulté vaincue from such a great genre as epic.²⁵⁴ A little later, however, despite making verse an element in his definition of epic,²⁵⁵ La Harpe adopts a less intransigent position: "Sans vouloir prononcer rigoureusement sur cette question, l'on peut au moins assurer que celui qui traiterait l'épopée en prose avec imagination et intérêt, laisserait encore à désirer une partie essentielle à notre poésie, la beauté de la versification, et aurait par conséquent un mérite de moins."²⁵⁶

As for the metre to be employed in verse epic, the very infrequency with which any specific direction was given by theorists must be taken as proof that the alexandrine continued to be regarded as the sole mètre proper to the genre. Batteux was one of the few critics to confirm that each genre of poetry enjoyed its own particular type of versification and to specify that the metre proper to epic in French was "... de douze tems, avec un repos vers le milieu, & une finale d'une cadence sensible."²⁵⁷ However, even if -

253. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 317.

254. La Harpe, I, 60.

255. La Harpe, I, 174-75.

256. La Harpe, I, 181.

257. Batteux, II, 116.

as has just been seen - it did not elicit from him an explicit statement of preference for the prose epic, Marmontel's disenchantment with the alexandrine at least led him to offer a revolutionary suggestion to the potential writer of verse epic: "Cependant, s'il faut céder à l'habitude où nous sommes de voir des poèmes en vers, il y auroit un moyen d'en rompre la monotonie, & d'en rendre jusqu'à un certain point l'harmonie imitative: ce seroit d'y employer des vers de différente mesure, non pas mêlés au hasard, comme dans nos poésies libres, mais appliqués aux différens genres auxquels leur cadence est le plus analogue. Par exemple, le vers de dix syllabes, comme le plus simple, aux morceaux pathétiques; le vers de douze aux morceaux tranquilles & majestueux; le vers de huit aux harangues véhémentes les vers de sept, de six & cinq aux peintures les plus vives & les plus fortes."²⁵⁸ It will be seen that at least one epic poet, Pagès de Vixouze, used such a variety of metres but failed to introduce them in the orderly fashion that Marmontel recommended.²⁵⁹

Whether verse or prose were employed by the author, however, it was conceded that epic demanded an especially elevated style of composition. Gaillard reasoned thus: "Le Style doit s'accomoder au sujet; il doit par conséquent être noble, élevé, magnifique dans l'Epopée. C'est le sublime majestueux qui doit régner dans la narration."²⁶⁰ To the illustriousness of the subject, Papon added the alleged result of the invocation as justification for the pomp and majesty of epic, explaining that "... comme le Poëte est censé être inspiré par une divinité, & qu'il chante une action grande & intéressante, qui décide ordinairement du sort d'un Empire, il est naturel qu'il prenne un essor extraordinaire, & que le style de son ouvrage en général soit noble & pompeux."²⁶¹

258. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 830.

259. See below, p. 120.

260. Gaillard, I, 111.

261. Papon, p. 70.

That this lofty and noble tone was particularly necessary in the narrative passages in epic was commonly agreed by critics. In the dramatic sections which the poet was enjoined to introduce for reasons of variety and interest, it was recognized that the rule of propriety compelled the use of vocabulary which reflected the status of the speaker, although the dignified rank of the usual participants in epic action ensured, at least in theory, that even in direct speech the everyday and the ordinary were avoided.

A dramatic element, then, was generally acknowledged to form an important ingredient of epic and La Harpe marvelled that Voltaire had exercised his dramatic talent so little in the Henriade.²⁶² Marmontel, however, invoked Aristotle's parallelism of the two genres, in Chapters xxiii and xxiv of the Poetics, to justify a closer approximation of epic to tragedy and elaborated in his various critical writings the theory of a dramatic epic. Marmontel's concept of the epic poem thus relied heavily on Aristotle's contention that epic was a tragedy in narrative form: "L'Epopée est donc une Tragédie dont l'action se passe dans l'imagination du lecteur. Ainsi, tout ce qui dans la Tragédie est présent aux yeux, doit être présent à l'esprit dans l'Epopée."²⁶³ The principal stylistic innovation Marmontel proposed was the incorporation into epic of the dramatic scenes of tragedy and he particularly recommended the political discussions to be found in abundance in the theatre of Corneille. Marmontel alleged that, properly manipulated, these dramatic sections could not appear too frequently in epic, since they animated and invigorated the poem and he even imputed the lack of interest of the majority of epic poems to the preponderance of narrative and the insufficiency of theatrical situations.²⁶⁴ In Aristotelian vein, therefore, Marmontel concluded that epic should be envisaged as a tragedy composed of an indefinite number of

262. La Harpe, VIII, 61.

263. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 229.

264. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 828.

dramatic scenes which were linked by passages of direct narrative by the poet.²⁶⁵

The Definition of Epic

An examination of the actual definitions of epic proposed during the years covered by this study will hopefully have been made meaningful by the foregoing survey of the principal articles of the epic doctrine. At the same time, such a review will now have the advantage of indicating those features of epic which, by specifying them in their definitions, critics signified to be of particular importance.

In a number of definitions, the supernatural element in epic received special stress. Vaubrières defined epic as "... le récit poétique d'une Action merveilleuse, qui semble être dicté par une Muse, ou par une intelligence céleste; où se trouve réunis [sic] l'influence des causes surnaturelles avec les causes naturelles".²⁶⁶ Batteux claimed that "... l'Epopée en général est le récit poétique d'une action merveilleuse ..." and analysed the Iliad, Odyssey and Aeneid as the poetic narrative of, respectively, the marvellous vengeance of Achilles, the marvellous return of Ulysses and the marvellous settling of Aeneas in Italy.²⁶⁷ Domairon, too, argued that marvellous action was the essential characteristic of epic.²⁶⁸

265. Marmontel, Poétique française, II, 271.

266. Vaubrières, I, 4.

267. Batteux, II, 173.

268. Domairon, p. 382.

On the other hand, reference to the supernatural was significantly absent from the definitions of both Marmontel and Sulzer.²⁶⁹ La Harpe, too, omitted it: "Je définis donc l'épopée, le récit en vers d'une action vraisemblable, héroïque et intéressante."²⁷⁰ La Harpe explained that, of the heroic and religious characteristics of ancient epic, modern epic had retained only the former and he decreed that it was not absolutely essential to introduce Christian machinery into the modern epic poem, although he would not exclude it.²⁷¹

In his definition of epic, Papon laid special emphasis on those qualities which were universally required of the action of epic and additionally demanded the presence of the supernatural. Moreover, he reiterated the traditional stipulation concerning the status of the protagonists and insisted on their celebrity. Papon wrote that "le Poème épique est l'imitation en récit d'une action grande, entière, vraisemblable & merveilleuse, dont les principaux personnages sont des Rois, des Héros, ou des hommes illustres connus dans l'Histoire ou dans la Fable."²⁷²

The definitions given by Abbé Mallet and Gaillard, who both wrote early in the period discussed, are modelled very closely on the concept of epic proposed some seventy years previously by Le Bossu. They are thus remarkable in that they tardily allege a paramount moral aim on the part of the poet and impute to him a highly dubious method of composition.²⁷³ Gaillard's shorter statement will adequately make the point: "L'Epopée,

269. Marmontel, article "Epopée", Encyclopédie, V, 825; Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 826.

270. La Harpe, I, 174-75.

271. La Harpe, I, 174.

272. Papon, p. 2.

273. See above, p.59 for Le Bossu's theory of epic.

ou Poëme Epique, est une Fable dont le but est de former les moeurs par des instructions déguisées sous les Allégories d'une action importante racontée en Vers d'une maniere intéressante, sublime, & vrai-semblable, quoique merveilleuse."²⁷⁴

That a number of critics were convinced that there was only one proper medium for epic is evidenced by those definitions which made verse a prerequisite of the genre. In addition to Gaillard and La Harpe, whose definitions have just been quoted, Mallet and Sabatier de Castres²⁷⁵ both demand verse but this latter quality assumes particular importance in the very modest requirements that Abbé Iraitlh made of the epic poem: "On le définit un récit en vers d'aventures héroïques ..."²⁷⁶

Because he felt that the genre had attracted too many rules and precepts, many of them either purely arbitrary or simply false, Sulzer proposed a generalized definition of epic: "C'est le récit pompeux d'un événement ou d'une action mémorable, accompagné de tableaux circonstanciés des principaux personnages, & des choses les plus intéressantes."²⁷⁷ In an attempt to determine the essentials of epic, Sulzer traced the genre back to the oral tradition of its earliest origins and thus arrived at a reduced number of requirements: "L'unité d'action, l'intérêt & la grandeur de l'événement, la maniere de le rapporter, plus épique qu'historique. Des

274. Gaillard, I, 39. Cf. Mallet, II, 104-105 and Le Bossu, I, 14.

275. Sabatier de Castres, II, 67.

276. Iraitlh, II, 275.

277. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 826.

peintures saillantes des héros, & de leurs exploits, une diction très-pathétique, mais qui ne s'élève pas tout-à-fait jusqu'à l'enthousiasme. Tout poëme qui réunira ces qualités méritera le nom d'épopée."²⁷⁸

Domairon's definition of epic will conclude this survey conveniently not only because it was published in 1804, towards the end of the period reviewed, and consequently serves to indicate the terminal concept of epic, but also because Domairon specified the way in which his particular definition distinguished epic from other genres. Domairon began his study of epic with the following claim: "Ainsi l'épopée est le récit poétique d'une action héroïque et merveilleuse. Le récit est ce qui la distingue de la tragédie, et ce qu'elle a de commun avec l'histoire: le récit poétique, c'est-à-dire, orné de fictions, est ce qui la distingue de celle-ci: l'action héroïque est ce qui la distingue des petits poèmes et du roman, dont le fond est toujours une historiette ou une intrigue amoureuse. L'action merveilleuse est ce qui la caractérise essentiellement."²⁷⁹ In this definition, then, Domairon repeats many of the traditional requirements of epic, with the exception that he does not demand that it be written in verse.

Conclusion

The above examination of the theory of epic expounded in France between 1745 and 1809 reveals that critical thought ran along largely traditional lines, the arbiters of the genre being concerned with substantially the

278. Sulzer, article "Epopée", Supplément, II, 828.

279. Domairon, p. 382.

same questions which had preoccupied their counterparts in the seventeenth century.

The superiority of epic over other literary forms remained unchallenged and the peculiar difficulties of epic composition were still conceded. Following the recommendation of Tasso, the poet was exhorted to select a subject which was, if not actually, then at least ostensibly historical, although he was permitted judiciously to embellish this authentic basis with fabricated matter. The demand that the tale recounted should constitute an action, which itself embodied a variety of requisite qualities, provides further proof of the survival of the neoclassical concept of epic. There was little modification of the agreed structure of the epic poem but Marmontel refused to allow that the absence of an artificial time sequence vitiated epic status or impaired poetic quality. The acknowledged educative intent of epic was not called into question and critics advised the manipulation of the emotions of the reader as the proper means of achieving this didactic aim, in preference to Le Bossu's insistence that a blatant moral lesson be enshrined in an allegorical story.

The problem of the merveilleux continued to excite controversy among theorists but the argumentation became, if anything, even more intricate and involved. If intransigent opposition to the inclusion of a supernatural element was uncommon but not unknown, a number of critics indicated their willingness to waive the traditional requirement that epic should record divine intervention in human affairs. In the face of appeals for the total proscription by eighteenth-century authors of the pagan supernatural favoured by Boileau, Marmontel condoned the employment of the mythological marvellous in modern epic poems where it was credible in the historical and geographical setting of the argument. At the same time, the period witnessed a very

considerable movement in favour of Christian epic machinery and Chateaubriand's crusade to establish the literary pre-eminence of Christianity finally discredited paganism as the source of the supernatural agents of epic.

In deliberating the possibility of the prose epic, too, theorists of the period were again discussing a topic which had already been raised during the classical period in France. However, the question had merely been hypothetical for the seventeenth century and the animation, even vehemence, with which it was exhaustively debated after the publication of Télémaque in 1699 perhaps entitles it to be considered as a feature more peculiar to eighteenth-century epic criticism.

Critical thought on epic in the years between 1745 and 1809, then, was confined to aspects which had enjoyed considerable prior scrutiny. Nor can any real innovatory approach to epic be clearly discerned within that restricted area of discussion. At the terminal, as at the inceptive date of this study, the predominant spirit of epic criticism was firmly neoclassical. Marmontel's attempt to infuse a greater dramatic element into the genre apart, epic theory betrays little evidence of the transition from the neoclassical to the romantic ideal which marked other branches of literature.

And perhaps the most eloquent and tangible proof of the survival of the neoclassical attitude to epic lies in the very promulgation of a systematic body of precepts to govern practical attempts at composition. The continuation of the belief that compliance with certain allegedly statutory requirements and the application of a detailed code of practice would ensure creative success is one of the salient characteristics of epic theory in the later eighteenth century. Voltaire's denigration of the petty maxims

which figured among the traditional rules of epic did not dissuade later critics from reiterating them, just as the relativist standpoint Du Bos and Voltaire advocated in the appreciation of ancient and foreign literature failed to encourage an attempt to elaborate a concept of epic which fully and accurately reflected the spirit of the age.

Nevertheless, the corpus of theory which has been investigated in this chapter was intended to provide the would-be epic poet with such instruction as was necessary to ensure, as far as was reasonably possible, success in his chosen field of literary activity. The efficacy of this voluminous critical material can, perhaps, be best evaluated by an examination of the practical attempts at epic made under its aegis in France between 1745 and 1809. The following three chapters, therefore, will deal with as many different themes, which were treated in the heroic epic manner in this period.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL EPIC

Epics discussed, listed in order of treatment

- P.-A. Dulard, Protis ou la fondation de Marseille, 1758
- C. Godard d'Aucour, La Pariséïde, ou Pâris dans les Gaules, 1773
- F. Vernes, La Franciade ou l'ancienne France, 1789
- A.-P. Tardieu Saint-Marcel, Charles-Martel, ou la France délivrée, 1806
- C.-S. Théveneau, Charlemagne, 1804 ff. (1816)
- C.-A. Dorion, Bataille d'Hastings, ou l'Angleterre conquise, 1806
- Le Manissier, La Louisiade, 1787
- F.-X. Pagès de Vixouze, Louis XIV, ou la guerre de 1701, 1778
- A. Piron, Essai d'un chant de la Louisiade, 1745
- F.-X. Pagès de Vixouze, La France républicaine, ou le miroir de la révolution française, 1793
- J.-F. de La Harpe, Le triomphe de la religion, ou le roi martyr, 1795 ff. (1814)
- J. Renaud-Blanchet, L'école des empires, ou la chute de la monarchie française, 1804
- C.-L. Lesur, Les Francs, 1797
- A.-P.-F. Ménégault, La Napoléïde, 1806

The neoclassical epic treating an historical theme in the vernacular has a long pedigree in France, stretching back to Ronsard's incomplete poem on the Franco-Trojan myth, the Franciade of 1572. A comprehensive study of the historical epic in France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been published by Maskell, whose book is an invaluable source of information on both the poems themselves and the way in which

the writers of historical epic envisaged the relationship between history and epic in the period from 1500 to 1700.¹

The aim of the present chapter is to examine a representative selection of the historical epics composed in France during the years spanned by this thesis. In the interests of clarity and convenience, the analysis has been confined to poems dealing with subjects relating to French national history and an attempt has been made to include most of the major poems dealing with the heroes of France.² By way of compensation for the limits imposed on the subject-matter, the term "history" has been conceived in its widest acceptance, as encompassing material as diverse as contemporary events, authenticated records of the past, national legend and even admittedly fictitious narratives concerning the earliest origins of the nation. The poems are considered in chronological order of subject-matter, ranging from the fabulous history of France to the successes of the Napoleonic era.

The investigation shows that French history continued to exercise a potent attraction for writers of epic and that poems on national characters and events achieved a substantial numerical superiority among examples of the genre. Practitioners of historical epic exploited a full range of diverse subject-matter, although they generally subjected their material to the conventions of the genre. Of particular interest is the way in which the licence the poet enjoyed over the historian was used to supply the invented matter of epic in works treating contemporary heroes or figures of the recent past.

1. D. Maskell, The historical epic in France 1500-1700 (Oxford: University Press, 1973)

2. It has unfortunately not proved possible to locate copies of the following works, which could usefully have figured in this chapter: Le Jeune, La Louiséïde ou le héros chrétien (Paris: Mellin, 1773). See Taylor, p. 683; H. de Bassac, Jeanne Darc, poème en six chants (Bordeaux, 1809).

DULARD, Protis, 1758³

Personal associations would appear to have played their part in determining Dulard's choice of national epic subject, for his Protis records the origins of his own birthplace, eulogized in the proposition as

... cette illustre Cité,
Le trône de la Gloire, & de la Liberté,
Le temple de Minerve, & du Dieu de la Guerre,
La soeur de la Cité qui subjuga la terre.⁴

On Dulard's own admission in the preface, his selection from the various versions of the founding of Marseilles was based on aesthetic considerations rather than on any regard for strict historical accuracy. For Justin's claim that Marseilles was colonized by Protis in peacetime and purely on account of the geographical advantages of the area, is not adopted, although it is acknowledged as correct. Instead, Dulard opts for the Herodotean account, which offers as explanation for the enterprise the siege of Phocaea during Cyrus's invasion of Asia Minor. This latter version, then, is preferred for its obvious artistic merits, although Dulard is fully aware that the siege postdated Protis's original founding of Marseilles by some sixty years and that the refugees joined an already established colony. Such historical inaccuracies are, he claims, the prerogative of the epic poet: "La critique, j'ose le dire, feroit une chicane puérile de Chronologiste, qui jugeroit un Poëte, comme on doit juger un Historien."⁵

3. P.-A. Dulard, Protis ou la fondation de Marseille. Poëme, in Oeuvres diverses, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Arkstée & Merkus, 1758); I, 9-104. Forced by parental pressure to enter commerce, Dulard (1695-1760) devoted his spare time to poetry. Crowned three times at the Jeux Floraux de Toulouse, he was a founder member of the Académie de Marseille in 1726. Dulard's most popular work was his poem entitled La grandeur de Dieu dans les merveilles de la nature (1749).

4. Dulard, p. 27.

5. Dulard, Préface, p. 18

The siege of Phocaea (directed, quite unhistorically, by Cyrus in person) provides the setting for the opening canto, in which the character of the future founders of Marseilles is firmly established. Heroic in their resistance and fanatically opposed to any form of servitude, they have to be convinced by Protis that flight does not entail loss of honour before they agree to abandon their city. Henceforth, however, they do not figure largely in the story and no further martial exploits are required of them. In Chants ii and iii, the exiles land at Ephesus and on Cyprus respectively and reach the banks of the Rhône in the fourth and final canto. That they have happened on a propitious site for a settlement is suggested by the great natural beauty of the area:

... Dans les champs les arbres dispersés
 Courbent sous le fardeau de leurs fruits entassés.
 Le Dieu que dans ses bras reçut le vieux Silène,
 Surcharge de ses dons les côteaux & la plaine.
 Plus utile que lui, la féconde Cérès
 D'une forêt d'épis couvre au loin les guerets.
 De l'onde d'un grand Fleuve, en ruisseaux divisée,
 La campagne riante est par-tout arrosée.
 Les prés sont revêtus de verdoians gasons,
 Et de nombreux troupeaux paissent dans les vallons.
 Telle, & moins gracieuse, étoit cette Contrée,
 Où Phébus, exilé de la voûte azurée,
 Sous l'habit de Berger couloit des jours heureux,
 Et ne regrettoit point la demeure des Dieux.⁶

But in the epic tradition, even an agricultural paradise is not in itself sufficient reason to warrant the founding of a great city, so Protis is provided with confirmation of a more tangible order.

Advancing into the interior with his chief captains, Protis finds the native population enjoying a fête champêtre. King Nannus and his court have assembled at a rustic temple to witness the choosing of a husband and

6. Dulard, pp. 94-95.

future ruler by Gyptis, the king's only child. Advised beforehand by Diana in a dream to marry an unknown foreign warrior, Gyptis duly offers Protis the sacred cup of wine, a gesture that indicates her choice. Nannus allows his new son-in-law to build a city and the poem concludes with a brief panegyric of Marseilles.

Although it incorporates many of the topoi of the great epics, it is difficult not to see in Protis a poem, not only on a small scale, but in a minor key. Its four cantos comprise a mere 1700 lines, but more noticeable even than its untypical brevity is the absence of any feeling of the majestic and the portentous. The title page bears on its reverse the Virgilian legend "Tantae molis erat condere Massiliam", a claim which seems highly exaggerated in view of the enterprise itself. The whole action lasts only three months and, as no attempt is made to endow it with more remote historical antecedents, it lacks any real climactic effect.

Protis himself, although he acts under the aegis of Diana, hardly reaches true epic stature. The list of his qualities when he is introduced to the reader is impressive:

... Issu d'un sang illustre,
Ses vertus à son rang prêtoient un nouveau lustre.
Amour de la Patrie, & respect pour les Dieux,
Coeur magnanime, ouvert aux cris des malheureux,
Valeur dans le combat, dans le conseil prudence,
Grandeur dans les projets, fermeté, vigilance,
Ces sublimes vertus, il les réunissoit,
Et le bruit de son nom par-tout retentissoit.⁷

But Protis is given little opportunity to show these attributes in action. Victory in single combat over his long-time secret enemy Phyllos on the island of Cyprus does not provide adequate compensation for the essentially passive

7. Dulard, pp. 37-38.

role he plays in the fulfilling of his destiny in Gaul.

In keeping with the atmosphere of the work, the style is predominantly simple, with some half-dozen similes, in the course of the poem, a noticeable absence of periphrasis and no gratuitous display of erudition. Altogether, then, Protis is an innocuous attempt at verse epic and Dulard is at least to be commended for his evident affection for his native city.

Godard d'Aucour, La Pariséïde, 1773⁸

The origins of Marseilles are also treated in La Pariséïde, a prose work⁹ published anonymously in 1773 by Claude Godard d'Aucour. In this version, the city is founded by the Phocaeen Marsillis and it is the favourable climate and safe natural harbour which prompts the settlement. The circumstances of the betrothal of Gyptis are reminiscent of those described by Dulard, except that the king here is named Sénanus and his daughter, as well as offering the Phocaeen leader a golden cup, also winds her garland three times round him. No divine intervention is necessary to ensure that Marsillis is selected, for his noble air, elegance and rich clothes make him the outstanding individual present.

But Marseilles is only one of a number of French cities which have their alleged origins revealed in this long and highly imaginative epic, which purports to relate the fortunes of Paris, son of Priam, after the fall of Troy.

8. C. Godard d'Aucour, La Pariséïde, ou Pâris dans les Gaules, 2 vols. (Paris: Pissot, 1773). A tax-collector and quite prolific author in his leisure time, Godard (1716-95) had comedies performed at the Théâtre Italien in 1743 and 1745. Many of his works have a licentious flavour, especially his Mémoires turcs, a pungent satire on contemporary French life published anonymously in 1743.

9. Contemporary opinions on the possibility of the prose epic are reviewed above, on pp. 63-69.

As the sub-title indicates, Paris journeys to Gaul (the Hyperborean land of legend, according to Godard) at the command of Minerva and, after a series of adventures, he fulfils her prophecy by founding the city which bears his name and establishing a great empire. Godard's justification for creating this particular story is the absence of any consensus of opinion concerning the death of Paris.¹⁰ So, without fear of contradiction, Godard embarks on a speculative tale which testifies to his considerable powers of invention.

The Pariséïde, therefore, recounts an authentically heroic endeavour but it also records a more personal quest, the basis for which Godard found in the legend of the early life of Paris. Exposed on Mount Ida as the result of a prophecy which named him the cause of his country's destruction, Paris was rescued and raised as a simple shepherd lad. He took to wife Oenone, daughter of Cébren, a shepherd on Mount Ida, but later abandoned her when he discovered his true paternity. In Godard's epic, Paris's quest for his kingdom after the fall of Troy is paralleled by his search for his wife and the son she had borne him, and so the work has a flavour that is at once national and domestic.

The long and somewhat rambling proem appears to allot equal validity to the twin objectives of Paris's travels but no such balance is maintained in the body of the work. Whereas it is established at the outset that Paris is exploring his future kingdom, and his various adventures are therefore tinged with a national importance, little or no attempt is made to keep

10. See Godard, Préface, I, v-vi for a discussion of the various accounts of the fate of Paris.

the Oenone theme in the forefront of the reader's mind. Minerva's prophecy in Book i that Paris will recover his wife and son is partly realized in the very next book, where the Trojan prince discovers that Paris is and his father-in-law at the Fontaine-de-Vaucluse and learns that Oenone has disappeared during an attack by marauding Celts. Interest in Oenone virtually lapses until Book viii, when there is further reference to her in another prophecy, and she eventually materializes at the end of the tale, in Book xii, when she appears as a priestess in the Temple of Minerva on the Mont Saint Michel, whither Paris goes to offer the spoils of war after his great victory over the Celtic hordes. The mystery of her arrival there is not dispelled and so shadowy is her presence in the story, that it is tempting to attribute to her a symbolic function and to see the reunion of the couple as a sign of Paris's complete rehabilitation after the degrading Helen episode.

The wisdom of employing as the protagonist of an ambitious national epic a mythical figure of, to say the least, somewhat dubious reputation might indeed be questioned, but Godard takes pains to underline that his hero has reverted to true type and has become once again the courageous and modest Paris of pre-Helen days. For although Paris here initially seeks out Oenone simply for her skill at curing wounds, his former love for her is rekindled on his return to Mount Ida and this longing for the first object of his affections marks the emergence in him of the future founder of a great empire. The sagacity and resourcefulness he exhibits throughout his adventures bear eloquent testimony to his change of allegiance from Venus to Minerva and nowhere is the temper of the new Paris more clearly visible than in his personal definition of a monarch, as given to Tolosis,

whose father, the king of the Tectosages, has just died:

C'est, lui dis-je en soupirant, un génie tutélaire choisi par les Dieux, pour le bonheur des hommes; c'est un mortel qui renonce à la douceur d'être à lui-même, pour n'exister que pour son peuple; c'est le protecteur des loix, le soutien des autels, l'appui de l'innocence, & la terreur du crime; c'est un pere tendre qui chérit également ses enfans; un berger vigilant, sans cesse occupé du soin de son troupeau; qui le défend des animaux carnaciers qui le menacent; qui veille, tandis qu'il dort; en un mot le plus grand des Rois, est à l'exemple des Dieux, celui qui procure aux hommes le plus de biens, & qui en reçoit le moins de ceux auxquels il commande.¹¹

The respect that Godard's Paris inspires in all with whom he comes into contact results in his selection as commander-in-chief of the allied armies for the battle against the Celts and his status is marked by his being presented with the arms and shield of Achilles, taken by Hector from the body of Patroclus. The annihilation of the enemy ensures his election as king of the allied peoples of Gaul and, as the tale ends, Paris is escorted in triumph into Lutèce, henceforth to be named after him.

As a supplement to categorical statement, itself translated into concrete action, Godard also supplies an indirect but highly effective means of emphasizing the change in Paris by providing him with a personal retinue from among his friends at Troy. These companions, images of his former degenerate self, are admitted by Paris to be "... six jeunes efféminés élevés à la cour de Priam, autour de la toilette d'Hélène, au sein du luxe & de la molesse!"¹² Their potential usefulness to him in his epic venture can be gauged from one of Godard's portraits of them:

11. Godard, I, 199-200.

12. Godard, I, 13.

Amasius, qui joignoit à une taille élégante les graces de la jeunesse, excelloit dans le grand art de la toilette, se mettoit avec gout, étoit toujours le premier instruit des modes, des nouvelles du jour, & surtout savoit agréablement occuper les loisirs des femmes, en variant à l'infini leurs amusemens. Don précieux, d'où naît toujours celui de leur plaire.¹³

Nostalgic for the conventions of court ritual, and anxious to re-establish the old way of life on Gallic soil, they fail to rise to the challenge of their changed circumstances. Their intriguing and meddling have, on one occasion at least, fatal consequences, for the bad advice of Amasius and Frivolidès leads to the death of the youthful king Sarron of the Samothides. But however irritating their conduct, their presence in the poem does constitute a constant reminder of the metamorphosis Paris himself has undergone.

The basic action of the Pariséïde will have been gathered from the comments made above but further details will not come amiss. In Book i, Paris journeys from Troy to the Rhône via Egypt and visits the new Phocæan colony of Marsillis, after which he proceeds inland. Book ii sees Paris united with his son, the marriage of the latter, and Paris's departure to explore his kingdom and continue the search for Oenone, under the pretence of visiting Marsillis. Since more than a year passes without news of his father, the young Paris decides to mount his own expedition and Book iii spotlights his adventures. In Book iv, Paris meets up with his father on the Seine, where Francus is building a city on the model of the old Ilium (Troyes), and Paris then launches into a recital of his travels, which lasts well into Book vii and which is principally concerned with his sojourn among the Tectosages. His is the sad tale of the destructive effects of the introduction of gold into a hitherto simple rustic community. The marriage of Francus to Plancée, daughter of the Fairy Queen Fétisse, the death and

13. Godard, I, 11-12.

funerary rites of Cébren and various enchantements by Fétisse take up the remainder of Book vii and Book viii. In Book ix, Paris and his company journey to Charenton and encounter the Samothides but in the following book the nation splits into two factions, led by Paris and Albion, a prince of the blood, and a terrible battle ensues. Albion joins with the ferocious Celtès and Inghland in Book xi and, foreseeing war, Paris is forced to send out all over his future empire for reinforcements. Book xii narrates in stirring terms the great conflict, in which Inghland and Celtès are killed and which leads to the separation of Britain from the continent, when the isthmus is broken up by Albion with the assistance of the goddess Britta and even of Neptune himself.

The scope of the Pariséide, of which the foregoing synopsis gives some idea, provides a possible clue to the intention of the author. The basic concept of a search by Trojan exiles for a divinely-promised home in Gaul, together with other unmistakable reminiscences of the Aeneid, would seem to betray an aspiration on Godard's part to provide his country with an epic poem on the Virgilian model, just as Ronsard had attempted to do. Such an assumption is given weight by the fervently francophile terms in which much of the proem is couched and the apostrophe to France makes clear reference to a nationalistic intent:

O France! O ma patrie! qui reçut alors Oenone dans ton sein,
 qui vit la réunion de ces tendres époux, & le destin, de sa main
 immuable, poser les premiers fondemens de l'éternel empire des lys,
 permets que je remonte à ces siècles reculés, & que, déchirant le
 voile qui les couvre, j'essaye de répandre quelques fleurs sur ton
 berceau: c'est ton origine, celle de tes loix, de tes moeurs, de
 tes usages, que je veux tirer de l'oubli.¹⁴

14. Godard, I, 3.

Godard's patriotism is also manifested rather amusingly in his attribution to his ancestors of a variety of achievements. The revelation that cloisters had their origin in pre-historical Gaul, as did tournaments, may well be greeted with indulgence but to assert that Lutèce saw the creation of the first works of fiction by Romanès, and their translation into visual form by Drama, is surely to stretch the most sympathetic credulity.

Another aspect of Godard's attempt to produce a work of truly national appeal is the attention he devotes to the major French provincial cities. The case of Bordeaux provides a typical example of how they are incorporated into the narrative. In Book vii, Paris relates how he arrived in the land of the Burdigaliens to find the native population terrorized by a tribe of negroes, who had built on the banks of the Garonne a huge semi-circular city round a natural harbour and who were principally engaged in viticulture. At the head of the local inhabitants, Paris attacks the negroes when they are engaged in an orgiastic celebration of the feast of Bacchus and drives them away with great slaughter. The local population thus inherits a ready-built city.

The whimsicality of Godard's accounts of the early history of French cities is matched by his evident interest in magic, which initiates several fanciful passages in the text. Most ingenious is a room in the palace of Francus, where new books are reduced to their essence. Books are placed on an altar of black marble and there they are struck by the rays of the sun passing through a lens at the centre of the cupola. Only new data is preserved and this is transferred to a book on the relevant subject, so that a few volumes suffice to contain the sum total of human knowledge. Similarly, only poetry which bears the imprint of the true genius survives the process.

In view of Godard's laudable invention for separating literary gold from dross, it is disappointing to record that his own offering is marred by a number of unfortunate errors of detail. Some inconsistencies of spelling can be dismissed as relatively unimportant, if annoying, but a more serious lapse occurs in Book xii, where Godard notes that the Celts always sacrificed their first prisoners to their gods:

... Polibius, un des fils d'Albion, emporté par son jeune courage, fut une des premières victimes qui tomba sous la hache de ce peuple cruel; son fanatique pere fut témoin de cette horreur, sans que ses entrailles en fussent émues ...¹⁵

Albion's stony calm is hardly surprising, since one of the most remarkable incidents in the engagement between the followers of Albion and Paris in Book x is the dastardly murder of his unarmed younger son Polibius by the selfsame Albion. The unfortunate Polibius thus suffers a second untimely death, at the hands of a careless author rather than of an unnatural father, it might be thought.

Godard's Pariséïde covers some 500 pages, which are divided between direct narration and recital in roughly the proportion of two to one. But, despite the undeniable breadth of the work, Godard cannot be said to have produced an account of the Trojan settlement in Gaul which constitutes a valid national epic such as eighteenth-century France longed to possess. There are occasions when the content - from the fairy-tale atmosphere pervading the recital by the genius Lugdus in Book iii to Fétisse's explanation of the human digestive system during her version of the creation of man and woman in Book viii - seems incompatible with a serious, lofty intent. The tone sometimes dips to the frivolous but the reason for these seemingly

15. Godard, II, 247.

incongruous sections lies, perhaps, in Godard's own estimation of the French character and in his attempt to adapt his story to the national taste. For in the proem, he implores the Genius of France:

Et toi, Génie aimable, protecteur de ma patrie, enfant chéri des Jeux & des Plaisirs ... donne à mon stile ce tour aisé, ce ton léger qui caractérise ta nation chérie; c'est à elle que cet ouvrage s'adresse, c'est à elle qu'il faut plaire.¹⁶

Incidentally, his plea was granted, at least as far as a contemporary reviewer was concerned. The Pariséïde received a favourable review in the Journal des beaux-arts, which praised Godard for making the work relevant to the French and their way of life and added the following judgement of the content and style: "Chaque Livre offre des tableaux variés & piquans qui récréent agréablement l'esprit, qui annoncent une grande fécondité d'imagination; & toujours quelque instruction découle naturellement du récit, qui est par-tout clair, aisé, fleuri; d'un style élégant, nombreux, poétique, & où l'on n'apperçoit néanmoins aucune affectation, aucune recherche."¹⁷

Moreover, the Pariséïde also seems to have been consulted by J.-P.-G. Viennet, whose Franciade of 1863 has close affinities with Godard's epic.¹⁸

16. Godard, I, 3-4.

17. Journal des beaux-arts et des sciences, May 1773, p. 250.

18. See H. J. Hunt, The epic in nineteenth-century France: a study in heroic and humanitarian poetry from "Les Martyrs" to "Les Siècles Morts" (Oxford: Blackwell, 1941), pp. 54-57.

Vernes, La Franciade, 1789¹⁹

Like Dulard and Godard, Vernes also turned to the long-distant past for his national subject, although the Franciade is nearer in spirit to the fanciful Pariséïde than to Dulard's plainer and terser poem. Vernes uses his title not, as might be expected, to proclaim a glorification of the deeds of Francus but to serve as a geographical indication. For him, the Franciade designates the area allegedly occupied in historically remote times by those peoples initially called the Franks, then the Gauls, and who eventually reverted to their original name. The territory in question is taken to comprise the France, Switzerland, Savoy, Piedmont and Italy of the late eighteenth century and the centre of this mythical Frankish kingdom is Lake Lemman. Whatever the merits of the nomenclature, however, the setting might more properly have been termed Arcadia, for Vernes claims that the Franciade is an attempt at a new genre, "le Poëme pastoral-épique", which seeks to combine the sublimity of the epic with the naïvety and sentimentality of the pastoral. For, as the author demands rather aggressively: "Pourquoi placer toujours la Muse épique sur un trône, ou à la tête des armées? Ne peut-on la concevoir se délassant de ses travaux, au milieu des bocages, dans les bras de quelques bergères, de quelques amours, qui cachent son casque sous des fleurs, et son baudrier sous le [sic] ceinture de Vénus?"²⁰

19. F. Vernes, La Franciade ou l'ancienne France. Poëme en seize chants, 2 vols. (Lausanne : Mourer, 1789). Born in 1762, the son of the Swiss theologian Jacob, François Vernes wrote more than a score of works, many with a religious flavour and among which figures a number of "sentimental voyages". The philosophy outlined in the Franciade is presented more formally in his L'homme religieux et moral, ou exposition des principes et des sentiments les plus nécessaires au bonheur (Paris: Mongie, 1829).

20. Vernes, Introduction, I, v.

Consequently, the 600 plus pages of prose of the Franciade are peopled by a host of shepherds and shepherdesses, who appear to find their principal motivation in love and, apart from disappointments in affairs of the heart, the greater part of the work is devoid of any tension. The predominant tone is thus lyrical and sentimental, as a seemingly endless number of maidens and youths sigh, cry, blush with modesty or flush with passion both in the course of the argument of the work and in the tales which these pastoral folk delight in telling.

Some of these preliminary comments on the Franciade would seem to place the poem firmly in the preromantic vogue, which increasingly gained strength in France in the later eighteenth century. The naked emphasis on personal emotion clearly recalls the nascent romantic movement, as does the setting of the story in a natural cadre. Indeed, the affective aspect of the Franciade reflects the practical circumstances in which it was conceived, for Vernes reveals that he was watching sunset fall over Lake Geneva at the tender age of twenty when inspiration struck him. The emotive description of that evening stroll, itself reminiscent of J.-J. Rousseau both in tenor and in the complicity of mood between man and nature, provides an accurate pointer to the dominant mood of the resulting work: "Ainsi j'errais le long des bords du Léman, l'ame plongée dans cette mélancolie douce qu'exhale, pour ainsi dire, une nature où, à chaque pas, l'homme sensible croit rencontrer le tableau le plus romantique, et l'azile de félicité, qu'il voudrait habiter avec un objet digne de son amour."²¹

Moreover, the narrative is punctuated by frequent passionate interventions on the part of the author, who laments on the decline of religious

21. Vernes, Introduction, I, 1.

faith, or apostrophizes the natural beauty of the Genevan countryside, or eulogizes the innocent festivals of the Golden Age.

Adherence to the epic tradition is found in the quality of the main characters, most of whom are leaders of the various tribes, topoi such as invocations, enumerations and harangues and, in the last third of the story, the emergence of a military theme which includes a single combat and a pitched battle. But the Franciade is most noticeably defective from the point of view of established epic requirement in that it does not commemorate any clearly-defined action and, indeed, none is proposed in the proem.

An observation about the period in which the Franciade is set might conveniently be made at this point. Although it is reiterated throughout the text that the tale takes place in the Golden Age, the world in which Vernes' pastoral peoples live is one in which castles have been built in a sufficiently remote past for them to fall into ruin, marriage is an institution which is universally accepted and, while it is unknown in practice, divorce is theoretically possible. That love in the Franciade is subject to a strict moral code of honour, which Léonce alone infringes in the case of Aloïse, can no doubt be ultimately attributed to the fact that the author's father was a pastor in Geneva and, indeed, young Vernes himself stresses his moralistic intent in his prefatory remarks.²²

A brief summary of its subject-matter is perhaps the most useful way to approach this particular poem. The constituent peoples of the Franciade

22. Cf. Vernes, Introduction, I, xii, where the author speaks of the "... principal but de mon Ouvrage, celui d'inspirer le goût des vertus et des moeurs de l'âge d'or, par la peinture du bonheur qui les accompagne."

have gathered on the banks of the Lemane for their quinquennial festival during which they renew their alliance. It is an occasion for singing, dancing and for two major contests, the winning of which confers on the victor the right to demand the hand of any maiden. Aldée, the chief or "Kan" of the Lemantins and the hero of the work, puts into practice an idea which came to him in a dream and wins the boat race by the simple expedient, hitherto unknown to the Franks, of hoisting a sail. He claims as prize the beautiful Genève, to whom he is devoted and who loves him dearly. Léonce, chief of the Lyonnais, and also in love with Genève, not unnaturally objects to this stratagem but is overruled. He departs with rage in his heart but reappears for the running contest which he proceeds to win easily as he is mounted on a horse, the first time such a tactic has been employed. When his claim to marry Genève is rejected, he abducts her with the help of fierce tribes from the mountains and his own Lyonnais, who have long fretted at the prerogatives of the senior nations of the alliance. War is declared and a great battle takes place, in which heroic deeds are performed on both sides but which ultimately leaves the forces of Léonce and his allies badly depleted. While Léonce's herald is proposing a single combat in order to prevent any further general warfare, Aldée rescues Genève from the ruined castle in which she has been held prisoner. He returns in time to accept the challenge and an epic contest ensues in which the advantage sways from one warrior to the other. Beaten to the ground, the proud Léonce refuses to admit defeat and yields only when Aldée is treacherously wounded in his sword arm by an arrow and so is put at a disadvantage. A peace honourable to all parties is concluded.

Thus reduced to its barest essentials, the story of the Franciade appears coherent and almost rapid in pace but such an impression is completely mis-

leading for Vernes' narrative is discursive and disjointed. No sooner have the hero and heroine been introduced to the reader in Chant i, for example, than at Genève's request Aldée recounts the Frankish version of the Creation which fills eighty pages and stretches up to the end of Chant iii. In the context this tale is totally gratuitous: it postpones entry into the argument of the work and is irrelevant to the past or future history of any of the characters. Nor even does Genève's request have an air of verisimilitude, for the couple have allegedly been separated for six months and would be more likely to discuss Aldée's election as Kan for the duration of the festival.

Since Chant iv is devoted to conveying some necessary information about the peuplades, their chiefs and the principal shepherdesses, it is not until Chant v that the plot begins, with Léonce falling in love with Genève at first sight. Hardly has Léonce avowed his determination to win one of the competitions, however, than the author intervenes in his own right to give a variation of Gessner's tale of the first mariner. This unfortunate and substantial digression at a time when the story of the Franciade is finally beginning to generate some interest is ennobled by a lyrical invocation to the "chantre aimable de l'Helvétie" himself and is the first of a number of similar intrusions by Vernes which somewhat undermine the validity of the story line. The plot makes little progress until Chant ix, when Aldée achieves his surprise victory and the rhythm then quickens, as the next two cantos follow the disgruntled Léonce up to his abduction of Genève. A recital by a hermit in Chant xii relaxes the tension in preparation for the general engagement in the following canto. Chant xiv deviates to the sentimental story of Yverdon and Mirza but the final two cantos carry the argument to the end without further interruption.

In a word, then, the plot of the Franciade is at times totally submerged under the sheer weight of matter which has only the most tenuous connection with the main theme. The author strays into digressive episodes on the flimsiest of pretexts and introduces such a superabundance of characters that he presumably seeks to help his readers by italicizing each name.

Vernes exhibits a strong predilection for colour in the Franciade. It is the colour of their écharpes, for instance, which distinguishes the different tribes among the Franks, for they otherwise wear the same white, close-fitting garment. The beauty of Genève stems largely from her complexion:

Fraîche, comme un matin du mois de May, les plus belles couleurs de la nature paraissent se plaire à se fixer sur ses traits. Ses yeux se peignaient de l'azur des cieux, et semblaient aussi exprimer un sentiment céleste. Son teint offrait le doux contraste d'une rose s'épanouissant au milieu des lys; ses lèvres répétaient cette image charmante, en se séparant, comme un bouton de fleur que les perles de la rosée viennent de pénétrer.²³

The drama is played out against a background of verdant pastures and snow-capped mountains, a setting which serves to heighten the sinister aspect of the crumbling towers, where Léonce confines his prisoner:

Le château des Vautours, environné d'une rivière qui figurait le Styx, éclairé par quelques vapeurs phosphoriques, était tellement en horreur dans le pays, que les habitans les moins superstitieux n'osaient, dans les ténèbres, passer la rivière qui coulait entre ses murs. Le murmure de son onde, et les cris des oiseaux de nuit qui s'y retiraient, y excitaient un bruit pareil à celui que forment, sur un champ de bataille, les soupirs des mourans qui, se voyant abandonnés de la terre, appellent en vain le secours d'un ciel justement irrité.²⁴

Despite the undoubted enthusiasm he brings to his subject and his sincere and laudable motives, Vernes has produced little other than an eminently forgettable hybrid. His attempt to combine the epic genre with a literary form of traditionally lower status, but of undoubted emotional appeal is

23. Vernes, I, 5-6.

24. Vernes, II, 276.

not ultimately successful. The rather cloying sentimentality of much of the work proves to be at variance with the spirit of epic. The style is predominantly effusive and the vocabulary relates principally to the emotions, despite the inclusion of the occasional Homeric simile. The example which follows, describing the formidable rearguard action Orbe fights to cover the escape of Léonce with the abducted Genève, has a more martial ring than most:

Ainsi, dans les déserts de l'Afrique, lorsque de jeunes lionceaux assaillent le plus grand habitant des forêts, et s'exercent à la victoire, leur ennemi, tranquille au milieu du combat, ne fuit pas; mais, les écartant de sa trompe et de ses défences, il semble plutôt suivre sa route. Tel l'intrépide Orbe, protégeant la retraite de Léonce, combattait, ne voulant pas paraître fuir, mais suivre son allié, quand il serait hors de tout danger.²⁵

Saint-Marcel, Charles-Martel, 1806²⁶

Rather than from the mythology of France, Saint-Marcel drew his inspiration from remote, but authentic, national history. Stated baldly in the preface, the subject of his 6,200 line poem is "la défaite des Sarrasins par Charles-Martel, sur les rives de la Loire, en 732".²⁷ Elevated and amplified, however, it is proposed in the following manner:

25. Vernes, II, 159.

26. A.-P. Tardieu Saint-Marcel, Charles-Martel, ou la France délivrée, poème historique en douze chants (Paris: Marié, 1806). Saint-Marcel described himself in 1806 as a colonel of infantry but he had previously served in the bodyguard of the Count of Artois. A member of the Athénée de Vaucluse as well as of other literary societies, he translated the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini in 1822 and had already written a novel and a verse tragedy in three acts, Caton d'Utique (1798).

27. Saint-Marcel, Préface, p. i.

Je chante ce Héros dont le bras glorieux
 Renversa d'Ismaël les fils victorieux;
 Fit mordre la poussière à leurs superbes princes,
 De leur joug étranger délivra nos provinces;
 Et de leurs grands desseins par sa valeur trahis,
 Sauva l'Europe entière, en sauvant son pays.²⁸

The justification of this subject-matter as proper for epic treatment occupies a considerable part of the preface. An evaluation therein of the criticisms levelled at the Henriade reveals that Saint-Marcel's requirements in this area - apart from an apparent assumption that the action will be of national interest - clearly centre on the historical setting of the subject. For Saint-Marcel, the latter must antedate the introduction into warfare of gunnery, which largely vitiated personal strength and individual heroism, and also be sufficiently early in time to permit the intervention of the supernatural on the grounds of contemporary convictions. A poem on Charles-Martel needs no defending on the first point and the religious beliefs and superstitions of eighth-century France are carefully and conveniently touched upon earlier in the preface: "La bataille de Tours est, je le répète, une des époques les plus brillantes de notre Histoire. Elle se perd dans la nuit des tems; elle se trouve placée dans l'âge merveilleux de la France ... Les enchanteurs, les paladins, les fées, les géans, les ogres ont été contemporains de Charles-Martel. Enfin, ce tems est à peu près pour nous, ce qu'était pour la Grèce celui des Hercule, des Jason et des Thésée. Quelle carrière peut s'y donner l'imagination d'un Poète!"²⁹

But although he thus follows his own recipe for success in his choice of theme, Saint-Marcel confesses that he expects his epic poem finally to

28. Saint-Marcel, p. 3.

29. Saint-Marcel, Préface, pp. viii-ix.

number among the failures in the genre. He explains his venture, therefore, in terms of a deep love of poetry and the practice of it, allied with a desire to celebrate in verse deeds analogous to the glorious victories of the French armies under Napoleon. Indeed, the identification between the two epochs is made explicit, for the Emperor is honoured in the text with a thirty-line apostrophe in which his similarity, even superiority, to Saint-Marcel's protagonist is indicated. It opens:

Et toi, de nos héros, noble et vivante image,
 Toi, qui touchant à peine au printemps de ton âge,
 As de tes devanciers surpassé le renom,
 Et rempli l'univers du bruit de ton grand nom,
 Si tu crois que ma muse animée à te plaire,
 N'ait point pris dans son vol un élan téméraire;
 Si les héros enfin qu'elle va célébrer,
 Sont dignes des vertus que tu fais admirer,
 Du faite où la Victoire avait marqué ta place,
 Souris, NAPOLÉON, à cette noble audace ...³⁰

Unfortunately, a willing heart and a patriotic spirit do not necessarily generate originality and it becomes all too obvious to anyone who has even a nodding acquaintance with Tasso that Charles-Martel is replete from beginning to end with reminiscences, adaptations or straightforward transcriptions of the Gerusalemme Liberata. Some random examples will show the extent of Saint-Marcel's debt. The whole of the opening canto is a replica of its counterpart in Tasso, containing a brief summary of the military situation, the sending of Gabriel by God to announce to the hero his election as leader in the fight against the infidel and an enumeration of the assembled Christian forces. The miraculous cure of Martel's wound in Chant iv is a contracted version of the incident in the eleventh canto of the Gerusalemme, where an arrow-head is removed from Goffredo's leg by the application of a celestial lotion, supplied by the leader's guardian angel. Martel's siege of Poitiers,

30. Saint-Marcel, pp. 4-5.

the chief Saracen stronghold in France, is modelled on the Christian attack on Jerusalem and the Frenchman has not failed to incorporate in his narrative Tasso's gigantic siege-tower which, as in the original, leads to an encounter with an enchanted wood. Tasso's magician Ismeno reappears as the Druid Hismar and both supply the enemy with explosive, although Saint-Marcel has drawn on Book viii of the Aeneid, where the Cyclops are seen forging Jupiter's thunderbolts, for his picture of the rebel angel Uriel compounding the inflammable substance for Hismar.

Even the above selection demonstrates that Saint-Marcel owes more to Tasso than he appears prepared to admit in the preface, for there he merely acknowledges the Italian as his principal model, before proceeding to play down the resemblance of his Anaïs episode to the Sofronia saga in the Gerusalemme. But despite his disclaimer, it can be fairly argued that Saint-Marcel's achievement, if not his aim, is that into a framework which, although there are differences of time and place, is roughly comparable to Tasso's, he has transferred more or less openly the principal characters and events of the Gerusalemme Liberata.

This procedure of Saint-Marcel's is facilitated by the lack of recorded detail on the famous French victory and he admits in the preface that, of the leaders who figure in his poem, only Martel and his opposite number, Abdérame, are historical. One other character who is not completely fictitious is Emérance, who is apparently based on Numérance, daughter of Eudes, Duke of Aquitaine, who was forced to yield her to the Moorish captain Manusa and saw her subsequently handed over to Abdérame himself. Not surprisingly, in view of the way she was passed up rather than down the Muslim social scale by her captors, Numérance was reputed to be very beautiful but Saint-Marcel, while making his heroine equally comely, spares her the fate which presumably

befell the unfortunate Numérance and allows her to escape before she endures the shame of sharing Abdérane's bed.

The lover whom Emérance is given in the poem, however, Lodomère, the young and valiant leader of a band of youthful soldiers from Bordeaux, is wholly invented, though his adventures are not without an occasional strong resemblance to the fortunes of Tasso's Rinaldo. Both are kept from the Christian ranks by magic arts but Lodomère's absence is in no way as damaging as Rinaldo's, for there are no deeds which none but he can perform, as is the case with Rinaldo and the enchanted wood. All the same, the French are clearly apprehensive at the prospect of facing the enemy without Lodomère and his return heartens them as they struggle to protect the siege-tower against the sally by Almanzor and Herridant. Lodomère is the natural choice as the French champion in single combat and when old Rainfroy testily and unwisely claims the right to accept Almanzor's challenge on the strength of his lineage, seniority and former exploits, he has his head split in two for his pains. The incident is obviously inspired by the encounter of the aged Raimondo with Argante in Canto vii of the Gerusalemme but it serves to establish Lodomère's pre-eminence among the Christian warriors, for he can then assume his rightful place by responding to the Saracen champion's renewed challenge and hold his own in a duel of terrible ferocity. His stature in the story is reflected by the thirteen similies he attracts, no less than a fifth of the total number in the poem, and in which he is compared to such monarchs of the animal kingdom as lions and bulls.

As may already have been deduced, Lodomère's particular adversary in the Moorish camp is Almanzor, king of Leptis, a doughty fighter but whose rash courage and sense of honour prevent from being an outstanding tactician or great commander. He equals the feat of Tasso's Solimano, who kills the

five sons of old Latinus and then the hapless father, by slaughtering six brothers in the Christian army and is a continual source of support and encouragement to the Saracen leader and his host. And yet this pillar of the Saracen cause and scourge of the French meets his end at the hands of a fellow Moor and is avenged in sorrow as well as in anger by the Christian Lodomère. For it is through the person of Almanzor that Saint-Marcel seeks to include in his tale an adaptation of Tasso's famous account of the conversion and baptism of Clorinda.

Wounded by Lodomère during the attack on the siege-tower, Almanzor is eventually found by Emérance and transported to the tent of Lodomère, who refuses to give him up to the vengeful soldiers of Rainfroy. Overwhelmed by the generosity of his protector and the magnanimity of Martel, Almanzor is henceforth faced with an impossible choice:

Mon sort est désormais d'être ingrat ou rebelle.
 Il faut qu'à Mahomet je devienne infidelle,
 Ou qu'à sa loi divine aveuglément soumis,
 J'aïlle encor me montrer parmi vos ennemis!
 Funeste alternative! ô destin déplorable!
 Qui de tous les côtés me fait trouver coupable.³¹

The question of his allegiance is decided, however, by that incident, with regard to which Saint-Marcel has been seen to defend himself against an over-close adherence to Tasso. On his return to the Saracen camp, Almanzor pleads for a young Christian virgin who is about to be publicly whipped to death for having claimed complicity in the flight of Emérance, in order to save the Christian population of Poitiers from the wrath of Abdérame. The mode of execution is slightly different, as is the nature of her "crime", and no lover comes forward to share her fate, but the sentiments that impelled such self-sacrifice and her courage in the face of death make Anaïs the twin sister

31. Saint-Marcel, pp. 253-54.

of Sofronia. Having obtained a stay of execution, during which time he is to persuade Anaïs to reveal her accomplices, Almanzor begins to fall in love with his prisoner and to be swayed by her passionate religious beliefs. Abdérame is moved by Satan to have Anaïs strangled and decapitated but her faith is rewarded with instant canonization and she appears to Almanzor and persuades him to seek Christian baptism rather than revenge on the person of Abdérame. A glittering baptism ceremony, at which Lodomère appears to be among the sponsors, assures Almanzor's salvation but does not resolve his original dilemma. He naturally feels disinclined to shed the blood of his former allies and hence cannot bring himself to fight wholeheartedly when attacked by Herridant, who strikes him down and slashes his dead body. As Lodomère points out, as he engages Herridant in his turn:

Almanzor abattu sous ton bras effréné,
Fut vaincu par tes coups bien moins qu'assassiné.³²

The noble conduct of Almanzor in the poem would have made it artistically inappropriate for him to have contributed to the great Christian victory and Saint-Marcel thus finds an effective solution by making him suffer what is, in effect, a martyrdom which will unite him with his beloved.

Almanzor's love for Anaïs would seem to be based at least as much on her spiritual as her physical qualities. He intially intervenes on her behalf, not because he is struck by the beauty of her naked body, but because he has been deeply moved by his own recent experiences at the hands of the Christians and it is as he gradually gets to know her that she grows in his affections. Anaïs, for her part, is devoted to her religion and, although it is alleged during the description of her on the scaffold that her arms would doubtless have embraced a husband one day, it seems somehow fitting

32. Saint-Marcel, p. 332.

that it is only after her death that she can promise Almanzor:

Je serai dans les cieux ton épouse fidèle,
Et veillerai sur toi de la voûte éternelle.³³

This chaste love is balanced in the poem by an episode involving the most intense physical passion of a man for a woman. Chant viii is wholly given over to the adventures of Emérance, who escapes from the castle on Poitiers to a nearby wood through a secret passage which is divinely revealed to her and asks sanctuary for the night of a hermit who lives in a hut in the forest. Emérance recognises him as a young man who had mysteriously withdrawn from her father's court but Helbert refuses to be drawn on the reasons of his self-exile. Once she is asleep, however, Satan reminds Helbert of the desire which he has tried to conquer by solitude, fasting and prayer and evokes for him a tantalizing picture:

Il croit voir Emérance, à ses pieds palpitante,
Lui présenter le prix de sa flamme constante.
Il voit sa bouche humide, et s'ouvrant au desir,
Donner à son amour le signal du plaisir.³⁴

Torn between his frustrated sexual urge and his Christian ideals and further restrained by a sense of the inviolability of the rules of hospitality, Helbert passes a sleepless night but the next morning he reveals his hopeless passion and stabs himself to death.

The foregoing comments on Charles-Martel will already have revealed a number of instances in which the author takes advantage of the opportunities the subject presents for the employment of the supernatural. In addition to summoning Martel, God supplies him with heavenly weapons, gives the victory-bringing oriflamme to the French leader and sends the dead Rainfroy to him in a dream with advice on strategy. Occasionally, however, this orthodox use

33. Saint-Marcel, p. 279.

34. Saint-Marcel, p. 220.

of the merveilleux chrétien is marred by jarring overtones of the pagan marvellous. When Almanzor sees the vision of the radiant Anaïs, she reveals that her sainthood entails unexpected pleasures:

Et maintenant assise à l'immortelle table,
J'y bois avec les saints le nectar véritable.³⁵

Similarly, it is rather surprising to learn that the rebel angel Uriel

... d'un cyclope énorme
Sous un cuir enfumé montrait l'aspect difforme ...³⁶

But what chiefly marks the use of the supernatural in Charles-Martel - and provides, incidentally, yet more proof of Saint-Marcel's dependence on the Gerusalemme - is the considerable recourse the poem has to the magic and enchantment of the romance which Tasso incorporated into the heroic epic. Gabriel's activity in the poem is matched by the tireless efforts of Hismar who hates the Christians, because they have destroyed his ancient cult and who is offered religious tolerance for druidism if the Saracens succeed in overrunning France. After a ceremony which involves the sacrifice of a child, Hismar changes his dessicated body into the shape of the beautiful Emérance and entices Lodomère away from the army and into imprisonment in a castle on the banks of the Vienne. Hismar then metamorphosizes himself into a young French soldier and leads more than a hundred of the best Christian warriors into the same trap. His most fiendish plot, however, is to place Lodomère and the other French paladins under a spell and to tempt them with the sensual pleasures of the Muslim paradise, which bear a close resemblance to Tasso's description of the gardens of Armida. Lodomère is singled out for particular attention and finally abjures his faith and defects to the Saracens in return for life with (unknown to him) a mere image of Emérance, which is more compliant sexually than one imagines the flesh and blood Emérance to be.

35. Saint-Marcel, p. 279.

36. Saint-Marcel, p. 294.

The captives are released when Martel, following an eagle sent by God to show him the way, kills the dragon-like monster which guards the castle and causes the edifice to disintegrate.

A further example of the use of magic in Charles-Martel, the enchanted forest, also provides one of the two extended descriptions of nature which, as in the Gerusalemme, appears under widely differing aspects, seductive in the portrait of the Muslim paradise but repellent in the following:

Près du camp des Chrétiens était un bois épais,
 Que la clarté du jour ne pénétra jamais,
 Dont les pins et les ifs par leur sombre feuillage,
 Semblaient accroître encor l'aspect noir et sauvage,
 Et qui, publiait-on, de tout tems redouté,
 Par le fer des humains fut toujours respecté.
 Jamais des doux oiseaux la voix mélodieuse
 Ne troubla de ce bois l'horreur silencieuse.
 Les colombes jamais, pour couvrir leurs petits,
 A ses tristes rameaux n'attachèrent leurs nids.
 Les daims et les chevreuils qu'avertissait la crainte,
 En fuyaient avec soin la redoutable enceinte;
 Mais l'affreuse vipère et le serpent hideux
 Y déroulaient par-tout leurs anneaux vénémeux;
 Et le gazon, flétri par leur brûlante haleine,
 Faisait sécher la main qui le touchait à peine.³⁷

It is difficult for any reader who has a prior knowledge of Tasso's epic to formulate a judgement on Saint-Marcel's Charles-Martel, so inextricably are the two linked. To one who is unfamiliar with the Italian poet, Charles-Martel could perhaps seem a rather more successful attempt at verse epic than most in the later eighteenth century in France. An objective analysis must record, though, that the Frenchman has condensed the best of Tasso into a poem which fills half the number of cantos of the Gerusalemme Liberata. Has the object been to adapt Tasso to an exclusively French situation, then Saint-Marcel could legitimately have been applauded for his effort. His aim, however, was personally to write a successful epic poem, a task which pre-

37. Saint-Marcel, pp. 181-82.

supposes originality and inventiveness, and on that account he must be deemed a failure.

Théveneau, Charlemagne, 1804 ff³⁸

In Chant iv of his poem, Saint-Marcel has Gabriel bring the sleeping Martel a tangible sign of his divinely-appointed mission in the form of weapons, which appear to have been dropped by the rebel angels in their hopeless fight against God. Among the glittering array is a superb, ruby-encrusted shield on which has been engraved, further to encourage the French leader, the future achievements of Pépin le Bref and the glorious Charlemagne.

It is only to be expected that this latter French hero should have been an especially popular subject for French epicists during the Empire but, of the five or so poems written on Charlemagne during, or immediately after, the period of Napoleon's ascendancy,³⁹ only one falls in the period under discussion here and that is incomplete. Charles-Simon Théveneau apparently published a prose plan of his verse epic, together with the first canto, in 1804 but only one further canto was written before his Poésies appeared in 1816.

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38. C.-S. Théveneau, Charlemagne, poème épique in Poésies (Paris: Guillaume, 1816), pp. 69-136. Principally a mathematician, Théveneau (1759-1821) became a teacher at 15 and, as well as re-editing earlier text books, himself published a book on his subject in 1800. He divided his time between cafés and his bed (where he wrote his poetry) and such was the poverty of his later years that six of his friends undertook to feed him one day a week each, leaving him to fend for himself only on Sundays.
39. C.-V. d'Arlincourt, Charlemagne, ou la Caroléïde (Paris: Le Normant, 1818); L. Bonaparte, Charlemagne; ou l'Eglise délivrée, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1814); C. Millevoye, Charlemagne, ou la défaite des Lombards (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1812); J.-B. Barjoud also apparently published a Charlemagne in 1811 in fragmentary form. See Hunt, p. 57.

A note at the end of the second canto of Charlemagne reveals that the poem was projected to be in twelve chants of between 800 and 900 lines each but, in the absence of the detailed information supplied by the plan, it is rather puzzling to see how Théveneau hoped to find sufficient suitable material for his enterprise. For the story opens when the great battles won by Charlemagne are over, ten years of warfare having seen him overcome all his enemies. Indeed, there has even been time for perhaps the most famous event of his reign to have received literary consecration, since as the triumphal procession enters Charlemagne's capital of Aix-la-Chapelle, the conquerors intone the Chanson de Roland! Nor does the proposition provide a clue, for it merely eulogizes Charlemagne's general achievements without announcing a specific action, while the invocation to History which follows claims, rather improbably, that there will be a reliance on historical fact rather than legend and an exclusion of "la Magie, art fécond en stériles merveilles ...".⁴⁰

There remain only such indications of the theme as may be gleaned from the existing narrative, a somewhat unpromising prospect as the 1666 lines are largely concerned with a statutory enumeration and an equally unoriginal tournament. However, it seems probable that civil strife would have figured prominently in the poem for in the first canto a conspiracy is hatched on grounds which are credible, if hardly heroic. The daughter of Hartrade has died of grief because Fastrade had thwarted her ambitions and married Charlemagne. For plotting against the Queen, Hartrade has been blinded but his son, Isménor, cuts out the heart of the captured son of Fastrade and places it on his sister's tomb, after which eternal hatred is sworn to Charlemagne. To compound this unsavoury situation, Charlemagne's own son

40. Théveneau, p. 72.

Pepin, in whom his illegitimacy is a rankling sore, is a willing witness of the ritual murder and plots with Isménor. Pepin has just been given custodianship of Vitikind, king of the Saxons, who has refused to swear fidelity as a vassal to Charlemagne, so the scene is set for dark deeds.

Chant ii, though, promises a theme of rather lighter vein. Charlemagne's daughter, Rotrude, pining for the exiled Isambard, is sought in marriage by Constantin, son of Queen Irène of Greece, who has fallen in love with her portrait, but Haroun-Al-Raschid has sent his ambassador, Giafar, to prevent this match.

The two cantos contain no promise of greatness and there is little cause for assuming that France lost a potentially immortal epicist when Théveneau died in 1821.

Dorion, Bataille d'Hastings, 1806⁴¹

Another subject in tune with the nationalistic mood in France during the Revolutionary and Empire periods was the historic conquest of England by William of Normandy. Given the nature of the relations between the two countries at this time, any treatment of the theme might well be expected to exhibit a blatant bias and constitute a vilification of perfidious Albion. Dorion's Bataille d'Hastings belies any such assumptions, however, and the introduction is a model of fairness, as the author refers to the contrasting

41. C.-A. Dorion, Bataille d'Hastings, ou l'Angleterre conquise, poëme en dix chants (Paris: Le Normant, 1806). A poet who also published a 3 volume historical novel on Perkin Warbeck in 1819, Dorion (1768-1829) was twice unsuccessful as a candidate for the Académie Française, in 1817 and 1824. His experience at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior enabled him to publish the Considérations sur l'état politique et commercial des puissances européennes, depuis la Révolution jusqu'au Congrès d'Aix-la-Chapelle (Paris: Dentu, 1818).

accounts left by Norman and English chroniclers on such matters as the naming of William as his heir by Edward the Confessor.

Nevertheless, the poem is certainly conceived in a patriotic spirit, since Dorion sollicitis the aid of the Muse for "... un hommage à la patrie offert".⁴² But adherence to historical fact here proves an embarrassment, for William is made to refer to the hostility of the French crown after the death of his father and to remind his audience and the reader that Normandy was "un état par Rollon à la France arraché".⁴³ However, the main obstacle to any panegyric atmosphere the poem might have had is the orientation of the reader's sympathy towards Harold, a fact that will become obvious, when the portraits of the two leaders are analysed in some detail.

In the Bataille, Dorion adopts an artificial order of events, although he integrates into his conventional opening a succinct analysis of the reasons for the conflict and the briefest indication of the relevant historical data. The narrative begins, therefore, at a point in time between the battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings and events prior to this are recounted by William a little later. The opening scene is the Norman camp at Hastings but the perspective soon changes from land to sea to follow the progress of the reinforcements William is awaiting, a strong contingent from Brittany led by Duke Fergant. It is the arrival of this latter at William's tent that serves as the pretext for William's recital, a mammoth effort covering two full cantos and falling not far short of 850 lines, the effect of which is evaluated in a simile of appropriate length:

42. Dorion, p. 1.

43. Dorion, p. 18.

Lorsqu'arrêté long-temps aux terres étrangères
 Un voyageur repose au foyer de ses pères,
 Il voit parens, amis, prompts à l'interroger,
 S'unir à ses plaisirs, partager son danger;
 Des lieux qu'il parcourut mesurant les espaces,
 Frémir à chaque pas attachés à ses traces.
 Plein des objets divers qu'embrassent ses esprits,
 L'ingénieux conteur variant ses récits,
 Avec art les abrège, avec art les prolonge:
 Le temps à l'écouter s'échappe comme un songe.
 Tel les discours du prince avaient charmé les preux.⁴⁴

But if the occasion for the recital is reasonably well engineered, the content of William's discourse is less than wholly plausible, given the person to whom it is directed. That William should instruct Fergant on developments since the landing of the main army in England is understandable but the details of William's early life, and especially of his dispute with Harold, seem incongruous in the context, for they must either represent an unnecessary recapitulation of facts, with which Fergant is fully conversant, or presuppose that the duke has espoused a cause without knowledge of its merits, a suggestion that is highly improbable. William, therefore, conveys the basic information the reader requires to understand the issue fully but Dorion fails to provide him with credible motivation for his comprehensive autobiography. This apart, the recital exploits a wide variety of tones, ranging from a straightforward and unornamented narration of fact, through a vivid description of the Norman fleet setting sail, to a stirring account of the single combat between Harold and the Danish prince Olaüs.

From Chant iv onwards, Dorion follows the chronological order of events and a feature of the poem is an apparent attempt to organize his material into a symmetrical pattern. In addition to the customary review of the

44. Dorion, p. 48.

two armies, both the Angel of Albion and the Angel of France depart on equally unlikely missions, William's own description of his taking leave of his family is balanced by a more deeply felt account by the author of Harold's farewell to his kin and Chant viii contains neatly contrasted pictures of the English camp on the night before the battle and the Norman camp on the fateful morn. Also noteworthy is the high incidence of dialogue in the poem. Over and above William's lengthy recital, much of Chant v records the angry exchanges between the English envoys and the Normans, more than one half of Chant vi is given over to the subsequent debate in the English council and a third of Chant vii is taken up by another recital. Effectively as this technique is sometimes employed by Dorion to create tension, it is, perhaps, rather too prominent here in what is essentially a narrative genre.

The Bataille has a reasonably large cast of characters. In the introduction, Dorion quotes from Camden's Britannia a list of the principal French knights who were called to William's tent after the victory was won. The Englishmen involved though, Harold's family excepted, are less authentic for anachronistic titles like Norfolk, Dorset, Kent and Leicester are employed and there is even an appearance by a certain Fingal, who has the distinction of being killed by the Conqueror himself. But almost more than any other international conflict, Dorion's subject can be reduced to the struggle between two outstanding individuals and it is curiously the victor and ostensible hero who comes off worse in terms of treatment.

As the poem opens, William is unable to curb the demands of his men for action and he has to be seconded by Saint Michael, who has disguised himself as Osborn of Breteuil. In the same opening canto, he is also eclipsed by Fergant, whose courage and qualities of leadership are underlined when he quells the panic aroused in his men by the sight of empty, burning Norman

vessels drifting away from the smoke-covered shores of England and persuades the Bretons to continue their venture. Although his recital allows him to provide his own modest version of events and he is nowhere in the story less than devout, chivalrous and courageous, William does not succeed in winning the reader's allegiance. And at the very end of the poem, his protestations of his good intentions are cut short by Harold's mother Algyde, who reminds him that his freedom of action is restricted by his indebtedness to his supporters:

... Tu n'as plus le droit d'être innocent,
Guillaume. Ces barons, de ta conquête arbitres,
Par mon sang au pillage ont fondé tous leurs titres.
Ils ont vaincu pour toi; tu dois régner pour eux.
Quel que soit ton désir, un destin rigoureux
Te soumet à leurs vœux, t'enchaîne à leur licence,
Et sur leurs attentats te condamne au silence.
Ton sceptre est à ce prix; il le faut mériter.⁴⁵

After which, the four concluding lines which depict William showing clemency to the defeated and preparing a fitting funeral for Harold, fall somewhat flat.

Paradoxically, it is William's own magnanimity to his opponent which plays no small part in creating the compelling portrait of Harold. The following judgement of the Saxon king's conduct after Stamford is one of a number of generous tributes by William in the course of the poem:

Rendons à mon rival cet hommage éclatant:
Sage dans le conseil, valeureux combattant,
Grand après la victoire, Eralde a fait connaître
Qu'il eut le coeur d'un prince et les vertus d'un maître.⁴⁶

Irrespective of the morality of Harold's claim to the throne, his total devotion to the well-being of his own countrymen commands respect and he emerges as an authentically heroic figure through such decisions as his refusal to countenance a scorched earth policy and his steadfast acceptance

45. Dorion, pp. 185-86.

46. Dorion, p. 40.

that a monarch does not survive the battle which has seen the defeat of his people:

Quand le peuple, l'armée et l'empire succombe,
D'un prince sans états le refuge est la tombe.
Albion a péri pour défendre son choix.
J'ai vécu digne d'elle, et meurs avec ses loix.⁴⁷

The reader's emotions are further engaged by glimpses of Harold's domestic life, which are reminiscent of scenes in the Iliad, and Harold's character is given an undeniably tragic dimension by his unwavering self-control in the foreknowledge that the outcome of the strife has already been decreed by supernatural powers. Harold's vision, on the eve of the great battle, of England personified in female form, her brow wreathed in cypress, clad in mourning, dishevelled, weeping and lamenting her lot is one instance of Dorion's use of the marvellous in the poem.

The whole conflict can be said to be initiated in heaven, for it is Saint Michael who successfully pleads the claim of William before God, when Harold is crowned, and is then sent to advise the Pope and the Norman duke of their course of action. Similarly, the issue is kept on a divine plane in Chant iv, where the guardian angels of France and England cannot agree on a compromise to avoid human bloodshed. If the bellicose nature of these heavenly spirits causes some surprise, it is even more astonishing to learn that such is the commitment of the tutelary angel of England to his country's cause, that he enlists the help of Satan and his hordes against his fellow seraph. Consequently,

Depuis ce jour, déchu des faveurs éternelles,
Cet Esprit eut son rang chez les Anges rebelles.
A sa voix l'hérésie et la rebellion
Ont renversé le culte et les rois d'Albion.⁴⁸

47. Dorion, p. 164.

48. Dorion, p. 151.

The devils intervene in the battle and temporarily reverse the tide in favour of the English but they are finally driven back to hell by Saint Michael at the head of the angelic host. Thus the dual level of the contest is maintained until the end but misgivings about the seemliness of the alliance the Angel of Albion concludes are compounded by the dubious method his opposite number employs to counteract the evil designs of the enemy.

Discord plots the death of Clisson, taken prisoner in a naval battle, at the hands of the disgruntled Radnor but the Angel of France solicits the help of a very pagan god of Love who contrives the release of the young French hero by Harold's sister, Emma. The ensuing love episode encapsulates the second recital in the poem, itself of an amatory temper, a sad tale by Guilfort of the savage blinding and eventual murder of his wife, Elgive, by the prelate Dunstan, who had forbidden the marriage on the grounds of consanguinity. Having engineered Clisson's escape to Guilfort's castle in Wales, where the reason of the unhappy widower is restored by the sight of Emma, Love performs the highly unlikely task of recalling Clisson to his duty and sending him back to the Norman camp.⁴⁹

Dorion's Bataille is not without commendable features. It is unified and fairly fast-moving, for the action of its 5000 odd lines is concentrated into a few days and episodic material is kept to a minimum. The content suffers somewhat from its consequent predictability, however, and the poem

49. In the second, expanded version of the poem Dorion published in 1821, the Angel of France is charged with rescuing Clisson from Wales, where he is kept by the machinations of infernal spirits. Dorion obviously realized the implausibility of a pagan god of Love advocating the obligations of honour and feudal allegiance, in preference to the delights of amorous dalliance.

is not devoid of artistic weaknesses, but perhaps its most striking aspect is the moderation of its attitude towards the English.⁵⁰

Le Manissier, La Louisiade, 1787⁵¹

Despite the martial ring of its proposition, the Louisiade, a short poem in eight chants and 2800 lines published anonymously by Le Manissier, actually celebrates Louis XIV's alleged disenchantment with war and determination to follow peaceful policies. The poem covers a time span of more than ten years, from the opening of the War of Devolution in 1667 to the Peace of Nimweguen of 1678, which concluded the Dutch War, but the historical events, which are sketched none too coherently and accurately in the first five chants, are really only a necessary preliminary for Louis' greatest and most difficult victory - the supposed victory over his own nature and notion of glory: "Il s'est vaincu lui-même en bornant ses conquêtes".⁵²

The occasion for Louis' conversion is a chance meeting with an aged recluse in a lonely valley into which the king has strayed during a hunt held to mark the French victory at Seneff:

50. The restraint of Dorion's tone is particularly noticeable when the Bataille is compared with the vituperative poem by Charles Le Mesle, Guillaume le conquérant (Paris: Prault, 1759). In the score of pages comprising the latter, which won the poetry prize offered by the Académie de Rouen in 1758, Harold is consistently portrayed as a perjurer and unbeliever and the inference is that his soul goes to hell.

51. Le Manissier, La Louisiade, poëme (- 1787). Most notable for his almost total anonymity, Le Manissier taught the humanities at the Collège du Mont in Caen. He was the author of a number of funerary odes on members of the Royal family.

52. Le Manissier, p. 80.

C'étoit un Vieillard doux, vertueux, vénérable,
 Qui sous le poids des ans étoit encor aimable.
 Des plaisirs enchanteurs le funeste poison
 N'avoit point dans le monde égaré sa raison.
 La modération conduisit sa jeunesse;
 Les maux n'assiégeoient point sa tranquille vieillesse.
 Des passions son ame ignoroit la fureur,
 Et de son corps le temps respectoit la vigueur. 53

The venerable hermit seizes the opportunity to ameliorate a troubled and war-filled world by opening Louis' eyes about the human misery caused by his expansionist campaigns. A chastened Louis hastens to arrange a treaty on generous terms to his adversaries and returns to France to work for the happiness of his people and the glory of his country by peaceful means. The result is a spate of magnificent buildings and the founding of a series of charitable institutions and the poem ends with this comment:

Ce n'est plus ce guerrier redoutable, invincible,
 C'est un Roi vertueux, c'est un Juge paisible.
 La Victoire jadis n'osoit quitter ses pas:
 La Justice triomphe aujourd'hui sous son bras. 54

The revelations made by the hermit as to the atrocities consequent upon seemingly glorious military offensives are reinforced in a more subtle way by occasional glimpses of the personal suffering engendered by war. An added source of poignancy is the fact that the victims are all on the winning side: the wife of Aubeterre pleads before the walls of Lille for the life of her captured husband; young Gisors dies in the arms of his father and comrade in arms, who commits suicide in despair; and Elisabeth, the wife of Grammont, utters this lament over the bloodstained corpse

53. Le Manissier, p. 70.

54. Le Manissier, p. 88.

of her husband:

Tes yeux sont pour toujours fermés à la lumière! ...
 Je ne jouirai plus de ces doux entretiens
 Qui de l'hymen encor resserroient les liens;
 De ces tendres regards qui faisoient nes délices,
 Dans ces jours où pour moi les Cieux étoient propices,
 Ne suis-je donc venue en ces funestes lieux,
 Que pour voir expirer un époux malheureux,
 Pour mêler à son sang le torrent de mes larmes ...⁵⁵

Although much of the content is concerned with military success, the spirit of the poem is thus fundamentally anti-war and the human note which the author stresses probably explains the reasonably restricted use of the supernatural. The Louisiade, is not too displeasing a work, although the modern reader is aware that its author has striven to include a maximum number of epic topoi in his 80 odd pages.

Pagès de Vixouze, Louis XIV, ou la guerre de 1701, 1778⁵⁶

If the title of Pagès de Vixouze's epic poem strikes an initially enigmatic note by appearing to number the disastrous War of Spanish Succession among the achievements of the Sun King, then the mystery does not remain unresolved for long. The analysis of the significance of the subject, which

55. Le Manissier, pp. 56-57.

56. F.-X. Pagès de Vixouze, Louis XIV, ou la guerre de 1701, poëme en XV chants (Paris: Duchesne, 1778). The author is actually given on the title page as "M. de Vixouze" but on p. ix of the preface of La France républicaine (see below p. 122), Pagès claims to be the author of Louis XIV. The pacifist views of Pagès (1745-1802) were put forward as early as 1763 in the dozen pages of La paix. Poëme au Roi. The author of some very mediocre novels, his most substantial work was the Histoire secrète de la révolution française, published in 7 volumes between 1796 and 1802.

is contained in the preface, increasingly reveals the pacifist ideas of the author who defines that particular instance of European strife as "... un fléau universel ..." ⁵⁷ Although none of the great epic poets, his examination of their themes shows, ever undertook an exclusive indictment of the human urge for destruction, the didactic aim of the modest Pagès is nevertheless clearly spelled out: "J'ai cherché à réunir, dans ce foible Ouvrage, ce qu'on peut représenter de plus fort & de plus touchant pour extirper du coeur des hommes, & sur-tout des Souverains, ce féroce amour de la guerre qui y paroît trop inné; enfin j'ai osé décrire les guerres extérieures de la Nation, & ses querelles avec les autres Peuples de l'Europe." ⁵⁸

Just as the spirit of the poem is hardly in keeping with the conventions of the genre, so the central figure is scarcely envisaged in a typical light, for, the author continues "... mon but est de blâmer en lui cet amour ruineux du faste & des conquêtes, qui coûte tant de larmes au Peuple, cette portion de l'humanité la plus utile & la plus négligée". ⁵⁹ The poem is thus conceived in a mood of condemnation rather than celebration, yet the decision to portray Louis in a time of reverse was allegedly not taken in a mood of unpatriotic vindictiveness, for Pagès can lay claim to discerning positive compensation for Louis in this period of political decline: "Je ne veux peindre que ses fautes, ses malheurs, ses défaites, ses humiliations dans lesquelles il parut plus grand que dans ses conquêtes". ⁶⁰

57. Pagès, Préface, p. 3.

58. Pagès, Préface, p. 7.

59. Pagès, Préface, p. 9.

60. Pagès, Préface, p. 5.

Louis XIV, therefore, essays a chronicle of the War of Spanish Succession, beginning with the naming of Philip of Anjou, the grandson of Louis, as the sole heir to the Spanish Empire by the dying King Charles II and ending with a sadder, wiser and moribund Louis warning his infant heir against sharing his ruinous passion for war.

To attempt to present a coherent account of more than a decade of European history in less than 5000 lines of verse is no mean ambition in itself and Pagès labours under the additional difficulty of seeking to conform with the established practices of an elevated poetic genre. The vexed question of the supernatural is a case in point. Pagès explains in the preface that he has no wish to deprive his poem of the machines which can be so effective in epic, nor does he want to destroy the plausibility of his tale.⁶¹ So he addresses his initial invocation to "Philosophie auguste" and contents himself for the most part with a discreet use of moral personifications. Other epic conventions are satisfied in Chant xv, when Louis is taken on an extra-terrestrial journey to other worlds by an angel, to be shown the Great Chain of Being and to be granted a prophetic vision of the political and intellectual destiny of France.

The need for invented material in the epic is satisfied by the inclusion of one of the most persistent rumours of the reign of Louis XIV, that of the existence of a high-born prisoner whose features were concealed under an iron mask for reasons of security. Here he is alleged to be the love-child of Louis and Mlle de la Vallière, who escapes from his captivity and who, after

61. Pagès, Préface, p. 5.

wandering over the face of the earth, revenges himself for his ill-treatment by enlisting under Prince Eugene of Savoy. His part in the story is slight, although he is credited with causing the wound which the French general, Villars, sustained at the Battle of Malplaquet.

Pagès also avails himself of the flexibility and licence the poet enjoyed over the historian and brings forward by a few years the celebrated journey Peter the Great made to France during the Regency. The ostensible relevance to the plot is Peter's attempt to negotiate a peace but the visit enables Pagès to abandon his military theme for one canto and to incorporate a picture of contemporary Paris, as the Tsar visits Versailles and the principal tourist attractions of Paris, witnesses French developments in printing, surgery and medicine and converses with Fénelon on the subject of luxury.

All in all, Pagès's Louis XIV falls between two stools and succeeds neither as versified history nor as poetry. The version of the War of Spanish Succession it offers is at best confused and at worst inaccurate and yet it has little or no literary merit either. Pagès employs a mixture of alexandrines and shorter lines in stanzas of unequal length, presumably in an effort to avoid monotony, but this innovation would have been more effective had the shorter metres been reserved for some specific purpose, such as the author's frequent personal laments, rather than being introduced apparently haphazardly.

Piron, La Louïsiade, 1745⁶².

The 500 or so alexandrines of the Essai d'un chant de la Louïsiade are more than sufficient to inspire eternal gratitude that Piron did not complete a full-scale epic. The poem celebrates the legitimate and topical subject of the French victory at Fontenoy - largely due, if the author is to be believed, to the inspiring presence of Louis XV himself and to a glorious charge led by the Dauphin - but, to an almost unprecedented degree, the fault lies not in the tale but in the manner of its telling. A florid, pseudo-classical approach conveys Louis' decision to wage war in terms of the victory of one group of personified abstractions over another and the ferocity of the resistance of the French meet is ultimately traceable to the fact that Louis offends certain deities of classical mythology. Amazingly, in a glorification of French military prowess itself contained in the martial genre of epic, Piron declines to enter into a detailed description of the battle on the grounds that this would be unpoetic:

Des mouvemens, de l'ordre, observés dans la Lice,
 Muse, ne tentons pas une pénible éskisse:
 Le Parnasse admet peu ce Détail & ces Plans.
 Ces Postes retranchés, & flanqués de Volcans;
 Ces Aïles & ce Centre étendus dans les Plaines;
 Ces Evolutions, ces Attaques soudaines;
 Tout ce fier appareil, pour se dépeindre bien,
 Veut les termes d'un Art trop différent du tien. 63

62. A. Piron, Essai d'un chant de la Louïsiade, poëme héroïque (Paris: Prault, 1745). If the Louïsiade is included here rather than Voltaire's Poëme de Fontenoy of the same date, the reasons lie in the more obvious adherence of Piron's poem to the epic tradition and its pre-eminence as an example of the worst features of the genre as it was practised in France in the eighteenth century. Apart from his verse comedy, La métromanie, his masterpiece and one of the best comedies of the century, Piron's many works for the theatre were not successful. Chiefly famous for his epigrams and bons mots, Piron (1689-1773) was the scourge of his contemporaries, especially Voltaire. The licentious Ode à Priape, probably never destined for publication, led to the refusal of Louis XV to confirm Piron's election to the Académie Française in 1753.

63. Piron, pp. 10-11.

Piron evidently considers the essence of a heroic poem to lie in enumerations, for he manages to include no fewer than five lists of French combatants, running to more than eighty names. The poem comes to a merciful conclusion with Venus, having recovered from her fit of pique at being abandoned by Louis for Bellona, ordering celebrations for the French king on her island of Cythera.

Pagès de Vixouze, La France républicaine, 1793⁶⁴

Pagès's second epic poem, La France républicaine, traces events from the convening of the States General to the fall of the monarchy with the death of Louis XVI but lacks a definite sense of purpose, in that the author cannot claim that he is celebrating the fruition of any conscious individual or corporate design. While the founding of the French republic is the outcome towards which the poem moves, it can in no way be said to constitute an action in the normal epic sense of the word. This absence of a specific argument is noticeable both in the abstract terms in which the author explains his theme in the preface and indeed in the lengthy but rambling proem, which perhaps comes nearest to a proposition in the following section:

J'attaque les tyrans prophanes et sacrés.
 C'est vous que je poursuis, vous faux dieux de la terre,
 Adorés trop long-tems d'un stupide vulgaire,
 Et qui par la terreur subjuguez les mortels.
 Je détruis votre culte et brise vos autels.
 Je peins la Liberté, l'Egalité chérie;
 La grandeur du sujet soutiendra mon génie.
 Je chante les Français par le luxe amollis,
 Par une antique chaîne à leurs loix asservis,
 Triomphant à la fois des tyrans et d'eux-mêmes,
 D'un invincible bras brisant les diadèmes,
 Donnant l'exemple au monde, et vers la liberté,
 A travers cent périls, marchant avec fierté.⁶⁵

64. F.-X. Pagès de Vixouze, La France républicaine, ou le miroir de la révolution française; poème en dix chants (Paris: Grand, 1793). On the title page, the author styles himself as "François Pagès" but claims on p. ix of the preface to have written the Louis XIV by "M. de Vixouze". See above, p. 117.

65. Pagès, La France républicaine, pp. 3-4.

In his prefatory remarks, Pagès underlines the uniqueness of his subject matter as compared with the choice of previous epic poets and shows his good republican sentiments by regretting that Voltaire mistakenly devoted a fine poem to a false idol. His contention that poetry is a better medium than history for apportioning blame for the benefit of posterity and is best calculated to inspire liberty and patriotism presupposes a blatant moralistic intent.

Since the poem records the principal stages in the move from monarchical to republican government, considerable attention is paid to the all-important deliberations of the National Assembly and the Convention and Chant ii contains an alleged address by Mirabeau just prior to the swearing of the oath of the Jeu de Paume. Mirabeau's speech is printed in play-form and what are virtually stage directions are included: "(Plusieurs Deputés de la Noblesse se rangeant du côté de Mirabeau)".⁶⁶ This procedure is continued throughout the text for speeches and conversations and is an aid to clarity in a poem, the near 3500 lines of which are almost equally divided between narrative and dialogue.

Although Mirabeau and other early leaders of the Revolution are shown to play their part in the course of events, the true hero of the poem is General Dampierre. It is Dampierre who is credited in the preface with being the real architect of the victory at Jemappes rather than Dumouriez, whose subsequent defeat and treason in the spring of 1793 obviously disqualified him for such an honour. and it is he who receives from Liberty a sacred sword, which has been eternally fatal to monarchy and which has been previously wielded by William Tell and George Washington. In a fiction

66. Pagès, La France républicaine, p. 17.

modelled on the imaginary voyage of Henri IV to England in Voltaire's Henriade, Dampierre is sent on a European tour to solicit support from various nations for the French cause. His diplomatic efforts take him to London, where he addresses the "Société des Wighs constitutionnels", to Rome, Venice, Naples and Constantinople but he returns in time to stem the Allied advance and win the Battle of Jemappes, here a highly exaggerated and emotive version of the French victory of November 1792.

If the hero of the story is obvious, there is equally no mistaking the villain of the piece. No pains are spared to blacken both Louis and Marie-Antoinette - "Une reine féroce, un roi lâche et perfide"⁶⁷ - but it is the foreign-born Queen who is singled out for especial vilification. The couple are held equally responsible for a dramatic worsening of the economic state of the country, which angers the French people, whom two centuries of national glory and power had made forgetful of their thousand years of slavery to the monarchy:

Une autre Messaline, un nouveau Claudius,
S'entourant de flatteurs et d'hommes corrompus,
Ont mis soudain l'empire au bord de sa ruine;
Et tandis que le peuple expiroit de famine,
Leurs prodigalités, leur luxe dévorant,
Formoient avec nos maux un contraste effrayant.⁶⁸

Antoinette's alleged opposition to any degree of emancipation for the French people is more total than her husband's and stems from an overweening pride in her lineage and present position. The presumptuousness of the Parisian populace consequently arouses her to a pitch of fury which can only

67. Pagès, La France républicaine, p. 38.

68. Pagès, La France républicaine, p. 8.

be. assuaged by the sight of French blood and the keynote to her character as presented in the poem is bloodthirsty vengeance:

Je t'implore aujourd'hui, Dieu puissant, Ciel vengeur;
Remplis mon voeu sanglant, ma fureur légitime;
Qu'il ne puisse échapper une seule victime.
Par des torrens de sang, effrayez à jamais⁶⁹
Tous les murmureurs, les rebelles sujets.

It is such fearless denunciation of supposed evil that Pagès curiously considers to constitute the only suitable modern form of the epic marvellous: "... le seul merveilleux qui convienne à l'épopée, seroit, suivant moi, la peinture que feroit une ame forte, du crime qu'elle poursuivroit avec le glaive de Juvénal, et qu'elle démasqueroit jusque sous la pourpre et le dais: voilà le seul merveilleux qu'un siècle éclairé puisse admettre."⁷⁰

But Pagès's claim to have suppressed all supernatural intervention in the poem is not strictly correct, for, in addition to the Voltairian use of allegories, the Angel of France inspires Danton to suspect that the king is plotting a reactionary insurrection in Paris.

The oratorical nature of much of the content of La France républicaine is heightened by frequent invocations, several diatribes and a large number of apostrophes. Similes are almost exclusively concentrated in Chants vii to ix, which treat of the early fortunes of the Revolutionary armies, with the Battle of Jemappes attracting the majority.

69. Pagès, La France républicaine, p. 31.

70. Pagès, La France républicaine, Préface, pp. ix-x.

La Harpe, Le triomphe de la religion, 1795 ff.⁷¹

Another account of the French Revolution appears in the incomplete epic by La Harpe, Le triomphe de la religion, but the approach here is diametrically opposed to that of La France républicaine, for La Harpe is as overtly monarchist as Pagès was republican. The very subtitle of the poem provides a preliminary indication of La Harpe's preoccupation and, moreover, that the epic celebrates the martyrdom of Louis XVI, is made abundantly clear in the proposition:

Je chante ce bon roi, de ses sujets victime,
 Pour prix de ses vertus immolé par le crime,
 Ce roi qu'un peuple ingrat punit de sa bonté.
 Lui-même, limitant sa pleine autorité,
 Voulait un peuple libre: il en reçut des chaînes.
 Jeune encore, il avait, de ses mains souveraines,
 Rendu la paix, la gloire à l'empire français:
 La hache et l'échafaud payèrent ses bienfaits.
 Mais Dieu, qui lui gardait les épreuves du juste,
 L'arma du bouclier de la constance auguste.
 Louis, dans le malheur loin de se démentir,
 Fut un roi dans les fers, dans sa mort un martyr.⁷²

This traditional statement of intent on the Virgilian pattern inaugurates a poem which, unfortunately, fails to deviate from the most conventional epic practice. An invocation to "Sainte Religion" follows and the narrative begins in medias res shortly after the demonstrations of 20 June 1792, when a mob forced its way into the royal apartments in the Palace of the Tuilleries

71. J.-F. de La Harpe, Le triomphe de la religion, ou le roi martyr in Oeuvres, 16 vols. (Paris: Verdière, 1820-21), III, v - 170. A major figure on the French literary scene in the later eighteenth century, La Harpe (1739-1803) was a prolific author in many genres, especially the theatre. A translator of Lucan, Camoens and Tasso, it was chiefly as a literary critic that La Harpe attained fame. The definitive work on La Harpe is that by C. Todd, Voltaire's disciple: Jean-François de La Harpe (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1972). According to Todd, the epic was begun sometime in 1795 (p. 145) and La Harpe was still working on it until just before his death (p. 74).

72. La Harpe, pp. 7-8.

and confronted the king. Prior events are conveyed to the reader in Chants ii and iii in a recital by Clermont-Tonnerre to the Duke of Brunswick, a ploy which mirrors the speech of Henri IV to Elizabeth of England in the corresponding cantos of the Henriade. Nor does La Harpe fail to incorporate a substantial supernatural element. The setting of the whole of Chant iv in Heaven is balanced by the infernal council depicted in the following canto, which Satan convokes on receipt from Saint Michael of God's judgement that France be delivered into the authority of Hell for a limited period, as punishment for her revolt against the Divine will. Consequently, in Chant vi Satan adopts the form of Cromwell and Machiavelli to appear to Danton and Robespierre respectively in nocturnal visions and suggest the murder of the king.

To ascribe the ultimate responsibility for a foul deed to the machinations of Satan represents fairly standard epic practice but in the present instance this attribution seems to be rather more than a mere literary stratagem. During the months he spent in prison in 1794 and 1795, La Harpe underwent a religious experience and the apocalyptic tone of Isaiah's reading from the Book of Vengeance in Chant iv appears to smack of personal belief. Certainly, the portrait La Harpe draws of the French monarch indicates, as the proposition suggests, a superhuman and divinely-inspired endurance in the face of truly fiendish persecution.

In the Triomphe, La Harpe is as equally concerned to commend Louis XVI as Pagès was to defame him. The very first picture of the king sets the tone of La Harpe's characterization:

Louis abandonné, dans sa cour solitaire,
 A tous les attentats d'un parti sanguinaire,
 Opposait vainement ses paisibles vertus,
 Sa royauté captive, et les droits abattus.⁷³

73. La Harpe, p. 9.

The emphasis is on quiet dignity, displayed in a variety of humiliating circumstances, as La Harpe depicts, for example, the king's journey from Versailles to the Hôtel de Ville in Paris on 17 July 1789 to receive the tricoloured cockade. Cécile, a young Carmelite nun allowed to leave Saint Denis to reveal to the king a prophetic vision she has been granted, weeps to see Louis "sous l'obscur vêtement d'un citoyen vulgaire",⁷⁴ but the king himself is untroubled by this humble garb.

An unswerving devotion to his country is a further feature of La Harpe's Louis XVI. If Louis rejects the suggestion by Clermont-Tonnerre that the royal family should flee from Paris to Rouen with the Swiss guards, it is chiefly from fear of provoking civil war among his subjects. He objects, moreover, that his presence in Paris alone keeps the worst excesses at bay and is determined to attempt to moderate the conduct of the leaders of the Revolution. Indeed, the only note of criticism which creeps into the text argues that the king, in his efforts to be the father of his people, was; excessively compliant:

Louis, pour le salut de son peuple qu'il aime,
Fait son premier devoir de s'immoler soi-même.
Il croit, de ses sujets daignant prendre des lois,
Avoir tout fait pour eux en leur cédant ses droits,
Ne veut agir qu'en père, oubliant trop peut-être
Que pour l'être en effet, il faut qu'on soit leur maître.⁷⁵

For his part, however, the king is convinced that God will vindicate his actions:

Dieu du moins voit mon coeur; oui, ce juge suprême
A vue quels sentiments en secret m'ont guidé,
Qu'à mon propre intérêt je n'ai jamais cédé,
Et j'attends mon pardon de ses regards propices;
J'en espère le fruit de tant de sacrifices.⁷⁶

74. La Harpe, p. 30.

75. La Harpe, pp. 16-17.

76. La Harpe, p. 23.

The extreme sympathy that characterizes the treatment of Louis XVI in the Triomphe inevitably entails the outpouring of La Harpe's wrath on the French Revolution itself. The analysis of the origins of the cataclysm is largely contained in Chant ii and, in Clermont-Tonnerre's opening address to Brunswick, La Harpe makes the following indictment for the immediate causes of the Revolution:

Prince, de nos malheurs la source empoisonnée,
 C'est des sages du jour cette audace effrénée,
 Cet orgueil novateur qu'il fallait réprimer,
 Qui crut pouvoir tout faire en osant tout blâmer;
 Dont la voix impunie abusant l'ignorance,
 S'enivra d'une aveugle et folle indépendance. ⁷⁷

But it is Rousseau and Voltaire who are impeached as the fundamental causes of the Revolution, although it is conceded that they would have disowned the violence of the mob. Both are reproved for their anti-religious views but Rousseau is particularly singled out for criticism, in that his egalitarian ideas, themselves born of his own pride, created the destructive republican spirit.

More than in the investigation of the sources of the French Revolution, however, it is in the pen-portraits of its principal agents and leaders that La Harpe's spleen is vented. Although the scathing description of Philippe d'Orléans has strong claims to be quoted, the sketch of Robespierre perhaps wins out in terms of sheer virulence:

... adroit, lâche et féroce,
 Il allume sa rage au coeur des scélérats,
 Et sa voix fait oser ce qu'il n'oserait pas.
 Il préparait dès-lors cette énorme puissance,
 Ce règne qui fut près d'anéantir la France;
 Ce glaive qui deux ans dans le sang fut trempé:
 Le monde en est encor de surprise frappé.
 L'excès de la bassesse et de l'hypocrisie
 Suffit pour expliquer sa fortune inouïe.

77. La Harpe, p. 39.

Dès que le plus vil peuple a droit de gouverner,
 C'est le plus vil de tous qui sur tous doit régner:
 Leur flatteur le plus bas doit devenir leur maître.
 Robespierre le fut: il était fait pour l'être.
 Leur exécration instinct fut celui de son coeur;
 Nul ne sut mieux que lui caresser leur fureur,
 Lui présenter l'attrait du sang et du pillage,
 De la perversité raffiner le langage,
 Et pour tous les forfaits commander le respect.
 Chacun de ses rivaux par lui devint suspect,⁷⁸
 Et lui seul affectait le nom d'incorruptible.

La Harpe finished only six of the projected dozen cantos of Le triomphe de la religion before his death in 1803. Chant vi ends with a personal intervention by the author, in which he laments the death of Louis and records his final abhorrence of the events he has described. The ultra-traditional form of the poem is disappointing from one of La Harpe's stature but the undoubted talent of the poet is revealed within the narrow conventions he set himself. The tone is more assured and the language more elegant than in most of the works analysed in this thesis.

Renaud-Blanchet, L'école des empires, 1804⁷⁹

The events of the Revolution and the death of Louis XVI were also treated some ten years later by Renaud-Blanchet in a strange little poem of just under 1100 lines for which he claims epic status, although the content

78. La Harpe, pp. 34-35.

79. J. Renaud-Blanchet, L'école des empires, ou la chute de la monarchie française. Poème épique en quatre chants et en vers. (Paris: Debray, 1804). Nothing appears to be known about Renaud-Blanchet, except that he had a verse tragedy, Lavinie, ou la fondation de l'empire romain, performed at Lyons in August 1806.

is largely related by a personified abstraction and the poem comes to an abrupt and inconclusive ending. The setting of the work is the Elysian fields, whither Destiny leads the ghosts of Louis XVI and his sister, Madame Elisabeth. The latter's speech, requesting immortality for Louis, is not free from blame of her brother but she alleges that his sins were weakness and excessive goodwill, so that the shade of Henri IV is impelled to offer some advice on kingship:

... qu'il est dangeureux
 Que jusqu'à la foiblesse un roi soit généreux!
 Pardonner aux méchants, c'est renoncer soi-même
 A l'empire des lois, aux droits du diadème.
 Un roi ne doit jamais abuser du pouvoir;
 Mais ne pas en user c'est trahir son devoir. 80

Louis XIV, anxious for information about the Revolution but unwilling to subject the royal pair to the strain of narrating their experiences, convokes a meeting in the Temple de Mémoire to hear an exposition of the facts by Vérité.

The financial disaster that overtook the country, far from being the sole responsibility of Louis XVI, as Pagès claimed in La France républicaine, is shown to have been of long incubation, stemming from the disinterest of Louis XIV in fiscal matters and being compounded by the mismanagement of his successor. The storming of the Bastille prompts the comment that "ici va commencer l'empire des bourreaux"⁸¹ and the insistence on the personal humiliations suffered by the King, together with the vivid description of the massacre of the Royalists in the prisons of Paris in September 1792, reveal a standpoint that is as much humanitarian as monarchist. Vérité's account sketches in subsequent phases of the Revolution and ends with the

80. Renaud-Blanchet, p. 19.

81. Renaud-Blanchet, p. 43.

coup d'état of 18 brumaire, an VII, which, it must be presumed, represents the approximate date of the arrival of Louis in the Underworld and of the subsequent assembly. The poem thus concludes without revealing the posthumous fate of the king and leaves the reader speculating rather unkindly on the reason why it took the ghost of Louis XVI so long to find its way to the Elysian fields.

That the brevity of the Ecole des empires does not permit any episodic ornament is, perhaps, fortunate, for, even as the poem stands, the figure of Louis fails to provide a real unifying link, in that he is peripheral to much of the content. It was, perhaps, in an attempt to compensate for the transgression of this primordial epic requirement that Renaud-Blanchet introduced a number of Homeric similes and a host of personified abstractions, none of which deserves to be recorded here.

Lesur, Les Francs, 1797⁸²

A title like Les Francs would not seem to promise a work of which the author can say that "... le sujet est la campagne de l'an 4 et du commencement de l'an 5 de la République française, ou 1796 et 1797 vieux style".⁸³ But in his comprehensive explanation, Lesur reveals that the choice was made on etymological grounds, since the name originally implied the freedom for which the ancient French fought so wholeheartedly and was therefore peculiarly suited to the soldiers of the Revolutionary armies.

82. C.-L. Lesur, Les Francs, poëme héroïque en dix chants (Paris: L'Auteur, 1797). Lesur (1770-1849) went to Paris at the beginning of the Revolution and returned to his native Gise in 1830. In Paris he worked at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs during the Directory and published in 1810 a Tableau historique de la politique de la cour de Rome. His most substantial and worthy work, however, was his Annuaire historique universel pour 1818-30, 13 vols. (Paris: Thoissnier-Desplaces, 1818-32).

83. Lesur, Note préliminaire, p. v.

A similar note of crusading zeal is struck in the neat and accurate opening of the poem:

J'ai cherché des héros plus que des conquérans;
 J'ai cherché des vertus, et j'ai choisi les Francs.
 Ils ont repris les droits de leur auguste race.
 Rempli de leur grandeur, brûlant de leur audace,
 Je chante leurs combats et ces nombreux exploits,
 L'étonnement du monde et le respect des rois.
 Aux horreurs de la guerre, au tumulte des armes,
 Souvent l'humanité viendra prêter ses charmes;
 Et détournant les yeux des cruels jeux de Mars,
 Je chante quelquefois l'amour et les beaux arts. ⁸⁴

The title and the proposition thus indicate a corporate body of heroes and a multiplicity of events which are inconsistent with a strict interpretation of epic unity and it is for this reason, Lesur confesses in a prospectus advertising the work, that he has preferred to qualify his poem as heroic. Nevertheless, Les Francs should not be excluded from this investigation because of its author's scrupulousness about a rule which was infringed by a number of writers, who unhesitatingly claimed the title of epic for works less deserving of that appellation.

Les Francs, therefore, relates the exploits of the armies of the young Republic in two separate theatres of war, in Italy and in Germany. Four chants are devoted to each, with the less successful northern sector sandwiched between the campaign in Italy and forming the central section of the poem. After an opening canto which gives a highly allegorical account of the Austrian decision to renew war and which extols French patriotism in the symbolic scene of a young Frenchman preparing to depart on active service, the poem thus concentrates first on the Army of Italy. Its new young commander is presented in eulogistic terms which compare him to Julius Caesar and refer to his recent marriage to "Josephine" de Beauharnais:

84. Lesur, p. 3.

Né des Liguriens, sous les lois de Neptune,
 Instruit par la sagesse, et plus par l'infortune,
 Héros prématuré, jeune élève de Mars,
 Favori de l'amour, de la gloire et des arts,
 Riche par les talens de l'oppresseur du Tibre,
 Plus grand par les vertus qui forment l'homme libre,
 Ceint du mirte amoureux, aspirant aux lauriers,
 L'ardent Bonaparte conduisait nos guerriers.⁸⁵

Chants ii and iii trace the first two phases of the brilliantly-waged Italian campaign, up to the siege of Mantua. The treatment of the various engagements is inevitably heroic and the centrepiece is perhaps the forcing of the passage of the Adda, at Lodi, when the French stormed a bridge under heavy Austrian fire. Lesur's description is more stirring than strictly accurate, since it was fought by the French infantry and Napoleon claimed French losses of only two hundred dead:

Le Franc court à la mort; mais, plus impétueuse,
 Par cent bouches de feu, la mort sort plus affreuse.
 L'airain tonne, il divise, il rompt les bataillons;
 De morts et de débris il couvre les sillons:
 Mille membres brisés, qu'on distingue avec peine,
 S'agitent palpitans sur la sanglante arêne.
 Ce n'est plus que sanglots, que douleurs, que mourans,
 Que coursiers abattus, sur leur maître expirans;
 Ce n'est que cris, qu'horreur, que trouble, que carnage:
 Tout fuit, tout se disperse à cet immense orage.⁸⁶

The concentration on military matters is offset, however, by a harrowing recital by an Italian woman of her eleven-year imprisonment in an underground conventual cell for having dared to marry a Frenchman. On her release, she learns that her husband has been killed at Fleurus, while her twelve-year old son is a drummer boy with the French army. The story, for which the author claims some slight basis in fact, is possibly intended also to illustrate the liberation of Italy by the forces of freedom.

The account of the French campaigns in Germany in 1796 is less comprehensible for an already unclear narrative is further complicated by recourse

85. Lesur, p. 24.

86. Lesur, pp. 51-52.

to the pagan marvellous and to the machinations of allegorized abstractions. Of the most signal interest here is the fabricated version of the death of the able young general, Marceau, who, as the author recognizes in his notes, was really killed near Altenkirchen covering the retreat of the Army of the Sambre-and-Meuse under Jourdan. In the present poem, however, Marceau accompanies Moreau's Army of the Rhine-and-Moselle in its famous withdrawal to the Rhine, pursued by the Austrian army under Archduke Charles. The tale occupies the whole of Chant viii and supposes that Marceau is the winner of a ballot held among the principal French heroes for the right to meet the Austrian champion Krai in single combat. After a digression on Marceau's love for Zulmé, which her father has finally sanctioned, a spectacular struggle ensues but the French hero is treacherously slain by a Tyrolean marksman, who is incited to his evil deed by Discord. The efforts of the Archduke's personal physician are unavailing and Marceau's passing is recorded in a rather precious horticultural simile:

Son ame en murmurant échappe à son beau corps:
 Telle ouvrant son calice aux baisers de l'aurore,
 A ses humides feux la rose se colore.
 A peine elle faisait l'ornement d'un jardin,
 Un barbare la cueille; elle expire soudain:
 Ainsi meurt ce héros.⁸⁷

In a gesture more appropriate to chivalric romance than an episode in the Revolutionary wars, Charles makes a magnanimous speech and the French and Germans are united round Marceau's funeral pyre.

Attention reverts to Italy for the final two cantos which follow Napoleon's fortunes in the third phase of the Italian campaign, up to the fall of Mantua in February 1797. The various victories over the armies of Wurmser and Alvinzi are formed into one single battle, so that an enumeration

87. Lesur, p. 181.

of the commanders under Bonaparte produces an arid list of 26 names. The poem ends with Victory guiding the Spirit of France to the Temple of Peace and with a brief prophecy of the future happiness of the French nation.

It is only in keeping with the choice of title that Lesur should make consistent use in his poem of antiquated vocabulary, a peculiarity which he justifies on the grounds that a heroic poem must embody: "... cette teinte antique et ce coloris merveilleux qui ne sont pas compatibles avec les noms nouveaux, soit que ceux-ci soient moins sonores en eux-mêmes, soit que notre imagination aime qu'on la transporte dans des pays inconnus, dans des temps reculés, qu'elle trouve plus beaux à proportion de leur éloignement."⁸⁸

What is dubious in the extreme, however, is that the reader will appreciate having to turn to the notes to discover that dawn breaking over the dome of the Invalides is the picture contained in the following lines:

L'épouse de Tithon sortait de sa demeure;
Elle arrivait à peine, avec la première heure,
Et des enfans de Mars dorait la noble tour,
Quand le bruit de la foudre annonça ce grand jour.⁸⁹

At least it may be supposed that such a style came easily to Lesur, since he wrote not far short of 4000 lines and published them in the same year as the events he was celebrating.

88. Lesur, Note préliminaire, p. vii.

89. Lesur, p. 105.

Ménégault, La Napoléïde, 1806⁹⁰

From figuring merely as primus inter pares in Lesur's poem, Napoleon emerges as the unchallenged central figure of Ménégault's Napoléïde. This epic did not immediately appear in its final form but represents the third and final stage of a process of amplification over a period of two years. It first saw the light of day as an Hommage à l'Empereur Napoléon immediately after Napoleon's coronation.⁹¹ Reminiscences of epic can already be seen clearly in the description of its 244 lines as a "chant sur le couronnement de Napoléon Ier" and in the invocation to Callipe, while a further pointer is the fact that it extols the deeds of modern France at the expense of the exploits of the Greeks and Trojans. It is perhaps cynical to suggest that it was the author's political ideas, revealed in the lines:

Oui, Grand Napoléon, oui, le Sceptre t'est dû.
 Tu protèges les Lois, la Liberté publique,
 Sois Empereur des Francs, Chef de la République.⁹²

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90. A.-P.-F. Ménégault, La Napoléïde, poème en six chants (Paris: La Bibliographie Centrale, 1806). Ménégault (c. 1770-c.1830) wrote, largely under pseudonyms, a substantial number of works, including poems, comedies and a critical directory of 700 contemporary French authors. He also edited a 4 volume historical dictionary of land and sea battles, sieges, etc. which took place during the Revolution. It appeared in 1818.
91. A.-P.-F. Ménégault, Hommage à l'Empereur Napoléon, xii frimaire, an XIII (1804).
92. Ménégault, Hommage, p. 7.

rather than his powers of expression that prompted the gratitude of Napoleon.⁹³

When Napoleon accepted the Iron Crown of Italy, Ménégault published an expanded version of the poem, now grown to more than double its original length.⁹⁴ In a greatly enlarged speech, the shade of Charlemagne proclaims the divine right of kings and stresses that:

L'Eternel a voulu que l'Inégalité,
Fut la base et le noeud de la Société ...⁹⁵

To which the author adds his own stern warning that "tout sujet indompté met en péril sa tête".⁹⁶

The Napoléïde covers an extra few months in the career of the Emperor and so incorporates perhaps his greatest victory, the total defeat of the combined Austrian and Russian armies at the Battle of Austerlitz on the first anniversary of his coronation in Paris. It takes more than a glorious climax to make a successful epic, however, and Ménégault has not managed to disguise the humble origins of his poem. To attain any semblance of length - the poem still only numbers just over 1700 lines - the original material is padded out with such unwelcome additions as this allegorical portrait celebrating Napoleon's conquest of Italy:

Regardez ce Héros sur le char de la Gloire:
Chaque jour de sa vie enfante une victoire;
Il paraîtra bientôt dans toute sa splendeur.
Voyez auprès de lui l'intrépide Valeur,
Le paisible Sens-froid, qui sans crainte s'expose,
Le patient Travail, qui jamais ne repose,
La Ruse vigilante et fertile en détours,
La Prudence, du sort prévenant les retours,
L'Imagination, dont la vue étincèle,
Embrasse la Nature, et dont l'ame recèle
Ces desseins favoris d'un Chef ingénieux

93. Ménégault, La Napoléïde, Préface, p.7.

94. A.-P.-F. Ménégault, Napoléon, poëme (Lyon: Maillet, prairial, an XIII)

95. Ménégault, Napoléon, p. 13.

96. Ménégault, Napoléon, p. 18.

Ces étonnans projets, ces plans harmonieux,
 Que la Victoire attend, que Pallas examine, 97
 Et dont par la Raison l'emploi se détermine.

The rather oblique comments on kingship in the Napoléon are supplemented by a full-scale and blatantly partisan denunciation of the "méchants", "censeurs" and "ingrats" who oppose Bonaparte and the account of the Coronation is hardly enhanced by the Nymph of the Seine apostrophizing Paris and Napoleon in turn. Not only is the Emperor the sole hero, he is almost the only character, for even the description of Austerlitz is given in general terms. Altogether, the Napoléïde has not been able to escape its antecedents and the result of so much amplification is a corresponding loss of poetic effectiveness.

Conclusion

That national history constituted the principal source of inspiration for writers of epic in France between 1745 and 1809 emerges as probably the single most important finding of this chapter. Historical poems treating national themes clearly enjoyed an undoubted numerical superiority among examples of French epic in that period.

As represented by the fourteen works discussed above, the national historical epic in the later eighteenth century embraced a wide spectrum of subject-matter. The legendary past of France inspired three works of divergent atmospheres and a like number of epics commemorated remote but authentic national heroes. The person of Louis XIV attracted two poets of decided pacifist inclinations but the remaining six epics - nearly half the total number under consideration here - all celebrated contemporary figures or events. With the exception of the Battle of Fontenoy of 1745, recorded in a somewhat farcical manner by Piron, the subjects of this last

group of poems are not unexpectedly drawn from the Revolutionary or Napoleonic eras. Rather less predictable, perhaps, are the diametrically opposed attitudes to the fall of the French monarchy and the death of Louis XVI of Pagès de Vixouze on the one hand and Renaud-Blanchet and La Harpe on the other.

This investigation into the French historical epic on a national theme has also produced a valuable insight into the attitude of epicists towards their source material, particularly when the latter was of recent origin. The traditional prerogative of writers of epic to deform even established fact in the interests of their craft was asserted in prefatory statements and practised in the text of the poems. Dulard's use of the Herodotean version of the founding of Marseilles for reasons of artistic effectiveness, despite his recognition of its factual inaccuracy, appears the more understandable in view of the historical remoteness of his theme. Pagès de Vixouze, however, passed contemporary events through the distorting prism of personal value judgements. Barely a year later, he ascribed the real merit for the French victory at Jemappes in November 1792 to Dampierre rather than to Dumouriez because of the latter's subsequent military failure and political defection. But the most extreme instance of the poetic rendering of contemporary history occurs in Lesur's Les Francs, in which the acknowledgedly fictitious account of the death of General Marceau owed nothing to history and everything to heroic epic and chivalric romance.

CHAPTER THREE

EPICS ON THE DISCOVERY AND CONQUEST OF THE NEW WORLD

Epics discussed, listed in order of treatment

A.-M. Du Boccage, La Colombiade , 1756

N.-L. Bourgeois, Christophe Colomb, 1773

R.-M. Le Suire, Le Nouveau Monde , an VIII

Boesnier, Le Mexique conquis , 1752

P. Roure, La Cortésiade , 1809

J.-F. Marmontel, Les Incas, 1777

Like the poems on French history reviewed in the previous chapter, epics treating the discovery and conquest of the New World properly represent a sub-genre of the wider literary form of historical epic. However, unlike the national historical epic, which first appeared in France in the later sixteenth century, no celebration in epic of the American adventure seems to have been attempted by a French author before the eighteenth century. Such neglect is unexpected in view of the potential of the subject and the tardy appearance of the New World among the diverse themes treated by epic poets is particularly surprising; given the significance America had been accorded by French writers almost since its discovery.

In 1911, Chinard examined the place American exoticism occupied in French literature of the sixteenth century.¹ He noted that it was through the agency of Italy that the New World was revealed to France and argued that it was largely due to the bucolic tendencies then prevalent in Italy that there took root in France an idyllic

1. G. Chinard, L'exotisme américain dans la littérature française au XVII^e siècle d'après Rabelais, Ronsard, Montaigne, etc. (Paris: Hachette, 1911).

picture of primitive life in America, which was ultimately responsible for the celebrated eighteenth-century theory of the innate goodness of natural man. According to Chinard, however, the real entry of America into French literature dates from the publication in 1558 of André Thévet's Singularitez de la France antartique and he observed that even the Pléiade poets lauded the exploits of French explorers in America and the innocent peoples of the New World.

In a second book, published two years later, Chinard extended his investigations to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France². He traced the growing tendency in an increasingly organized and centralized society to escape from the reality of a steady erosion of individual liberty in dreams of an exotic but contemporary paradise in the New World. As a result, the American Indian was invested with both the Christian virtues and the ideal qualities of the ancient world. Chinard claimed that the climax of this movement, which had developed over some two hundred and fifty years, came in 1755 with the publication of Rousseau's discourse on inequality. After this date, allegedly, fuller knowledge of the Indian and recognition of the savagery of at least some individuals or tribes led to a feeling of discouragement permeating the utopias of the later eighteenth century.

Chinard's researches on the American theme in French writing up to the close of the Enlightenment revealed, then, that a long intellectual chain linked a Rousseau with an author like Montaigne. The proliferation of accounts of voyages in the second half of the eighteenth century represents, therefore, a continuance, or even intensification, of previous national interest in travel and Prévost's

2. References are to G. Chinard, L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Droz, 1934).

monumental Histoire générale des voyages eventually ran to eighty volumes in-12. In an age of travel, the merits of travel were debated. At his reception into the Académie de Béziers in August 1762, for example, Abbé Gros de Besplas chose to devote his address to a consideration of the usefulness of exploration.³ His concern with the effects of travel was but a foretaste of what was to come for, as the century progressed, attention was increasingly focused on the economic and moral repercussions on Europe of the discovery of the New World. In 1787, the Marquis de Chastellux concluded that the discovery was beneficial from a commercial standpoint, even if it was also responsible for the introduction of syphilis into Europe.⁴ And the subject was indeed consecrated when the following title was set for a competition organized for 1792 by the Académie Française: "Quelle a été l'influence de l'Amérique sur la politique, le commerce et les mœurs de l'Europe?"

Apart from the philosophical and economic speculation it thus engendered in eighteenth-century France, the New World also figured prominently in the more popular literature of the period. The novels, plays and poems which deal wholly or in part with themes and characters drawn from the New World have been analysed by Chinard, who was decidedly unimpressed by such works in the second half of the century.⁵

In the light of such general literary interest in the New World

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3. Abbé J.-M. Gros de Besplas, De l'utilité des voyages relativement aux sciences et aux mœurs (Paris: Berthier, 1763).
 4. F.-J. de Chastellux, Discours sur les avantages ou les désavantages qui résultent, pour l'Europe, de la découverte de l'Amérique (Paris: Prault, 1787).
 5. Chinard, L'Amérique, p.407; pp. 422-23; p. 427. The Tableau Chronologique of these works (pp. 435-45 and listing items from 1598 to 1788) is not, of course, complete. Of the epics examined in detail in this chapter, Chinard fails to record the poems by Boesnier and Bourgeois and also the first edition in 1781 of Le Suire's epic.

in France in the later eighteenth century, the fact that the subject finally attracted a number of writers of epic is less remarkable than would have been a continued disregard of this particular theme. For the history of the discovery and conquest of the New World inherently conformed to many of the criteria then taken to indicate appropriate subject-matter for epic. According to the conception of the genre in eighteenth-century France, the authenticity but historical remoteness of the events, the illustrious but perilous nature of the enterprise, the unfamiliar and exotic geographical setting, the clash of disparate cultures and an undeniable martial element all combined to make the European colonization of the New World eminently suitable for epic treatment.

Of the great names in the history of the early European involvement in the New World, it is Columbus who was the most favoured by epic poets during the years under consideration. This numerical superiority supports Bédarida's claim that Columbus has been consistently popular with French authors and public alike since the sixteenth century.⁶ And in addition to the epic poems on Columbus discussed below, further proof of his appeal for practitioners of the genre between 1745 and 1809 can be supplied by reference to two other epics, which mention Columbus but do not properly qualify for inclusion in this chapter.

The Columbus story is treated in the second canto of Grée's

6. H. Bédarida, "Christophe Colomb dans la littérature française" in A travers trois siècles de littérature italienne (Paris: Didier, 1957), pp. 419-39, p. 439. See also in the same book, pp. 440-58, "Christophe Colomb, héros de quelques drames français de Rousseau à Claudel."

La navigation,⁷ which is dedicated to " Messieurs les officiers de la marine ", a fact that perhaps helps to explain why large sections of the poem are devoted to a panegyric on contemporary French naval power. This digressive and justly-obscure verse epic aims basically to glorify discoveries and advances in the techniques of navigation but frustratingly restricts itself to terminology culled from the classical writers of antiquity. The gloomy tone of the Columbus episode contrasts sharply with the atmosphere of the rest of the poem. Supernaturally forewarned of the evil results of his venture for both continents, Columbus is subsequently persecuted and calumniated and his fate is surveyed with this solemn warning :

Tant il est dangereux d'éclairer les humains.⁸

Columbus also makes an appearance in the similarly-named epic by Joseph-Alphonse Esménard.⁹ The latter, too, celebrates the science of navigation but chooses to chart its progress by recalling great events in which navigational skill figured conspicuously and immortal discoveries which extended the known world. The section on Columbus fills about twenty pages of text and contains some pleasant descriptive passages, although a liberal use is made of mythological allusions. Once again, however, the author is acutely aware of the calamitous consequences for the New World of Columbus's achievement and laments :

O rivage fatal! ô terre infortunée !
Conquête du génie au crime destinée !
Je te salue, hélas ! les yeux baignés de pleurs.¹⁰

7. Grée, La navigation, poème en quatre chants (Paris:Mérigot,1781)

8. Grée, p. 51.

9. J.-A. Esménard, La navigation, poème, 2. vols. (Paris : Giguet & Michaud, 1805).

10. Esménard, I, 178.

Although they are not in the epic strain, two other works might usefully be mentioned here, in that they, too, confirm the contemporary vogue for the Columbus theme. Abbé L'Espinasse de Langeac's Colomb dans les fers¹¹ purports to be Columbus's written response to an invitation to come to court from the rulers of Spain, to which country the explorer has been brought back in chains in 1500 from the third expedition to America. The actual verse epistle covers a mere sixteen pages and faithfully follows the data of the life and voyages of Columbus given in the Précis historique sur Colomb, which forms by far the greatest portion of the work. In Carteau's Le songe de Colomb,¹² the hero, who has just landed on Hispaniola, is visited in his sleep by the tutelary spirit of the New World. The latter reveals the future lot of the native population and presents as fact Carteau's theories that the colonization of America was economically debilitating for the European powers concerned.

The literary popularity of Columbus in the period from 1745 to 1809 is, therefore, established beyond question but his was not the only American adventure which invited celebration in epic. The chronicles of the predominantly Spanish successes in the New World offered subjects in sufficient number and variety to cater for the individual tastes and talents of any would-be epicist. It is not without value, consequently, before proceeding to examine the poems themselves, to consider the reasons offered by the poets who feature in this chapter for their particular choice of subject and the grounds on which they disqualified other potential candidates among

11. Abbé L'Espinasse de Langeac, Colomb dans les fers, à Ferdinand et Isabelle, après la découverte de l'Amérique; épître (Paris: Jombert, 1782).

12. F. Carteau, Le songe de Colomb, en vers (Bordeaux: Moreau, 1809).

the galaxy of New World heroes.

Madame Du Boccage gives a direct and comprehensive evaluation of the comparative merits of probably the three greatest adventurers, Cortes, Pizarro and Columbus.¹³ While she admits that a poem about the New World would inevitably seem to suggest Cortes as its subject, Madame Du Boccage argues that a closer examination of the conquest of Mexico reveals that the success of Cortes was largely due to the weakness of Montezuma. But if Cortes is dismissed virtually on the grounds that his adversary was not of epic stature, Pizarro is judged equally unsuitable because of his excessive cruelty. Her choice devolves, therefore, on Columbus, because he overcame great navigational difficulties, subdued hostile native peoples and generally blazed a trail that others were to follow.

Madame Du Boccage's praise of Columbus is echoed in the following appraisal of the great explorer's achievements by Le Suire:

La Découverte du Nouveau Monde, la plus fameuse qu'on ait faite, la seule importante peut-être qui ne soit pas due au hazard, est sans doute un grand événement. Un nouvel Océan franchi, un Continent qu'on ne soupçonnait pas imaginé, et découvert par un homme, une espèce de Pendant donné, pour ainsi dire, à notre Hémisphère; voilà de quoi frapper les esprits.

Bourgeois¹⁵ does not give any explicit reason for celebrating the discoverer of America but his choice of theme might be explained in part by the fact that he wrote his poem in Santo Domingo,¹⁶ a city on Hispaniola which had close associations with Columbus. However,

13. A.-M. Du Boccage, La Colombiade, ou la foi portée au Nouveau Monde. Poème (Paris: Desaint & Saillant, 1756), Introduction, pp. v-vii.

14. R.-M. Le Suire, Le Nouveau Monde, ou Christophe Colomb. Poème. Nouvelle édition, entièrement refondue et corrigée, 2 vols. (Paris: L'Auteur, an VIII), Préface, I, v. Details of the first edition are: R.-M. Le Suire, Le Nouveau Monde. Poème, 2 vols. (Paris: Quillau, 1781). Despite the claims made for the second edition, few material alterations are evident, except that the number of cantos is reduced by two to twenty-four.

15. N.-L. Bourgeois, Christophe Colomb, ou l'Amérique découverte, poème, 2 vols. (Paris: Moutard, 1773).

16. Bourgeois, Préface, I, iv.

the Christian atmosphere that pervades the whole work would seem to suggest that Bourgeois was principally concerned with selecting a protagonist who was morally worthy and that Columbus came nearest to fulfilling his requirements.¹⁷

The claims of Cortes to be a legitimate epic hero were advanced in 1752 by Boesnier¹⁸ in an argument which is diametrically opposed to the thesis Madame Du Boccage put forward four years later. For Boesnier : " Il n'a jamais paru de sujet plus digne de l'Epopée que la conquête du Mexique ; tout y respire l'élévation & l'intérêt."¹⁹ Boesnier's implication that, in view of the little or no military opposition they met, the exploits of the early adventurers in the New World do not constitute proper epic material - an implication which, of course, runs counter to Madame Du Boccage's subsequent denigration of Cortes's triumph on the same grounds - is intended to highlight the totally different and exceptional nature of his own subject-matter : " L'entreprise de Cortès, les traverses qu'elle a éprouvées, les moyens qui ont contribué au succès, surpassent les forces & la prudence humaines." 20

Boesnier's enthusiasm for the conqueror of the Aztecs is shared by Roure, who waxes lyrical in praise of a hero who outshines those

17. The text contains scathing references to both Cortes and Pizarro. See Bourgeois II, 214-15 for the former and II, 219-21 for the latter.
18. Boesnier, Le Mexique conquis, 2 vols. (Paris: Desaint & Saillant, 1752).
19. Boesnier, Discours, I, iii.
20. Boesnier, Discours, I, vi-vii.

immortalized by the great exponents of the art of epic: "Cortez a toutes les qualités qui constituent un héros; son courage, sa magnanimité, ses exploits incroyables, ses périls inouïables, ses longues traverses l'élèvent au dessus de tous ceux qu'ont célébré Homère, le Tasse et Virgile."²¹

For Marmontel, however, "Cortès a détruit sa conquête & déshonoré ses exploits "²² and he is equally unable to approve of Columbus, for "l'homme étonnant à qui l'Espagne a dû le Nouveau Monde, Colomb, s'est dégradé par une trahison"²³

This preliminary investigation of the motives underlying the selection of New World heroes by the various authors leads naturally into the detailed analysis of the poems themselves. It seems advisable to begin with an examination of the epics treating Columbus, both because of their greater number and because an improved perspective is obtained, if the poems are considered in chronological order of subject-matter.

Du Boccage, La Colombiade, 1756²⁴

It is in Du Boccage's poem that Columbus first appears as the

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21. P. Roure, La Cortésade, ou le Nouveau Monde, poème en douze chants, enrichi de notes historiques, géographiques et d'histoire naturelle sur le Nouveau Monde (Paris: Renouard, 1809), Préface, p.2.
22. J.-F. Marmontel, Les Incas ou la destruction de l'empire de Pérou, 2 vols. (Paris: Lacombe, 1777), II, 295.
23. Marmontel, II, 242. Discussion of Marmontel's own choice of subject will best be deferred until later, because Les Incas is an explicitly polemical work and his criteria for selection are necessarily somewhat different from those indicated above.
24. Anne-Marie Du Boccage (1710-1802) was one of the foremost female literary figures of her day. A translator and adapter of foreign poets, her verse tragedy, Les Amazones, was performed at the Académie Française in 1749. After the publication of the Colombiade she became a member of many leading European academies. See G.G. Mark, Une femme de lettres au XVIIIe siècle: Anne-Marie Du Boccage (Paris: Champion, 1927).

principal subject of a French epic. Madame Du Boccage was not unfamiliar with the genre, for in 1748 she had published Le paradis terrestre, a free adaptation in verse of Milton's great epic. The demands of original epic composition were obviously of an entirely different order, however, and Madame Du Boccage modestly acknowledged that she suffered from a particular handicap : " Je sens que mon entreprise est au-dessus des forces de mon sexe."²⁵ So it is in a spirit of feminine solidarity that she makes the following appeal to Calliope :

Muse, viens de ton sexe étendre encor l'empire :
 A mes accords tremblans, joins l'éclat de ta lyre :
 Montre ici qu'au Parnasse, aussi bien qu'à Paphos,²⁶
 Nos chants, chéris des Dieux, illustrent les Héros.

In La Colombiade, which is divided into ten cantos, Madame Du Boccage conforms strictly to the most traditional epic pattern. The poem opens with a standard proposition and invocation and further follows the recognized procedure in that it begins in medias res , with Columbus waiting for daybreak before landing on an unspecified fertile island. The events leading up to the enterprise and the story of the epoch-making voyage are later related by Columbus to the venerable chief of the island and his daughter, Zama. The main narrative of the poem covers a relatively short period of time for, as the sub-title indicates, it is the coming of the Christian message to America that forms the action proper and the duration of this latter can thus be limited by Madame Du Boccage to the final part of Columbus's first outward voyage.²⁷ The element of romance,

25. Du Boccage, Introduction, p.vii. Her fear was justified in the opinion of at least one critic, for La Serre comments : "En lisant cet ouvrage, on sent que l'épopée est au dessus d'un sexe qui a dans l'esprit plus de douceur que de force." La Serre, p.392.

26. Du Boccage, p.3.

27. It should be noted, however, that Madame Du Boccage does not hesitate to include in her poem incidents of a dramatic nature, which occurred during the course of subsequent voyages. Many of the events narrated are, however, purely fictitious.

which Virgil introduced into the Aeneid with the Dido episode and which is particularly prominent in Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata, appears here when Columbus, under the spell of the Indian god of Love, becomes captivated by the beautiful Zama. Recalled to duty by his men and strengthened by an angel sent specifically from heaven to encourage him, the reluctant Columbus finally leaves and sets sail to discover Hispaniola. It is here that the more properly heroic events take place and the poem concludes with a great battle, the successful outcome of which for the Europeans is synonymous with the establishment of the Christian faith in the New World.

Madame Du Boccage's insistence on the religious aspect of the discovery of the New World obviously has a direct and decisive bearing on the character of Columbus himself as conceived in the poem. Indeed, the dominant feature of Du Boccage's Columbus is his firm belief that he is fulfilling divine will. Not, however, that his premonition of the existence of the New World is given any supernatural origin. According to Madame Du Boccage, Columbus's beliefs were based on scientific knowledge, intellectual curiosity and the authority of ancient writers. But Columbus does receive a tangible sign of heavenly approval for his projects when, at a time of strong opposition to his proposals, a voice from heaven encourages and reassures him.

Columbus can, therefore, face up to setbacks with the fortitude of one who expects his earthly labours to be rewarded in the afterlife :

Des maux que nous souffrons la palme est dans les Cieux.²⁸

28. Du Boccage, p.4.

This explorer is not motivated by a thirst for military renown , for his is the more mature realization that

... la gloire

Est le prix de la paix plus que de la victoire.²⁹

Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that Du Boccage's Columbus, though pacific, is non-combative. In times of dire peril, he is cast in the heroic mould:

Colomb, le glaive en main, au front des siens s'avance,
Et détruit dans sa course autant de bataillons³⁰
Que la faux de Cérès renverse de moissons ...

The character of Columbus is only partly responsible for the non-military emphasis in the poem, for Madame Du Boccage evidently feels a certain apprehension about venturing into descriptions of physical conflict :

Je tremble au seul récit des maux que fait la Guerre;
Comment peindre aux combats Mars armé du tonnerre?
Loin de cicatriser son front plein de fureur,
Mes couleurs, de ses traits adouciroient l'horreur.³¹

This reluctance to depict martial strife was obviously overcome by the dictates of the genre and the aesthetic advantage of using a military victory to symbolize the triumph of Christianity over the powers of darkness. Hence, Madame Du Boccage invents a great war on Hispaniola, which arises out of Columbus's refusal to accept the hand of the fictitious Queen Vascona who, in pique at her

29. Du Boccage, p.86.

30. Du Boccage, p.140.

31. Du Boccage, p. 131.

rejection, organizes a powerful coalition against him. Vascona is a despotic ruler, so that Columbus appears to be leading a virtual crusade for liberty. The grounds on which Columbus rejects Vascona's offer reflect, incidentally, to his credit. Vascona offers herself to Columbus, because she believes him to be a god and she hopes to share his worldly power and his immortality. But Columbus disclaims divinity and further declares that the Christian ethic makes marriage with an unbeliever impossible. The descriptions of the resultant battle are, in spite of Madame Du Boccage's misgivings and the alleged disadvantage at which her sex puts her, perfectly adequate but she excels in the enumeration of Vascona's troops, which gives free rein to her imaginative powers :

Du port de Mayana d'autres Antropophages
Viennent du champ de Mars affronter les orages;
Des Squelettes humains leur servent de Drapeaux.
Sans chef, sans loix, sans culte, ils vivent tous égaux.
Et dans les Rochers creux qu'ils prennent pour retraite,
D'une femme sans choix leur flamme est satisfaite.
Pour les suivre à la chasse, au sein d'un arbrisseau,
A ses fils nouveaux nés elle forme un berceau;
Et l'oiseau, que sa flèche atteint près de la nuë, 32
Meurt glacé d'un poison plus vif que la ciguë.

As may have been surmised from the extracts so far quoted, the text of La Colombiade abounds in allusions to classical literature and mythology. The followers of Vascona- " Cette Circé de l'Inde" - are described thus :

Les troupes d'Enchanteurs qui suivent l'Amazone 33
Forment près de son char la Cour de Tisiphone ...

32. Du Boccage, p.132.

33. Du Boccage, p.135.

Poetic vocabulary is explained for the uninitiated. The line

Dès que Vesper montra ses rayons lumineux

merits the following gloss at the foot of the page: "Vesper ou Hespérus, est la Planette de Vénus quand elle est Occidentale : on l'appelle aussi l'étoile du Berger, parce qu'elle paroît le soir à l'heure où l'on ramene les troupeaux." ³⁴

In fact, the whole poem is pervaded by an atmosphere of erudition. A host of recondite footnotes discuss, among other things, the technique of gold filigree work and the manufacture of glass.³⁵ The author misses no opportunity to display her encyclopedic knowledge. In Chant ii, Columbus enlightens the rustic Zama and her father with a thumbnail sketch of the history and civilisations of the ancient world, to which these simple folk listen with exemplary patience and innate good manners. Later, in Chant ix, the martyred Zama herself becomes the vehicle for Madame Du Boccage's learning; when God sends her to unveil the future to Columbus. Madame Du Boccage has earlier invested Columbus's enterprise with a decidedly European flavour, by supposing that English, French, Spanish and Italian noblemen were numbered in his company and this fabrication now serves as a convenient excuse for tracing a panorama of European history up to contemporary times.

It is in Zama's prophecy, moreover, that perhaps the most extreme example of intellectual display in the poem occurs. Madame Du Boccage is concerned to convey the cultural wealth of France in the reign of Louis XIV and adopts the unnecessarily oblique procedure

34. Du Boccage, p.136, note (q).

35. Du Boccage, p.29, notes (x) and (y).

of using the great names of antiquity to indicate the leading figures in the arts in this period :

Chez Louis, un Sophocle(x), un nouvel Amphion(y),
Un rival d'Eurypide(z), un autre Anacréon(a)
Surpassent en talens l'Antiquité profane:
Demosthène(b) renaît, Esope(c), Aristophane(d);
Vitruve(e), Praxitele(f), un Zeugis(g), des Saphos(h);
De ce regne éclatant consacrent les Héros.

The inevitable notes at the bottom of the page indicate respectively :

(x) Corneille; (y) Lully; (z) Racine; (a) Guillaume Amfrie; (b) Bossuet; (c) La Fontaine; (d) Molière; (e) Perrault; (f) François Girardon; (g) Charles Le Brun; (h) Mme Deshoulières and Mme Dacier.³⁶

The overriding impression here is of an exercise in intellectual gymnastics more appropriate to the proceedings of an eighteenth-century salon than to a sweeping epic narrative. The whole section sounds incongruous coming, as it does, from the mouth of an uneducated native girl, even if she has been made Columbus's guardian angel as a reward for being the first inhabitant of the New World to abjure idolatry in favour of the Christian faith.

For the modern reader, La Colombiade suffers from a surfeit of classical reminiscences, is excessively abstract in character and too frequently provides a platform for the undeniable erudition of its author. At the time of its publication, however, it won a great deal of critical acclaim. The Journal encyclopédique proclaimed : " Il y a dans ce Poëme beaucoup d'intérêt, & des incidens qui attachent continuellement le Lecteur. On y trouve une imagination vive, un esprit qui raisonne sa marche, chose très-rare!"³⁷

The same month, a reviewer in the Journal des sçavans found in it " ... une expression forte, une versification claire & aisée, une

36. Du Boccage, p.165,

37. Journal encyclopédique, March 1757, p.136.

narration toujours libre, & souvent embellie par la fécondité des fictions, & par des détails rapides et heureux." ³⁸ The poem also enjoyed considerable commercial success, running to three editions in Paris and being translated into Spanish, English, German and Italian.³⁹

Bourgeois, Christophe Colomb, 1773 ⁴⁰

After Madame Du Boccage's Colombiade, the discoverer of America next appeared as the main protagonist of an epic in Bourgeois' Christophe Colomb and it is unlikely that any epic poem in eighteenth century France - indeed, in any place, at any time - was conceived and composed in circumstances less appropriate to the true spirit of the genre. In his prefatory remarks, Bourgeois confesses apologetically that the work owes its origin to boredom rather than to any transcendent creative impulse and was written to combat tedium while he was resident in Santo Domingo, on Hispaniola.⁴¹ His admission that he has opted for this unusual form of antidote in full knowledge that he is no real poet⁴² is followed by the revelation that he is far from being even an habitual versifier.⁴³ It is not

38. Journal des sçavans, March 1757, p.85.

39. Mark, p.166.

40. Nicolas-Louis Bourgeois (c.1710-c.1776) returned to his native La Rochelle to study history, after practising as a lawyer in Poitiers for some years. He published his researches in a number of journals, including the Mémoires de Trévoux. He then spent some thirty years in Santo Domingo before returning home. He left an enormous quantity of unpublished material.

41. Bourgeois, Préface, I, iii-iv.

42. Bourgeois, Préface, I, iii.

43. Bourgeois, Préface, I, xii.

surprising, therefore, that with his poem scarcely begun, Bourgeois should exclaim :

Muse, redis-moi donc ce qu'il faut que je fasse,
 Pour soutenir un ton dont mon esprit se lasse?
 La course est encore longue ! &, sans doute, ma voix,
 Trop foible pour suffire à ce glorieux choix,
 N'arrivera jamais au bout de la carrière
 Où tu vois que m'engage une imprudence altière.⁴⁴

But, despite Bourgeois' fears, the poem fills nearly five hundred pages and concludes in Chant *xxiv* with Columbus, who has returned to Spain with the news of his discovery, seated in triumph between Ferdinand and Isabella. The expedition does not actually weigh anchor, however, until the sixth canto and prior to this Bourgeois deals at some length with the background to the enterprise. He holds a personal theory concerning the existence and discovery of the New World, which has a decidedly religious basis and which is expressed succinctly in the preface : " Que Dieu sépara la partie moderne de l'Univers pour savoir si les hommes s'y conserveroient meilleurs, mais que s'étant convaincu qu'ils étoient tout aussi méchans, il leur permit alors de nous connoître & de vivre avec nous; se réservant de les punir, ou de les récompenser, selon qu'ils se comporteroient bien ou mal."⁴⁵

This argument is obviously of some importance to Bourgeois for, after a conventional proem, it is used to open his narrative. The inaugural scene is thus set in heaven and shows God, who has witnessed the corruption of the peoples of the New World, pronouncing his judgement on America :

44. Bourgeois, I, 36.

45. Bourgeois, Préface , I, xi-xii.

... L'homme est par-tout le même;
 Abandonnons l'espece à son erreur extrême,
 Elle ne vaut aucun de mes soins bienfaisants:
 Je la livre au plutôt à ses affreux penchans.
 Qu'ils se connoissent tous, & se revoient ensemble,
 Puisqu'un coeur corrompu les lie & les rassemble:
 Je ne les retiens plus, ils ont leur liberté;
 Qu'ils suivent désormais leur propre volonté.
 Maîtres du châtiment ou de la récompense,
 Leurs actions un jour régleront ma vengeance. ⁴⁶

As a result of God's decision, Columbus is chosen to receive
 divine inspiration and knowledge of the New World, because

Colomb avoit pour lui de dignes actions:
 Né noble, généreux, bien faisant, estimable, ⁴⁷
 Pour ses ennemis même il étoit respectable.

He is made aware of his divinely-ordained mission in a way which is strongly reminiscent of the biblical account of the annunciation and which also draws on one of the legends surrounding the historical Columbus. During Columbus' lifetime, a story gained considerable currency that it was an unknown pilot who, shortly before his death, revealed to Columbus the existence of transatlantic lands, which he himself had discovered by accident, after being blown off course by a storm. In Bourgeois' version, the old man whom Columbus finds lying on the sea-shore is an angel, who has been commanded by God to assume that form. Bourgeois even attempts to forestall any possible scepticism on the part of the reader about the real identity of the old man with this explanation :

Car ces Êtres divins, pures intelligences,
 Prennent, quand il leur plaît, différentes substances;
 Leurs corps aériens, subtilement formés,
 Ressemblent quelquefois à des corps animés ... ⁴⁸

The role of the old man, whom Columbus receives into his house

46. Bourgeois, I,4.

47. Bourgeois, I,11.

48. Bourgeois, I,7.

as a friend, appears to be to instil into the hero those religious and moral truths and precepts, which Columbus himself is to impart to the peoples of America. After a suitable period of instruction, Columbus is informed that his virtue has found favour in heaven and that

Tu peux être, en un mot, Apôtre & Conquérant.⁴⁹

Columbus has great difficulty in believing the promised change in his fortunes and, in an obvious parallel with the story of Moses, the old man predicts that, as punishment for his excessive incredulity, Columbus will not give his name to the land he will discover. The old man is then transfigured before Columbus' eyes and departs, leaving him in a mood of exalted resignation to God's will :

Mon Dieu!-je suis à vous, disposez donc de moi; 50
Je ne suivrai jamais que votre sainte Loi !

The early pages of Christophe Colomb foreshadow Bourgeois' considerable recourse to the merveilleux but the use made in the poem of supernatural intervention is not restricted to heavenly agents alone. The difficulties Columbus experiences in arousing interest in his project (Chants iv and v chronicle his attempts to interest the courts of Europe in his enterprise) and the more positive dangers he faces are directly attributed by Bourgeois to the machinations of Satan and his minions. It would seem that they are not able to alter God's decrees but it does lie within their power to delay the discovery of the New World. That this latter is done with a view to self-preservation, becomes evident in the fourth canto, where the celestial scene which opened the poem is counterbalanced by a council of infernal spirits in hell. Satan,

49. Bourgeois, I, 20.

50. Bourgeois, I, 31.

who presides over the meeting, is clearly modeled on the Miltonic figure. He shares the same inordinate pride, the same burning sense of God's injustice and he sees in the discovery of America, which is wholly given to devil-worship, a new sign of God's implacable hatred :

Notre persécuteur renouvelle l'affront.
 Que sa haine autre fois imprima sur mon front.

 Rappelez-vous ce jour qui m'est toujours présent !
 Cette funeste époque à jamais déplorable,
 Où d'un tyran cruel la haine impitoyable,
 Pour n'avoir pas voulu subir un joug amer,
 Déshonora ma main par ce sceptre de fer;
 Moi , plus digne que lui de tenir dans les miennes 51
 Le signe impérial qu'il porte dans les siennes!

Satan then exhorts his forces to action and one of the most active in his service is Discord :

Cette hydre qui sait prendre autant qu'il lui convient, 52
 De formes, de couleurs, & que rien ne retient.

But even when infernal interference is not in evidence, other factors may be at work to thwart the plans of good men. The immediate reason for the historical revolt of Columbus' crew is given in the poem as boredom and inactivity but, the author suggests, the fundamental cause stems from original sin :

C'étoit encore un fruit de cet arbre fatal
 Qui naît & prend racine au séjour infernal,
 Et d'où sortent sans cesse, & les maux, & les peines, 53
 Que répand Lucifer sur les races humaines.

The inspiration for the exploits these men achieve in America is provided by their leader. Columbus is filled with a love and reverence for Christianity which, unlike Madame Du Boccage's hero

51. Bourgeois, I, 49-50.

52. Bourgeois, II, 80.

53. Bourgeois, I, 103.

(who, despite his piety, makes little or no attempt to spread the Gospel himself), he tries to share with the natives he encounters. Whereas the Columbus of Madame Du Boccage's poem discourses learnedly on secular subjects, his counterpart in the epic under discussion devotes a major speech to the nature of Christianity and to biblical history. Bourgeois dispenses with the need for an interpreter for, before he embarks on his evangelizing talk with the native chief, Caonabo, his Columbus is transfigured and receives the quasi-apostolic gift of speaking and understanding a foreign tongue. Columbus displays a puritanical attitude to the pleasures of the flesh offered to the Spaniards at the court of Caonabo but, like his predecessor in La Colombiade, he becomes involved with a beautiful native girl and has to be reminded of his duty by a heavenly spirit.

The character of Columbus is directly dissected for the reader in a sustained allegory towards the end of the poem (Chants xxiii and xxiv). In the grounds of a magnificent palace on an otherwise deserted island, Columbus meets the female figures of Truth, Religion and Justice. The first two goddesses are flattering in their evaluation of Columbus but the third sternly declares :

Mais il n'a point assez réprimé dans son coeur, 54
Le funeste levain qui nuit à la candeur.

Columbus becomes even more depressed, when Truth reveals to him the past, present and future history of America and paints a horrific picture of the greed, avarice and cruelty which will invade the country with future colonists :

Ces Pays verront donc régner, avec le vice,
 Tous les autres forfaits, la fraude, l'artifice,
 L'iniquité sensible à des coeurs généreux,
 Et l'injuste pouvoir qui fait les malheureux,
 Dont on abusera contre tout homme sage
 Obligé par le sort d'y montrer son visage.⁵⁵

It is possibly because of these dire prognostications that the poem ends somewhat abruptly. The return voyage is only briefly described and the landing in Spain and reception at the court are despatched in little more than a score of lines. It would seem that Bourgeois sensed that a prolonged panegyric would not ring true after the revelation of the results of Columbus's exploit. Even so, the final word on the discovery of America in the poem appears excessively negative and tends to remove any justification for the author's expending nearly twelve thousand alexandrines celebrating the event. Columbus is commenting on his achievement in revealing the New World to Europe and the poem ends on this gloomy note :

Il prédit qu'on verroit sous un Ciel si maudit,⁵⁶
 Les vices honorés, les vertus sans crédit.

However, the principal weakness of Christophe Colomb does not lie in this decrying of the action, nor in Bourgeois' adherence to strict chronological order in his narrative. The major defect of the poem is to be found in the style, which is prosaic in the extreme. The almost total lack of poetic devices creates the impression that the author is using rhymed prose as his medium and the fact that a large proportion of the text is given over to factual and somewhat arid discourses by Columbus, contributes to the pedestrian tone. The following passage, in which Columbus

55. Bourgeois, II, 254.

56. Bourgeois, II, 266.

brushes aside the thanks of the old man he has rescued, is a typical example of the predominant poverty of the style :

... Je suis assez payé,
Interrompt Colomb, en vous étant utile;
Ce n'est qu'un sentiment naturel & facile:
Il naît, dans tous les coeurs, de la compassion.
Ne m'en ayez ainsi-nulle obligation.
Levez-vous, & marchons vers mon humble demeure :
Venez, elle est à vous, disposez-en sur l'heure. 57

It is difficult to be charitable in the face of such glaring poetic inadequacy, especially when it occurs in what contemporary opinion held to be the highest literary form, but a benevolent reviewer in the Journal des beaux-arts et des sciences managed to find reason for indulgence in Bourgeois' avowed intention to expound the great Christian truths in his poem⁵⁸: " Des intentions aussi pures doivent tout faire passer. Si sa maniere d'écrire ne captive pas le suffrage des Lecteurs délicats, le but qu'il s'est proposé en écrivant lui méritera du moins l'estime & l'indulgence des honnêtes gens." 59

Le Suire, Le Nouveau Monde, an VIII⁶⁰

Le Suire is the third and final poet to devote an epic to Columbus in the period covered by this thesis. It was, perhaps, this knowledge that persuaded him to depart from the pattern followed by

57. Bourgeois, I, 12.

58. Bourgeois, Préface, I, vi.

59. Journal des beaux-arts et des sciences, September 1773, pp. 440-41.

60. Sometime tutor of the prince of Parma, Robert-Martin Le Suire (1737-1815.) later lived by his pen. He was an exceedingly prolific author of works of only mediocre value, many frivolous but quite successful in their time. Most famous was L'aventurier français, a novel first published in 1782 and to which Le Suire added numerous sequels.

his predecessors and consequently to infringe one of the most fundamental rules of epic, as they were ordained by neoclassical theorists. For, as has been seen, both Madame Du Boccage and Bourgeois confined themselves to celebrating the discovery of America by Columbus and properly excluded all subsequent events in his career. Unlike them, however, Le Suire does not compose his poem around a single, central exploit and the narrative follows the fortunes of Columbus up to his death. Le Suire's inclusive policy and his seeming unwillingness to sacrifice material provided by the later life of Columbus inevitably means that his poem violates the rule requiring unity of action.⁶¹

Le Suire also fails, apparently, to appreciate the particular spirit that was traditionally assigned to epic and was generally held to animate the central character in particular. As his poem opens, the force of the proclamation of heroic deeds is vitiated by references to their disastrous consequences and by the obtrusive moral judgement of the author:

Des hommes, franchissant les abîmes des mers,
Ont trouvé, pour leur perte, un second Univers;
Et, sous de nouveaux Cieux, par des travaux sublimes,
Ont transplanté nos arts, nos malheurs et nos crimes.
D'un hémisphère à l'autre étendant leur fureur,
Dignes d'être admirés en inspirant l'horreur,
De leurs exploits sanglans ils ont porté la peine;
Mais le plus grand effort de l'industrie humaine
Est devenu bientôt, pour ce globe affligé,
Le plus grand des malheurs où le sort l'ait plongé.⁶²

The very proposition, which is allegedly suggested to the author

61. The point is made forcibly by a contemporary reviewer, who suggests that the poem would more correctly be entitled " ... les Aventures de Colomb, ce qui n'auroit pu faire un poème épique, parce que l'unité d'action nous paroît essentielle à l'épopée, parce que ni une histoire, ni un roman ne peuvent faire le sujet d'un poème épique." Journal encyclopédique, February 1782, p.450.

62. Le Suire, I,2.

by the ghost of Columbus himself, strikes a note of doom and regret :

Chante, dit-il, ma gloire, époque de douleurs,
Et, sur mes vains exploits, fais répandre des pleurs.
D'un projet si riant quelle fin désastreuse !
Sans mes travaux, la Terre eut été plus heureuse. 63

In each of the earlier Columbus epics, the hero is not left unaware of the pernicious results of his discovery but the revelation is made late in the work and, in the case of Madame Du Boccage, at least, he is explicitly absolved from any blame.⁶⁴ Le Suire, however, inexplicably sends his Columbus a prophetic dream of the future conflict between the two continents before land is sighted, so that his moment of triumph is clouded by premonitions of disaster. When Columbus formally takes possession of the New World, he does so remorsefully and he alone is unable to share in the general rejoicing :

Mais Colomb, s'égarant sur ces fatales rives,
Croit entendre gémir des ombres fugitives ;
Il croit voir sur le bord des flots de sang couler,⁶⁵
Et la terre en courroux sous ses pieds s'écrouler.

The self-reproach already evident at this early stage in the poem becomes outright self-condemnation at the end when, in his deathbed confession, Columbus exclaims :

O Rois ! & courtisans ! apprenez tous mes crimes ;
Le plus grand, je le vois, fut de franchir les mers, 66
Pour aller découvrir un nouvel Univers.

This continual denigration of the events narrated in the poem is completely at variance with the essential mood of neoclassical

63. Le Suire, I,2.

64. When Columbus bitterly regrets that he discovered America, he is rebuked by his dead lover :

Du Ciel, reprit Zama, respecte les desseins.
Quand tu répands sa loi, plains l'erreur du vulgaire
Qui transforme en poison ce baume salutaire. Du Boccage, p.157.

65. Le Suire, I,29.

66. Le Suire, II, 136.

epic and, despite the many references to the admirable personal qualities of Columbus, ends by debasing his heroic status.

Columbus's credibility as a hero of true epic proportions is still further compromised in the latter part of the poem where, instead of rising above the obstacles that are habitually sent to enervate the heroic protagonist, he is shown as the helpless victim of base ingratitude and the malice of lesser men. That it was Le Suire's specific intention to move the reader to sympathy for Columbus, can be inferred from this prefatory observation: "Les persécutions mortelles qu'a souffertes cet homme célèbre, ce prix ordinaire des grands travaux; voilà de quoi toucher les coeurs."⁶⁷ The insistence on Columbus's patient acceptance of disgrace and unmerited imprisonment and on the extent of his fall achieves this aim but the very fact that Columbus arouses the reader's pity makes him a tragic, rather than an epic figure for the majority of eighteenth-century theorists of epic.⁶⁸ More appropriate would have been, perhaps, an attempt to inspire admiration for a man, whose submission to fate was itself not devoid of heroism. As it stands, however, Le Suire's Columbus differs radically from the contemporary conception of the epic hero and his exploits.

The chronological narrative of Le Nouveau Monde opens, as indeed it closes, in prison, with Columbus about to meet the maiden who makes intermittent appearances throughout the poem. Clémence⁶⁹ Isaure is replacing her sick mother in the charitable task of

67. Le Suire, Préface, I, v.

68. The effect epic was to produce on the reader and the consequent nature of the dénouement are discussed above, pp. 59-63.

69. This lady revived the Jeux Floraux de Toulouse in the sixteenth century and donated a property to house the college. According to Le Suire (Préface, I, xx), rumour had it that she lived with Columbus.

visiting state prisoners and she immediately falls in love with Columbus. Although the latter feels the attraction of life with her, he postpones marriage until after he has discovered the world he is sure exists on the other side of the Atlantic. Unknown to him, Clémence and her mother embark on his ship and she accompanies him on his voyages in the disguise of a young hermit. Clémence reveals her identity to Columbus only when he is on his deathbed and they are finally married in prison just before he expires.

The relationship between Columbus and Clémence is completely devoid of any emotional interest.⁷⁰ and the maiden herself is little more than an abstraction.⁷¹ The key to her existence within the poem is contained in a question she herself asks Columbus, when he talks enthusiastically of his proposed voyages of exploration :

... Hélas ! qu'est-il besoin,
Pour trouver le bonheur, de le chercher si loin ?⁷²

The love-theme is designed, therefore, to illustrate the moral that happiness can be sought afar, when it often lies unrecognized within the grasp of the seeker. In the context of the present work, such a moral can only be interpreted as being detrimental to the adventure for which Columbus opts.

Clémence Isaure is further linked with one of the episodes which abound in Le Nouveau Monde. Unable to communicate with Columbus, the natives eventually bring as an intermediary a tall,

70. The reason can be found in Le Suire's comment that this love can be attributed to Columbus without compromising his dignity! See Le Suire, Préface, I,xix.

71. The author himself confesses as much : " L'amante, que je donne au Héros, est un de ces Êtres bienfaisans et purs, qui ne peuvent guères exister que dans l'imagination." Le Suire, Préface, I,xix-xx.

72. Le Suire, I,10.

sunburned European, clad in the skin of a wild boar. He recites his tale in Chant v, disclosing that he is one Rémond, a descendant of the counts of Toulouse, who has spent some fifteen years wandering in foreign lands, trying to forget the horrors of the infamous Albigensian crusade. Haunted by the conviction that he has seen his wife and twin children burned alive, the escape he seeks in (presumably natural) death continually eludes him. It comes as no surprise to the reader, however, when Rémond discovers that his family is alive and well in the shape of Isaure, her mother and her brother, Alvarès.

More successful than the Rémond story is a pastoral episode, which extends over more than two cantos and bears a striking resemblance to the tale which was immortalized by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre less than a decade later. On an island paradise, which was separated from the mainland by an earthquake fifteen years previously, Columbus meets Éona, who has been abandoned there by her lover, and her daughter Zilna. They are grief-stricken at the disappearance of Tindal, an adolescent, who was fathered on Éona's now-deceased friend by this same lover. Tindal eventually returns to the island - where Columbus is wont to take relaxation from the cares of leadership - and it transpires that he is the young Indian, whom Columbus has saved from being burned at the stake for refusing to bow to a crucifix. The most attractive section of the episode is, predictably, the description of the awakening love of the adolescents. This latter is treated very much in the preromantic vein and a further reminder of the growth of the movement in eighteenth-century France comes in the fact that their growing attachment evokes a similar response in nature :

Par leurs chants mutuels, par leurs douces caresses,
 Des oiseaux, dans les airs, s'exprimaient leurs tendresses,
 Et, sous des bois touffus, des béliers amoureux
 Poursuivaient les brebis dociles à leurs feux. 73

Up to this point, the episode is simple and charming but in Chant xvi it becomes contrived and needlessly complicated. At the end of the marriage ceremony joining the two lovers and which is performed by Columbus, Tindal is accidentally wounded by a poisoned arrow shot by his long-lost father, who has been bribed to assassinate Columbus by the latter's enemies. There follows a series of melodramatic events, which are narrated none too clearly and tax both the concentration and patience of the reader, in which Tindal, Zilna and Columbus lie successively at the brink of death. The episode ends with the three natives being rescued from prison by the disguised Clémence and Columbus being sent back to Spain as a prisoner by the jealous Bovadil.

The suspicion that such involved episodes are misplaced in a work of the nature of Le Nouveau Monde is confirmed by the number of extravagant and unlikely adventures that befall Columbus, when he becomes separated from his crew. Columbus's recital of his experiences to his brother, Barthelemi, fills Chants xi, xii and xiii and includes an embroidered version of the story of Androcles and the lion. Such inane matter would seem to be more suited to a romanesque novel than to the genre which contemporary critical thought almost unanimously hailed as the most lofty of poetic forms.

In addition to the considerable use made in the poem of purely fictitious material, it must also be noted that Le Suire attributes to Columbus certain exploits - the discovery of the courts of

73. Le Suire, II,39.

Mexico and Peru, for example - for which the credit belongs to others. Strict chronological exactitude is disregarded and events are included which are not recorded by history but which lie within the bounds of remote possibility. Among the most significant examples of these latter are Columbus's alleged meeting with Zizim, brother of Sultan Bajazet, his encounter with Amerigo Vespucci and the appearance at the explorer's death-bed of the Pope, Louis XII of France and Ferdinand of Aragon. 74

Although it will not be found in any history book, Le Suire's account of the death of Columbus is unlikely ever to be surpassed for its sheer sense of occasion. The marriage with Clémence is followed by the entry of Louis XII, who has secured Columbus's release from prison but, alas, too late, and by that of other European potentates. Columbus then confesses his crimes, nearly all of which are connected with his discovery of the New World. The Pope, who bears the last sacrament, arrives next and precedes Éona, Zilna and Tindal. After proffering advice to the assembled throng, Columbus finally expires in a veritable apotheosis :

On croit voir, sur son front animé d'un saint zèle,
Un rayon de l'éclat dont Dieu même étincelle.
Son corps paraît céleste, et devient radieux,
Le Ciel même est ouvert et brille dans ses yeux. 75

His passing is marked by a cosmic manifestation of God's power :

La Terre a tressailli, l'Eternel a passé ... 76

In the face of such imaginative power, it is refreshing to

74. Almost unbelievably, Le Suire makes this claim: "Malgré ces fictions, on se flatte qu'il y a pour le moins autant de vérité dans ce Poëme, que dans beaucoup d'Histoires, qu'on donne tous les jours pour vraies." Le Suire, Préface, I, xx.

75. Le Suire, II, 144.

76. Le Suire, II, 146.

record that Le Suire is extremely restrained in his use of the marvellous. The reason for this rather unexpected self-denial is found in the preface, in which the author complains bitterly that the French insistence on vraisemblance in literature, together with the contemporary lack of religious faith, have forced him largely to exclude the traditional supernatural.⁷⁷ He does, however, occasionally introduce allegorical figures, although he denies them any influence on the course of events. Perhaps the most sustained example of such personification occurs in the attempt to depict the calming influence of Columbus's presence on his men:

De sa pure vertu l'influence paisible
 Endormait, à ses piés, par un charme invincible,
 L'Avarice affamée, à l'oeil veillant et creux,
 La Cruauté rongéant le coeur des malheureux,
 Le Fanatisme ardent qui, dans l'azur céleste,
 Brille, la torche en main, comme un astre funeste;
 L'Envie enfin, cachant son funeste poignard, 78
 Aux genoux du Héros fléchissait avec art.

Le Nouveau Monde is clearly modelled on the structural pattern of the Odyssey but, unlike the latter, it fails to work towards any clearly-defined climax. The actual discovery of the New World is of little dramatic importance in the poem, for land is sighted as early as the end of the second canto. Thereafter, Le Suire seeks to generate interest by accumulating the adventures of Columbus, many of which have little more than a tenuous connection with the main theme. In filling twenty-four cantos with material ranging from Columbus's encounter with a friendly lion to his exploration of the Dantesque world of prisons and tombs, Le Suire seems to have been intent on proving the durability of his

77. Le Suire, Préface, I, ix-x.

78. Le Suire, II, 27.

inspiration. Unfortunately, he displays at the same time an unconscious talent for the bizarre and the ridiculous.⁷⁹

Boesnier, Le Mexique conquis, 1752⁸⁰

The decision to begin the detailed study of epics on New World heroes with the three poems on Columbus discussed above was taken, partly because of the numerical superiority of these latter, partly because of the convenience of examining the poems according to the chronological order of subject-matter. The next most popular subject for epicists of the period was Cortes and it also so happens that the conquest of Mexico was the next of the great, related exploits, which followed Columbus's discovery of America. Had it been decided, however, to investigate the theme by adopting an approach based on the chronological order of composition of the epics, then the review would have opened with Le Mexique conquis.

In addition to the distinction of being the first epic to treat one of the European heroes of the New World saga in the years under consideration (and, possibly, of being the first to do so in the history of French literature), Boesnier's poem is also remarkable in that it makes an early use of a medium, which would have been unthinkable for the genre before the publication of Télémaque in 1699.

The validity of the prose poem is debated by Boesnier in his prefatory comments.⁸¹ Boesnier's honest recognition of his

79. In a savagely ironic review, the first edition of the poem was criticized for its excessive length, monotony and mediocrity. See the Journal de Paris, 26 November 1781, pp. 1327-29.

80. Boesnier appears to have lived his life in almost total anonymity. Apart from the publication of his poem, nothing seems to be known about him.

81. Boesnier, Discours, I, xiii-xvi.

inability to write verse is followed by the contention that poetry and verse are not synonymous. Although Boesnier does not contest the superiority of regular verse over prose, he is adamant that the essence of poetry does not fundamentally lie in the manipulation of traditional prosody but rather in a skilful use of vivid imagery. Boesnier's basic contention is reiterated with force and conviction : " Convenons donc seulement que la poésie doit paroître encore avec éclat dénuée de la versification."⁸² The text of the poem itself provides a clear indication of the literary intent of the author, for in it are found the epic devices of invocation and proposition, together with the celestial and infernal aspects of the merveilleux chrétien and a liberal sprinkling of Homeric similes.

As Madame Du Boccage and Bourgeois were later to do for Columbus's discovery of America, Boesnier stresses the religious nature of Cortes's enterprise and he clearly envisages the conquest of Mexico less as the acquisition of a temporal kingdom than as an episode in the history of the spread of Christianity. The fall of the Aztec capital, symbolized by the capture of the new emperor, Guatimozin, son-in-law of Montezuma, is explicitly hailed as the overthrow of the visible throne of Satan and it is on this note that the work ends.

Appropriately, the instigation for this religious crusade comes, in the poem, from Columbus who, after his death, has become the patron angel of Spanish adventurers in the New World. He is seen in heaven, interceding with God on behalf of the Indians of Mexico,

82. Boesnier, Discours, I, xiii.

who are under the sway of Satan :

Glorifiez votre Verbe parmi ces peuples; replongez pour 83
jamais votre ennemi dans l'abîme.

Cortes is selected as the new Joshua by none other than Christ himself and this divine choice is communicated to the Spanish governor of Cuba, Velasquez, in a dream.

No detailed reference need, perhaps, be made to the frequent appearance of infernal powers in Le Mexique conquis , since the situations in which they are employed are similar to those in Bourgeois' Christophe Colomb discussed above. The machinations of the demon of Cuba, for example, are responsible for Velasquez's jealous recall of Cortes in Book ii. It can be noted, however, that the influence of Milton is once again clearly discernible in this context and nowhere more so than in the description of the edifice Satan commands to be erected for a meeting of the fallen angels :

Ce temple est à découvert, c'est une rotonde. Il s'élève sur cent degrés qui l'entourent de toutes parts, il est ouvert de tous côtés. Un double rang de mille colonnes d'ordre Corinthien, placées à distance égale, est sa seule enceinte. Elles soutiennent un entablement, dont la frise est chargée dans la façade extérieure & intérieure d'un balustre, & ce balustre est varié & partagé par des acroteres qui répondent aux chapiteaux des colonnes. Ils sont chargés alternativement de trophées ou de génies. Ceux-ci tiennent des médaillons, dans lesquels sont représentés les principaux exploits de Satan. On n'y a rien oublié de tout ce qui peut flatter la vanité du monarque, & depuis le combat des Anges rebelles & la chute du premier homme, on y voit l'histoire de l'erreur & des vices qui ont précipité le genre humain dans l'abîme.

84

Boesnier takes as his principal historical source the Historia

83. Boesnier, I,9.

84. Boesnier, I, 30-31.

de la conquista de Méjico of Antonio de Solis y Ribadeneyra, although he claims in his prefatory notes that Solis worked from defective material and lacked the necessary documentation to compile a reliable history.⁸⁵ Consequently, whenever Boesnier is convinced that Solis clearly lacks authority, he has no hesitation in inventing a suitable account of his own. Boesnier's approach to his subject-matter is explained at some length : " Les moeurs, les caracteres, tous les évenemens principaux, seuls dignes de passer à la postérité, sont conservés; l'ordre des tems & l'histoire sont respectés. Les détails supprimés, changés, embellis, sont ceux qui de l'aveu de Solis, n'ont d'autre fondement que l'incertitude ou la conjecture. La liberté dont il donne l'exemple, devient permise & même indispensable dans un genre ou l'exactitude doit céder à l'intérêt & à la vraisemblance. La fiction n'est employée que pour soutenir l'attention, & pour lier toutes les parties d'une grande action, dont les rapports échappent facilement dans une simple narration."⁸⁶

The high degree of historical fidelity, which is a feature of Le Mexique conquis, can be partly ascribed to the fact that the authentic details of the conquest of the Aztecs have an heroic quality, which enables them to be incorporated bodily into an epic poem on the neoclassical pattern. In fact, the narrative of this particular work tends to become a little wearisome through a surfeit of battles and speeches and the introduction of a love-episode is relatively welcome. The heroine is an historical character - a high-born Mexican woman baptized under the name Marina, who proved

85. Boesnier, Discours, I, iv-vi.

86. Boesnier, Discours, I, xii-xiii.

to be of the utmost assistance to the Spaniards. Boesnier's Marina is an idealized figure, who has been granted a vision of the Virgin Mary during her childhood and knows that it is her destiny to further the cause of Christianity in Mexico, whereas the real person was by no means so ethereal. There is no doubt that the historical Marina's relationship with Cortes did not remain on the platonic level described in the poem. That it does so in Le Mexique conquis is, incidentally, entirely due to the Mexican maiden who, faithful to the Virgin's command that she should live a chaste life, flees from Cortes's infernally-inspired passion for her.

In his portrait of Cortes, Boesnier follows history in depicting the Spanish leader as an excellent military tactician, who displays remarkable concern for the safety and welfare of his men. He plays down the ruthless element in Cortes's nature and generally glosses over any recorded incident which showed him in an unfavourable light. On the other hand, no chance is missed to allege Cortes's wholehearted devotion to the Christian faith. In his speech accepting command of the expedition, Cortes reveals that it is God's kingdom rather than the Spanish empire that he is most anxious to extend :

Je l'avouerai, sage Vélasquès, je suis moins flaté
d'étendre la puissance de notre monarque, que la religion
de notre Dieu. 87

The aim of the enterprise, as Cortes sees it, is specified in Book vi :

Nous voulons abolir en tous lieux les sacrifices humains; nous
en apportons de plus purs, & nous venons réconcilier Montézume
& son peuple avec la Divinité. 88

87. Boesnier, I, 17.

88. Boesnier, I, 172.

Cortes particularly abhors the Mexican custom of pagan sacrifice as a manifestation of demonic power. After a successful battle, he gives glory to God and builds a chapel on the site of victory in thanksgiving.

The picture of Cortes's adversary, Montezuma, is powerfully drawn. The author is forced to paint him as a villain in the early stages of the narrative, in order to convey the very real dangers encountered by the Spaniards on their march to the Mexican capital. Following Cortes's arrival in the Aztec stronghold, however, Boesnier faithfully follows Solis, who records a great change in the comportment of the Mexican emperor. The death of Montezuma is shown to be yet another obstacle to the accomplishment of Cortes's divine mission and the author eulogizes the Aztec chief in the following terms :

Montézume n'avoit rien de barbare que la naissance. Son coeur étoit noble, son esprit sublime, sa politique profonde. Il s'étoit élevé sur le throne par sa valeur, il s'y étoit maintenu par sa sagesse. 89

All in all, Le Mexique conquis makes for pleasant enough reading. The fact that the whole history of the fall of the Aztec kingdom is encompassed in two small volumes ensures that the narrative maintains a pace that leaves the reader occasionally breathless.⁹⁰ Boesnier manages to include the standard epic devices of a prophetic dream (in which the events taking place after the conquest of America are foretold to Cortes) and an athletic contest but greater variation of mood and pace through the use of episodic matter would have been agreeable. Nevertheless, a reviewer found that his

89. Boesnier, II, 83-84.

90. At one point in his account of the capture of the Mexican capital, Boesnier remarks plaintively: " Divine Uranio, pourquoi me refuses-tu tes accens? Je ne peux suivre la rapidité des conquêtes & des succès qui couronnerent dans l'espace d'un mois les travaux des Espagnols." Boesnier, II, 191.

misgivings about the feasibility of the prose poem were completely allayed, after reading Le Mexique conquis, and he declared : " ... nous n'avons qu'à féliciter l'Auteur de son entreprise ; & à lui promettre de nouveaux succès quand il voudra reprendre la plume." ⁹¹

Roure, La Cortésiade , 1809 ⁹²

Between Boesnier's poem and the next epic in which Cortes appeared as the principal hero, more than fifty years elapsed. In 1809, Roure published the first six cantos of a verse version of the Cortes saga, entitled La Cortésiade, ou le Nouveau Monde. The opening chant had already appeared separately the previous year⁹³ and the complete poem came out in 1811, under a different title.⁹⁴ Noteworthy in the preface to the incomplete poem of 1809 is Roure's optimism that his mere twenty-three years would not inevitably prevent his success in a genre which he acknowledges to be notorious for making demands , to which the greatest men of letters had proved unequal. He writes : " Je ne me suis point dissimulé ... quel concours heureux de talens il fallait posséder, de quelle fécondité d'imagination il fallait être doué pour réussir dans une aussi grande

91. Mémoires de Trévoux, May 1752, p. 1072.

92. Born in Ardèche in 1786, Roure did not make a great impact on the literary scene. In 1807, under the pseudonym Eruor, he published a satire entitled Le monde littéraire and in 1813 appeared his Macédoine poétique, ou recueil de satires et epigrammes (Paris: Duminil-Lesueur, 1813).

93. P. Roure, La Cortésiade, poème en douze chants (Paris : Imprimerie de Sétier, 1808).

94. P. Roure, La conquête du Mexique, poème en dix chants ... (Paris: Pillet, 1811). In this edition, the Préface and the Hommage à Napoléon le Grand of the 1809 version are omitted and the contents of the six original cantos are compressed into five. The text, however, has not otherwise been substantially altered.

entreprise que celle d'un poëme épique ; écueil contre lequel se sont brisés les plus grands génies, sans même en excepter Voltaire qui n'a pu remplir tout ce qu'impose la carrière de l'épopée." 95

It is regrettable that Roure's youthful spirit of adventure did not lead him to seek that elusive success in epic outside the traditional framework. On the contrary, Roure conforms strictly to the epic canon in his proem, modestly proposing Cortes as his subject and invoking the aid of the Muse, although he does then follow a less traditional historical sequence of events, beginning with Cortes soliciting support from King Ferdinand for his grandiose projects of discovery and conquest. Into the six cantos, which close with the Spanish army marching on the Mexican kingdom, he incorporates such time-consecrated topoi as a storm, a prophetic dream, two bitterly-fought battles, which are preceded and followed by discourses, the hero's love for a native maiden and a recital, here by a white priest, who reveals himself as an exiled European prince. There is, however, only a low incidence of supernatural intervention. Satan's activities are confined to ordering Montezuma to wage war on the Christians and to inducing some sailors to flee back to the fleet during the night before the second great battle with Xicotencal and the Tlascalans. Satan's efforts are counterbalanced by the " ange exterminateur " who, in that battle, saves the Spaniards, sore pressed and in danger of being overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers, by causing the Indians to run from the battlefield in terror.

95. Roure, Préface, p.1.

That such divine assistance is necessary on this particular occasion should not be taken as a reflection on Cortes's military prowess as depicted in the poem. Cortes impresses with the general excellence of his leadership and fully merits the stirring introduction Roure gives him :

Généreux, intrépide, autant que vertueux,
Il savait tempérer le feu de son courage,
Et de la guerre encor faisant l'apprentissage,
Il avait des guerriers blanchis dans les combats 96
Egalé la prudence et surpassé le bras.

As in Boesnier's Mexique conquis, Cortes here, too, envisages his undertaking as primarily a religious mission. He promises the people of Tabasco :

Je viens vous annoncer un Dieu bon, équitable ... 97

and a visible sign of God's pleasure is bestowed upon him :

La gloire du Très-Haut, le couvrant de ses ailes, 98
Fait briller sur son front de vives étincelles.

That night, in a prophetic dream, Cortes is shown the New World by Columbus and the discoverer of America not only acknowledges Cortes's superiority but explicitly defines the Mexican venture as a Christian project :

Mais tu dois t'illustrer par de plus grands travaux;
Tu dois porter la Foi sur ce vaste hémisphère;
Tu dois faire en un mot ce que je n'ai pu faire. 99

But Cortes's halo slips, when a momentary lapse on the part of the author affords the reader a glimpse of the historical conquistador. For it is no apostle of mercy who cries :

... ce vaste hémisphère
Nous appartient déjà par les droits de la guerre:

96. Roure, p.9.

97. Roure, p. 30.

98. Roure, p. 30.

99. Roure, p. 35.

Partagez ces trésors, devenus votre bien; 100
Partagez ces captifs ...

The character of Cortes apart, however, and also setting aside the more obvious poetic conventions, Roure remains quite close to his historical sources. He confesses that he has reinforced the warlike and cruel disposition of the authentic Montezuma, in order to make it more dramatic¹⁰¹ and among his minor embellishments may be noted the fact that his Cortes obtains permission for the enterprise from King Ferdinand in person (rather than from Velasquez, the Governor of Cuba) and sets sail from Palos, Columbus's port of departure on his first voyage. Both these infringements of strict historical truth are presumably intended to ennoble the protagonist of the tale.

Attempts to elevate the tone of the poem are also to be found in Roure's use of stylistic devices and particularly his fondness for periphrasis and classical allusion :

L'astre éclatant des jours sur le sein de Thétis,
Ne lançant plus au loin que des feux amortis,
Achevait de fournir sa carrière brillante;
Recueillant les rayons de sa clarté mourante
La lune sur son char remonte dans les cieux, 102
Et répand sur les flots un calme harmonieux.

Although he skilfully avoids repetition in the above passage, Roure would seem to have a less extensive storm vocabulary for, on the next page, " l'horrible tempête ", " les horribles ténèbres " and " les horreurs de la nuit " occur within the space of seven lines.¹⁰³ At other times, his predilection for classical terminology and erudite vocabulary, dutifully explained in numerous footnotes, is

100. Roure, p. 78.

101. Roure, Préface, p.4.

102. Roure, p.11.

103. Roure, p. 12.

strongly reminiscent of Madame Du Boccage's procedure in her Colombiade.

Although the Cortés does not manage to avoid the epic reef Roure mentions in his preface, it provides a moderately enjoyable read. Its rather nondescript quality can at least be attributed to the youth of the author and, unlike some of the epics analysed in the present chapter, it is unlikely to strain the reader's patience.

Marmontel, Les Incas , 1777 ¹⁰⁴

The third New World hero to figure as the subject of an epic in the period covered by this thesis is Pizarro and he ranks behind Columbus and Cortes in popularity, just as he achieved fame later than they. Before proceeding to a detailed examination of the one work to celebrate Pizarro, it seems necessary, however, to justify its inclusion in a study of epic.

That Les Incas lacks a standard proem, omits the marvellous and, additionally, is not written in verse, may have denied it epic status for many of Marmontel's contemporaries but did not similarly disqualify it in Marmontel's own eyes. References to Marmontel's conception of epic are scattered throughout Chapter i above but it will be most convenient to recall his main ideas here. In the article

104. Jean-François Marmontel (1723-99) rose from humble origins to become a member and permanent secretary of the Académie Française. Summoned to Paris by Voltaire, he at first experienced real hardship but his successes in poetry competitions held by the Académie Française in 1746 and 1747 helped to establish him on the literary scene. In 1747 his Denys le tyran was performed at the Comédie Française. Among a large literary output, his major works are, perhaps, the Contes moraux of 1761, the Poétique française of 1763 and the novel Bélisaire of 1766.

" Epopée " in the Encyclopédie,¹⁰⁵ for example, Marmontel denied that invocation and the merveilleux were essential to epic and his disenchantment with the traditional epic medium of the alexandrine was matched by his enthusiasm for the flexibility of prose. Moreover, Les Incas conforms to Marmontel's specific recommendation in the article of conquest and civil war as suitable epic subjects and obeys his demands that the action should have unity and breadth, while everything should lead nevertheless to the dénouement. In Marmontel's view, therefore, there would be no grounds for excluding Les Incas from an investigation of eighteenth-century French epic.

In addition to its somewhat unusual format, another noteworthy feature of Les Incas is its rather uncertain tone, which might be described as an uneasy mixture of epic and polemic. If the portrait of Pizarro is drawn on epic lines and much of the content is proper to the contemporary view of the genre, the political and moral message that is overtly proclaimed is anticipated in the very subtitle.

The closest approximation to the usual proposition is to be found in the Epître Dédicatoire to the King of Sweden and it is marked by a note of undisguised moral indignation : " La moitié du globe opprimée, dévastée par le fanatisme, est le tableau que je présente aux yeux de Votre Majesté ; je rouvre la plus grande plaie qu'ait jamais faite au genre humain le glaive des persécuteurs"¹⁰⁶

The flavour of the work is further foreshadowed by the appearance

105. J.-F. Marmontel, article " Epopée " in Encyclopédie V, 825 - 31. See also J. Lauret, " Une épopée en prose au XVIIIe siècle : ' Les Incas ou la destruction de l'empire de Pérou ' " in J. Ehrard, ed. De l'Encyclopédie à la contre-révolution : Jean-François Marmontel (1725-1799) (Clermont-Ferrand: Bussac, 1970), pp. 201-28.

106. Marmontel, I, vii-viii.

on the title page of a quotation on tolerance from Fénelon's Direction pour la conscience d'un roi ¹⁰⁷ and also by a striking vignette, which depicts fanaticism as a blindfolded male figure, holding aloft a blazing torch in his left hand, while his right menacingly clutches a dagger and a pair of manacles. A little later, in the preface, Marmontel formally acknowledges that his work has been written with a specific aim: "Le but de cet Ouvrage est donc, & je l'annonce sans détour, de contribuer, si je le puis, à faire détester de plus en plus ce fanatisme destructeur; d'empêcher, autant qu'il est en moi, qu'on ne le confonde jamais avec une religion compatissante & charitable, & d'inspirer pour elle autant de vénération & d'amour que de haine & d'exécration pour son plus cruel ennemi." ¹⁰⁸ Nor does Marmontel leave the reader in any doubt as to his personal definition of the term: "Par le fanatisme, j'entends l'esprit d'intolérance & de persécution, l'esprit de haine & de vengeance, pour la cause d'un Dieu que l'on croit irrité, & dont on se fait les Ministres. Cet esprit régnoit en Espagne, & il avoit passé en Amérique avec les premiers Conquérens." ¹⁰⁹

In the text itself, fanaticism is seen embodied in certain

107. "Accordez à tous la tolérance civile, non en approuvant tout comme indifférent, mais en souffrant avec patience tout ce que Dieu souffre, & en tâchant de ramener les hommes par une douce persuasion."

108. Marmontel, Préface, I, 17.

109. Marmontel, Préface, I, 11. In the light of this incisive analysis of fanaticism and its explicit application to the Spanish conquistadors, it is hardly surprising that Les Incas was put on the Index by the Spanish Inquisition, being condemned by an edict of 20 December, 1782. See M. Defourneaux, "Marmontel en Espagne" in J. Ehrard, pp. 287-98, p. 288.

historical characters of the epoch, notably Fernand de Luques (to adopt the French form of his name), an ecclesiastic and financial partner of Pizarro's in the enterprise , and the priest who accompanied the expedition, the notorious Valverde. The spirit of humanity and true Christianity is represented by Las Casas, who became famous as the protector of the natives of the New World and on whose book Marmontel largely drew for his material. 110

The totally divergent attitudes towards the Peruvians of Las Casas and Luques are forcefully and dramatically exposed during a council held shortly before Pizarro leaves Panama on his first, abortive expedition to Peru. Las Casas seeks to ensure the safety and independence of the Indians and he insists that they are amenable to conversion by rational means. Luques, however, recognizes only one method of exterminating idolatry and, finding a convenient parallel in the Old Testament, he claims :

L'Amérique nous appartient au même titre que Canaan appartenait aux Hébreux : le droit du glaive qu'ils avoient sur l'idolâtre Amalécite, nous l'avons sur des Infidèles, plus aveuglés, plus abrutis dans leurs détestables erreurs. 111

An attempt at mediation is made by Valverde, who is portrayed as the very incarnation of fanaticism and who stands accused - often rather unjustly - of being the perpetrator or instigator of a variety

110. Marmontel indicates that he used a translation published in Paris in 1687 (Préface, I,21). In the absence of any such translation, it may be suggested that he mistook the date and intended to cite Abbé J.-B. Morvan de Bellegarde, trans. La découverte des Indes Occidentales par les Espagnols, écrite par Dom Balthazar [sic] de Las-Casas, évêque de Chiapa (Paris : Pralard, 1697).

111. Marmontel, I,154.

of heinous crimes. ¹¹²The direct analysis Marmontel gives of Valverde's personality could hardly be less flattering :

Cet homme, le plus noir, le plus dissimulé que l'Espagne eût produit, pour le malheur du Nouveau Monde, portoit dans son coeur tous les vices; mais il les couvoit sourdement; & le masque de l'hypocrisie, qu'il ne quittoit jamais, en imposoit à tous les yeux.

In a piece of vicious character assassination, Marmontel makes Valverde offer to free the fictitious Aztec princess, Amazili, if she will first let him make love to her. And it is natural that Marmontel should follow with alacrity the historical source which lays on Valverde the responsibility for the terrible loss of Indian life, which results from the meeting of Pizarro and Ataliba, as Marmontel calls the Inca chief more usually known as Atahualpa. In Marmontel's version, after Pizarro has skilfully and apparently successfully explained Christianity to Ataliba, Valverde intervenes and launches into an obscure account of the Christian mysteries. When Ataliba accidentally drops the Bible, which Valverde has handed to him, the priest calls on the Spanish soldiers to avenge their religion and the carnage begins.

But if he draws principally on Benzoni for information relating to the above massacre, Marmontel has no authority for the most chilling example of fanaticism in Les Incas, the murder of Ataliba at the dead of night, through the evil designs of Valverde, who persuades his accomplices that their deed is to the glory of God.

It would seem that Marmontel was affected by his own propaganda,

112. The question of Marmontel's manipulation of historical fact in Les Incas, both as romancier and philosophe, is discussed by M. Portal in " ' Les Incas ' : de l'histoire au roman philosophique " in J. Ehrard, pp. 273-84. For the particular case of Valverde, see pp. 281-83.

113. Marmontel, I, 159-60.

for he allots to Valverde a horrible, but quite unhistorical, death at the hands of cannibals. His notes laconically inform the reader :
 " Ici la vérité feroit horreur; j'y substitue la justice !"¹¹⁴

Les Incas is extremely comprehensive in its historical scope for, in addition to the main narrative of the fall of the kingdom of Peru (which itself includes the earlier civil war between the royal brothers Huascar and Ataliba), Marmontel also manages to record the passage of the Spaniards through Central America (Chapters xi-xxv) and to include the story of the fall of the Aztec empire in Mexico (Chapters vi-x). The latter is given in a recital by Orozimbo, a fictitious nephew of Montezuma who, with his sister, Amazili, and his friend, Télasco, to whom she is betrothed, seeks sanctuary at the court of the Inca Ataliba. For even better measure, Pizarro's return to Europe to obtain royal approval and support for his venture enables Marmontel to describe the horror of religious fanaticism in Spain itself, including the account of an auto-da-fé (Chapters xli-xlii).

The introduction of the Mexican saga, which Marmontel sees in an entirely different light from Boesnier, serves Marmontel's polemic ends in two principal ways. In the first place, the recital gives him an added opportunity to provide examples of Spanish fanaticism in the New World. Orozimbo tells how the Spaniards' description of their religion is belied by the deeds they commit in its name :

Ils nous annoncent un Dieu de paix, un Dieu propice & débonnaire; c'est un piège qu'ils tendent à la crédulité. Leur Dieu est cruel, implacable, & mille fois plus altéré

114. Marmontel, II, 373, note (a).

de sang que tous les Dieux qu'il a vaincus.

Apprends que, sous nos yeux, ils lui ont immolé plus d'un million de victimes; qu'en son nom ils ont fait couler des flots de larmes & de sang; qu'il n'en est point rassasié, & qu'il leur en demande encore. 115

It should be pointed out, however, that the chief motivating factor behind the atrocities committed by the Spaniards in Mexico is clearly shown, in Orozimbo's recital, to be the lust for gold. Given this emphasis on human cupidity, Marmontel's indictment of fanaticism as the sole reason for the slaughter of the Incas is somewhat simplistic and constitutes rather too blatant a case of prejudice.

The second way in which the account of the conquest of the Aztecs furthers Marmontel's didactic intent is by throwing into relief the humanitarian religion and democratic government of Peru, through Orozimbo's references to the Mexican practice of human sacrifice on a huge scale and to the despotic and oppressive rule of Montezuma. Orozimbo's story is thus carefully calculated to imply a comparison which persuades the reader that, whatever the merits of the Spanish invasion of Mexico, there was no such possible justification for the devastation of Peru and the massacre of its inhabitants.

Marmontel's explicit polemical aim, his condemnation of the actions of the Spanish soldiery and the sympathy he arouses for the Inca nation make it difficult for him to present Pizarro as an acceptable hero. The first mention of Pizarro comes after Orozimbo has concluded his tale and he is introduced as

... un homme d'une résolution, d'une intrépidité à l'épreuve de tous les maux; un homme endurci au travail, à la misère, à la souffrance; qui sût manquer de tout, & se passer .

de tout, s'animer contre les périls, se roidir contre les obstacles, s'affermir encore sous les coups de la plus dure adversité. 116

The impression given is that of an intrepid man, accustomed to meeting-- and overcoming - difficulties and this practical aspect of the leader of the Peruvian expedition is reinforced by Pizarro's own business-like assessment of the results he expects from his venture :

Faire adorer mon Dieu, faire obéir mon Roi, imposer à ces Peuples un tribut modéré, établir entre eux & l'Espagne un commerce utile pour eux, autant qu'avantageux pour elle; voilà ce que je me propose. 117

Pizarro is portrayed as a true adventurer, set on achieving immortal renown among men rather than assuring himself of a place in heaven.

He explains to the Emperor :

Il me faut de la gloire. Le reste est au-dessous de moi. 118

Moreover, he is fully aware that glory has to be merited and is not automatically conferred on men by the magnitude of the tasks they set themselves.

According to Marmontel, therefore, Pizarro is basically honest, noble-hearted and, as the circumstances demand, severe or indulgent. Yet, through the mouth of the perspicacious Las Casas, the following qualification is added :

... il seroit juste & modéré, si chacun consentoit à l'être. Mais il veut réussir; & son ambition fera céder aux circonstances sa droiture & son équité. 119

Pizarro is indeed seen to make various concessions to the importunings

116. Marmontel, I, 136.

117. Marmontel, I, 153.

118. Marmontel, II, 211.

119. Marmontel, I, 170.

of his men against his better judgement and the dictates of his conscience. After the seizure of Ataliba, the soldiers become seditious and the situation finally slips out of Pizarro's control :

... semblable au Pilote surpris par la tempête, dans un détroit semé d'écueils, tantôt cédant, tantôt résistant à l'orage, il évitoit de se briser. 120

Although, therefore, - and against all historical fact - Marmontel gives Pizarro no hand in the slaughter of the Peruvians or in the death of Ataliba, there remains the implied criticism that he was, in the last instance, unequal to the events he had set in motion. He, too, meets his end by murder but his death strikes a heroic note:

Accablé sous le nombre, il succomba, mais en grand homme qui dédaignoit la vie & qui bravoit la mort. 121

Unlike the other great conquerors of the New World, who appear in this chapter, Marmontel's Pizarro is not himself involved in any amorous episode but Les Incas is not devoid of love interest. The parties concerned are Cora, a Peruvian virgin who is dedicated to the service of the Sun God during the festival, with a description of which the work opens, and Alonzo da Molina, a young friend of Las Casas who, because of his dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Spaniards, espouses the cause of Ataliba. During a volcanic eruption, Alonzo rescues Cora and, when it becomes evident some time later that she is pregnant, he successfully pleads for Cora and her family, whose lives are forfeit under Inca law. Their happiness is short-lived, however, and they die as melodramatic a death as Marmontel can devise for them. Alonzo, horrified at the carnage wreaked among the Incas, tears the dressing off the wound he received trying to

120. Marmontel, II,346.

121. Marmontel, II,372.

defend Ataliba and bleeds to death. Cora flings herself on his tomb in a paroxysm of grief, gives birth and both she and the infant perish. Nor does the Mexican princess fare any better, for she commits suicide to forestall a hopeless rescue attempt by her brother and her lover.

That these characters, together with Orozimbo and Télasco, should disappear in rapid succession is inevitable, given the way in which Les Incas is structured. The conquest of Peru proper does not begin until Chapter xlv and is then condensed into some nine chapters, which might suggest that a disproportionate amount of space is devoted to background description and episodic matter. This technique does achieve a climactic effect, which strengthens the polemical import of the work, but Marmontel evidently sensed that Les Incas was open to criticism of structural imbalance, for he assured his public : " Dans mon plan, l'action principale n'occupe que très-peu d'espace : tout s'y rapporte, mais de loin."¹²² However, the reader has become too involved with Orozimbo and Télasco for the baldness of the end meted out to them to be artistically satisfying to him. The Mexican warriors are despatched with almost indecent haste in the main engagement, blown to pieces by cannon fire :

Amis infortunés ! ils vont tête baissée se jeter sur la batterie ; une explosion formidable les met en poudre ; ils disparaissent dans un tourbillon de fumée ... 123

Generally, though, the concentration of events serves to crystallize sympathy for the Incas, overwhelmed by a cataclysm they have done little to deserve.

122. Marmontel, Préface, I, 18.

123. Marmontel, II, 310.

According to Chinard,¹²⁴ it is Marmontel's feeling of pity for the conquered which alone makes Les Incas readable in the twentieth century and he pronounces the work to be largely dead and displeasing. The judgement is unwarrantedly severe and would seem to have been prompted by Chinard's personal irritation at Marmontel's admittedly extravagant attack on fanaticism.¹²⁵ A contemporary critic, however, basing his opinion on Marmontel's avowed difficulty in defining the exact nature of Les Incas,¹²⁶ found much to praise: "Cet Ouvrage n'est donc pas un Poëme, mais il en a l'éclat & l'élévation; il en a même quelquefois le langage, l'harmonie & la cadence; ce n'est pas une histoire, mais il est fondé sur l'exacte vérité des faits les plus extraordinaires; ce n'est pas un livre de morale, mais celle exprimée par l'Auteur, est puisée dans les sources pures de la religion, de la raison & de l'humanité; ce n'est pas un roman, mais il en a le charme, le merveilleux, & l'intérêt; enfin, ce n'est point un discours, mais il renferme une suite de discours de la plus grande énergie, & de la plus sublime éloquence."¹²⁷

The final word on Marmontel's poem might, perhaps, be left to a notable figure on the literary scene in eighteenth-century France. La Harpe predicted that "... le livre des Incas sera regardé comme un des monuments distingués de notre littérature, lorsque, après la voix tumultueuse des partis qui la divisent, il ne restera que le jugement tranquille des lecteurs impartiaux, à qui les défauts ne ferment pas les yeux sur les beautés, et qui, se permettant d'appr --

124. Chinard, L'Amérique, p.385.

125. Chinard, L'Amérique, pp.385-86 and p.388.

126. Marmontel, Préface, I, 18.

127. Mercure de France, March 1777, pp.154-55.

écier les uns, sont encore plus jaloux de jouir des autres."¹²⁸

In the examination of Les Incas - and this is equally valid for the other epics on New World heroes - one salient aspect has so far been neglected. All the works analysed in detail in this chapter obviously share a geographically -distant sphere of action, which provides an exotic setting for the human activities that are recounted. The authors studied above at once displayed their erudition, authenticated their narrative, enlivened their argument and varied the pace of their story, merely by describing various features of the locus of their particular tale. Since such accounts form an integral part of each epic, this common element merits at least some examination.

Local colour is frequently supplied in the poems on the New World by reference to strange flora but it takes a Madame Du Boccage to compile the following sonorous list of trees :

L'Inde, qui du Coco tire un lait qui nourrit,
Des vapeurs d'un feuillage enivre la paresse.
Le fruit du Cotonnier y sert à la mollesse.
Le Cacao fournit le nectar des repas.
Le Mangle, l'Acajou, le Cédra, l'Ananas,
Répandent leurs parfums dans l'air qu'on y respire;
Et, sous mille autres noms, Flore y charme Zéphyre. 129

As is her normal practice, Madame Du Boccage glosses each noun likely to be unfamiliar to her readers, so that this particular page contains far more notes than actual text.

In the next example of local colour, Bourgeois adopts the reverse procedure, preferring to test the reader's ingenuity with a lengthy description of an unnamed fruit, which is revealed as a banana only in a footnote :

128. La Harpe, Lycée, XIV, 300.

129. Du Boccage, p. 15.

Moelleux, doux, succulent; sa bonté, sa saveur,
 A nos Marins ravis parlent en sa faveur,
 Et la chair qui sembla tout-à-fait nourrissante,
 Fit couler dans leur sang sa vertu bienfaisante.
 Pour le sobre Espagnol il devint souverain,
 Il a depuis pour lui l'utilité du pain;
 Un seul est son soutien, nourrit & rassasie,
 C'est le fruit le plus sain qu'on mange dans la vie:
 Sa forme est en longueur un aspect singulier, 130
 Et l'on n'en connoît point de si particulier.

Le Suire imagines that a European would have been struck by the
 bright plumage of American bird-life :

Que le peuple des airs est brillant sur ces rives!
 De son plumage heureux que les beautés sont vives!
 Jamais de nos oiseaux les plus vives couleurs
 N'ont à ce point lutté contre l'éclat des fleurs:
 Mais d'un gosier plus doux le séduisant ramage 131
 A nos chantres aîlés forme un plus beau partage.

The disappointing quality of bird-song in the New World is more than
 outweighed, however, by the parrot's gift of mimicry, which is
 noted in La Colombiade :

L'Hôte des airs qu'Iris orne de ses couleurs,
 Dont le bec recourbé, l'articulante haleine
 En imitant nos sons rendent la voix humaine,
 Redit ces tendres mots ... 132

Roure describes the sea off the coast of Mexico and explains how

La dorade poursuit tous les poissons ailés.
 Les lamentins, sortant de leurs grottes profondes,
 Sous leur énorme poids font bouillonner les ondes.
 En radieux cristal le flot tranquille et pur
 Se peint avec les cieus d'éméraude, d'azur.
 Par des feux voltigeans la voile se colore, 133
 Et fait étinceler les couleurs de l'aurore.

An equally abundant source of local colour for the epic poets
 under consideration was provided by the life and customs of the

130. Bourgeois, I, 159-60.

131. Le Suire, I, 31.

132. Du Boccage, p.65.

133. Roure, p.46.

native peoples, with whom the European adventurers in the New World came into contact. Descriptions of the unusual appearance and practices of these primitive races are to be found in nearly all the epics on the American theme but remarkable for its wistful tone is this portrait of native girls by the youthful author of the Cortésia :

Les femmes ont aux fleurs emprunté leur parure,
Et n'ont pour dérober leurs attraits séduisants,
Que des tissus légers que soulèvent les vents.
Le feu de leurs regards que la douceur tempère,
Les contours amoureux de leur taille légère,
Du tendre empressement l'attrait victorieux,
Séduit les Castillans; il eût séduit les Dieux. 134

Roure dwells longingly on the free sexual habits of the women of this isle but the more sober Bourgeois recalls that Europe was to pay a heavy price for such seemingly harmless pleasures. He describes how Columbus and his men arrive at a village, where the chief is called Syphilis and the inhabitants are ravaged by some unknown disease :

Le corps sec, décharné, le teint pâle & livide,
Exhalant une odeur rebutante & putride;
L'attente de la mort faisoit tout leur espoir. 135
Quel déluge de maux! l'eût-on pu concevoir?

Less dramatic but more historically authentic are the summary of the laws of the Inca kingdom and the descriptions of the Sun Festivals, on which Marmontel largely relies for his use of local colour. The narrative of Les Incas opens with the festival of the autumn equinox, to which Marmontel devotes some four chapters. The king, nobles and the common people anxiously await the appearance of the sun, which is then greeted with a sustained hymn of praise,

134. Roure, p.14.

135. Bourgeois, II, 177.

from which this "choeur des vierges" is abstracted :

O délices du monde! heureuses les épouses qui forment ta céleste cour! que ton réveil est beau! quelle magnificence dans l'appareil de ton lever! quel charme répand ta présence! les compagnes de ton sommeil soulevent les rideaux de pourpre du pavillon où tu reposes, & tes premiers regards dissipent l'immense obscurité des cieux. O! quelle dut être la joie de la nature, lorsque tu l'éclairas pour la première fois! Elle s'en souvient; & jamais elle ne te revoit sans ce tressaillement qu'éprouve une fille tendre au retour d'un père adoré, dont l'absence l'a fait languir. 136

Marmontel's pacific and tender hymn constitutes rather more than the usual descriptive embellishment of the narrative, for it skilfully opens his defence of the Incas of Peru and his virulent condemnation of those who so wantonly destroyed their kingdom.

Conclusion

Although the works analysed above are numerically inferior to those which compose each of the other two categories of epic examined in this thesis, they nevertheless form a pleasingly homogeneous unit. Between them, the six authors who elected to write on the American theme cover the three principal phases in the annals of the discovery and conquest of the New World and they therefore present in combination a comprehensive epic view of the European colonization of those distant lands.

That no treatment of this particular topic in the epic manner appears to have been attempted before 1752 must remain a matter of surprise to any student of French neoclassical epic poetry. As

the half-dozen epics themselves bear witness by their content, the subject-matter conformed intrinsically to a large number of the diverse requirements of the genre and its possibilities were often fully exploited, sometimes even abused.

The remoteness of their plot in both time and place provided an opportunity for the writers of epic considered here to include the more easily the episodic embellishment that was demanded by theorists. Boesnier's failure to capitalize on this aspect of his material is noticeable but perhaps still preferable to the extravagant imaginings of Le Suire. Supernatural intervention figures prominently in the works by Boesnier and Bourgeois but is restricted in Le Suire's Le Nouveau Monde and Roure's La Cortésíade and is absent from Marmontel's Les Incas.

A majority of the authors under review in this chapter stressed the religious motivation of the enterprises they celebrated and underlined the personal devotion of their protagonists to the Christian faith. While recognizing the integrity of his hero, however, Marmontel attacked what he saw as the fanatical and brutal attitudes of many of the Spaniards who were attracted to the New World. The three poems treating Columbus revealed the disastrous consequences for the indigenous population of the discovery of America and in the case of Le Suire this insistence on future evil is such that an already suspect epic atmosphere is still further impaired.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BIBLICAL EPIC

Epics discussed, listed in order of treatment

L.-C. Le Clerc, Tobie, 1773

N. Le Roy, La Tobiade, 1786

P.-J. Bitaubé, Joseph, 1767

L.-J.-N. Lemerrier, Moyse, 1823

A.-H.-J.-F. de Bérault-Bercastel, La conquête de la terre promise, 1766

L. Collet, Josué, 1807

M.-S. Cottin, La prise de Jéricho, 1806

J-F. de La Baume-Desdossat, La Christiade, 1753

Dubourg, Le Messie, 1777

Like the national historical epic discussed in Chapter II above, biblical epic is a sub-genre of some antiquity in French literature. In his majestic study of epics on Old Testament themes in seventeenth-century France,¹ Sayce indicates Du Bellay's Monomachie de David et de Goliath, published in 1560, as the earliest attempt to treat a biblical subject on the classical model in French, although he prefers to term it an epic fragment.² Sayce's researches show that, within the great century of epic composition in France, there is a gap in the publication of biblical epics between about 1609 and 1650 and that Saint-Amant's Moyse sauvé (1653) inaugurates a great efflorescence of poems on Old Testament subjects, notably in the 1660's, a phenomenon which mirrors the

1. R. A. Sayce, The French biblical epic in the seventeenth century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

2. Sayce, p. 35.

second wave of production in the literary epic as a whole.³ Examples of the mode become less numerous as the seventeenth century moves to its close and Charles Perrault's Adam of 1697 is taken by Sayce to mark the disappearance of the genre.⁴

The diminution in the popularity of biblical themes for the purpose of epic composition can no doubt be imputed both to Boileau's hostility to the literary use of the Scriptures and, especially, to the relative failure of the poems themselves. When the decline in Christian belief in eighteenth-century France is additionally considered, a scrutiny of the literature of that period cannot reasonably be expected to reveal a large-scale revival of the genre.

Nevertheless, a restricted but still significant number of epics on biblical subjects did appear within the time-limits covered by this thesis and merit critical attention by reason of their own intrinsic interest as well as on account of the literary importance of their predecessors in the seventeenth century. It can be anticipated that, by the very nature of their subject-matter, such poems would have presented in an exacerbated form those difficulties which faced all writers of epic in the neoclassical manner. The injunctions that epic poets should incorporate invented material into their narrative and embellish their subject with episodic ornament, for example, would have been particularly problematical for authors of biblical epic, whose basic material would have been held in reverence by at least some members of the reading public.

It will have been gathered that the word "biblical" in the title of Sayce's book is taken in what he claims is its common French sense and New Testament subjects are therefore excluded from his study.⁵ In the present

3. Sayce, p. 74 and passim.

4. Sayce, pp. 4-5.

5. Sayce, p. 4.

chapter, however, the term is envisaged in its widest theological acceptance and embraces the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, together with the Books called Apocrypha. But within this comprehensive field of application a rigorous interpretation is brought to bear and to qualify for inclusion poems must treat a precise biblical character or event in a substantially accurate manner. Epics based loosely on the creation story related in Genesis have not been admitted and meditations on the Christian religion, however epic their form, have equally been debarred.

As in the two previous chapters, the poems are discussed according to chronological order of subject-matter, except that the two epics drawing their inspiration from the apocryphal Book of Tobit are studied ahead of the works which derive from the Bible proper. Since the consideration of textual problems does not enter into this examination of the French biblical epic in the later eighteenth century, references to the Bible are to the King James or "Authorized" Version of 1611 and, for the Apocrypha, to the Revised Version of 1895.

Le Clerc, Tobie, 1773⁶

Le Clerc is unusual among French writers of epic in the later eighteenth century in his omission of any prefatory statement justifying his choice of subject-matter and specifying his approach to his material. But if the reasons for the former must remain a mystery, much concerning Le Clerc's attitude towards the epic treatment of biblical themes can be deduced from his practice in Tobie.

6. L.-C. Le Clerc, Tobie; poëme, en quatre chants (Paris: Le Jay, 1773). Little appears to be known about the life of Louis-Claude Le Clerc, except that he initially pursued a military career and fought in the Seven Years War. Ten years before his epic poem, he published a verse comedy, L'envieux.

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This prose poem opens with a regular proposition, which largely comprises an evaluation of the quality of the protagonist in various capacities:

Je chante un Adorateur du Dieu d'Israël, qui, dès sa plus tendre jeunesse, ouvrit son ame aux trésors de la piété; un Citoyen, qui, dans les horreurs de la captivité consacra les débris de sa fortune à soulager ses frères gémissants; un fils tendre & soumis, l'unique consolation d'un père & d'une mère aussi malheureux que respectables; un Epoux, dont le coeur, né sensible, ne brûla jamais que des chastes feux de l'hymen; un Ami enfin, que son goût épuré pour la vertu, rendit digne de l'approche de ces intelligences qui environnent le trône du Très-haut.⁷

This beginning is, perhaps, less than totally satisfactory, since the lack of an explicit reference to the hero is compounded by the fact that the eulogies do not apply exclusively to either the father or the son of the apocryphal tale.⁸ The exact identity of the central character thus remains equivocal but the author concludes his proposition by firmly dispelling any suspicion (should, indeed, any doubt remain in the reader's mind after the earlier pacific note) that his might be a celebration of martial prowess:

Lorsque je chante cet homme juste, éclipez-vous, ambition guerrière, orgueil philosophique: c'est à la solidité des vertus morales à faire disparaître vos vains fantômes.⁹

Less remarkable than the appearance of an invocation is its recipient, for the plea is directed - somewhat surprisingly in a biblical story - to Nature, the alleged inspiration of Homer and Gessner and the beauty of which, incidentally, inspires Raphael in Chant ii to lyrical praise of its divine creator.¹⁰ Some historical data on the Twelve Tribes of Israel, held

7. Le Clerc, pp. 1-2.

8. In the interests of clarity, the names Tobit and Tobias will henceforth be used to designate Tobie père and fils respectively. Names of other characters are also given in their English form, a practice that will be maintained throughout the chapter, whenever possible.

9. Le Clerc, p. 2.

10. Le Clerc, pp. 68-69.

captive in Nineveh, follows the invocation and prepares for the introduction of Tobit.

In the best epic tradition, Le Clerc adopts an artificial order of events and, although he briefly but sufficiently establishes Tobit's virtuousness and charitableness, his narrative opens at a time when Tobit has fallen into penury, through generously exhausting his patrimony in gifts to the less fortunate. The main biographical information on Tobit is delayed until the following canto, where it is given by Tobias, in response to a direct question from Raguel as to the fate of the Jews in Assyria. The essential feature of Tobit's physical condition is stated in the early character sketch but the author carefully avoids any mention of the cause of Tobit's loss of sight:

Il étoit aveugle. Non que l'organe de la vue eût perdu de son ressort sous la lime du temps, mais un accident cruel avoit fermé cet organe précieux, & lui déroboit ce ciel, qu'il aimoit tant à contempler.¹¹

If the question of Tobit's blindness reveals an instance in which biblical detail is deliberately omitted, then the motivation for Anna's outburst represents a distinct departure from the original account. Here it is Tobit's declaration that his son must earn his living with his hands that provokes the bitter remonstrances of his wife, on grounds, moreover, which provide an echo of the more usual temper of the genre. For Anna alleges that, from infancy, Tobias has given proof of heroic courage, which destines him for the most glorious enterprises, and she resents the debasement that mere manual labour would entail for him.

11. Le Clerc, pp. 8-9. There is the same fastidiousness in Tobias's speech in Chant ii : "Tandis que le soleil de justice éclairait l'ame de mon père, & la pénétrait de ses plus purs rayons, une taie épaisse, obscurcissant sa prunelle, lui déroba tout-à-coup l'aspect de la lumière créée". Le Clerc, p. 130.

Anna's furious indictment of Tobit for imprudent charity and excessive bounty leads to the latter's prayer for death but it is presumably in order not to infringe one of the cardinal rules of neoclassical epic theory that Le Clerc introduces at this point a significant modification of the biblical version.

In the Apocrypha, Tobit's lament is immediately followed by the exposition of Sarah's grievous predicament and her plea to God, who then intervenes through the archangel Raphael to end the misfortunes of both parties, by healing Tobit's eyes and by bringing about the pre-ordained marriage of Sarah with Tobias. The biblical story thus constitutes a quasi-dual action, in which two initially unconnected but contemporaneous situations are juxtaposed and find their eventual solution in a common train of events. Whatever the aesthetic attraction of this symmetrical structure, the requirement that the action of epic should be unique and unified clearly necessitated some alteration of the construction of the scriptural tale.

Le Clerc introduces Sarah at a correspondingly early stage but through the mouth of the mourning Tobit and in invented circumstances, which make no allusion to the seven previous husbands who perished in the marriage-chamber. A human contract replaces the predestination of the union of Sarah and Tobias, for Tobit reveals that, before their families were separated, it was agreed that the daughter of Raguel would become Tobias's wife. It is his father, therefore, in Le Clerc's version, who exhorts Tobias to claim his rightful bride in Ecbatana, as a supplementary motive to the prime object of the journey into Media, that of recovering the ten talents of silver Tobit had left in trust with Gabael in Rages and thereby repairing the depleted family fortunes. Raguel himself divulges the sinister deaths of Sarah's husbands, when Tobias asks for his

daughter's hand, and it is at this later point than in the Apocrypha that in a prophecy Raphael, disguised as Azarias the guide, reassures not only the suitor but his prospective father-in-law also that Tobias is indeed God's choice as a husband for Sarah.

Sarah's own prayer is not suppressed but is postponed until later that evening, when agreement has already been reached to hold the ceremony on the morrow. It is occasioned, not by the maid-servants of the Apocrypha, who reproach Sarah with her seven deceased husbands, but by a similar remonstrance on the part of an ungrateful girl companion, jealous of her mistress's future happiness with Tobias. Delaying Sarah's supplication to God in this way until Chant iii reinforces the human marriage contract as a means of preserving unity of action, for in Le Clerc's poem Raphael thus descends to earth in order to answer the requests of the Tobit household alone.

If Le Clerc's rearrangement of biblical structure is ascribed to his awareness of the established requirements of epic, then his amplification of the supernatural element in the original can no doubt be likewise explained. In the Apocrypha, the death of Sarah's seven husbands is attributed to the evil spirit Asmodaeus and it is with this latter alone that Tobias has to contend, whereas Le Clerc imagines the eventual intervention of the supreme infernal agent himself. Asmodaeus reports to a council of demons that neither he nor Death has any power over Sarah's latest husband and his revelation that the young couple have sworn to consecrate the first three nights of their union to God and consequently to delay consummation of the marriage for that period arouses in the assembly the fear that their example will inaugurate a reign of purity on earth. Asmodaeus is commissioned to subvert this dangerous resolution and, on his admission of failure, Satan himself sets out to seduce Tobias. His passage affects the whole of nature:

... sa route est marquéé par la destruction: les vents sont déchaînés, les airs, embrâsés du souffle mortel de la contagion, les fleurs se fanent, la verdure se desséche, les arbres sont dépouillés de leur feuillage, les animaux languissent, & les hommes sentent se rallumer en eux les funestes ardeurs des desirs empoisonnés.¹²

In the guise of a celestial being and by leading Tobias almost insensibly from a consideration of Sarah's moral virtues to an appreciation of her physical charms, the arch fiend succeeds in inducing the newly-weds to embrace. Tobias's guardian angel recalls him to his duty, however, and only then does Tobias burn the heart of the fish - his only defence against Asmodaeus in the Apocrypha - and drive Satan back to hell.

The magical properties of the viscera of the fish are not specified in the Book of Tobit but Le Clerc's Azarias justifies thus his advice that Tobias should burn the heart at the moment of his greatest sexual temptation:

Quand l'Etre impalpable daigne se communiquer à notre substance grossière, il institue des signes sensibles, qui, agissant sur nos organes, sont les symboles mystérieux de ses opérations intellectuelles.¹³

The heart is intended, therefore, as a visible and earthly sign of infernal impurity and its immolation in the fire constitutes a renewed token of that love of God which, in preference to an attachment to any created object, must devour Tobias's own heart.

Le Clerc is also concerned to explain the nature of Raphael, who is first seen presenting the prayers of Tobit, Anna and Tobias to God. He therefore postulates the existence of a great chain of beings, descending from archangel to insect, in which man occupies an intermediate position, pertaining to the spiritual entities by his thought and to the material substances by his body. The celestial spirits Le Clerc

12. Le Clerc, p. 191.

13. Le Clerc, pp. 143-44.

envisages at the top of this universal scale have no eyes, ears or wings but function solely through the faculty of thought and it is especially emphasized that they bear no resemblance to the anthropomorphic gods of mythology. Revealing his true identity after the healing of Tobit's cataracts, Raphael enlarges on his biblical statement that he neither ate nor drank during his sojourn on earth and neatly incorporates into his elucidation an anticipation of the future benefits of Christ's passion:

Il vous a paru que je buvois, & que je mangeois avec vous; mais je me nourris d'une viande invisible, & d'un breuvage qui ne peut être encore connu des hommes. Ils viendront, ces jours de salut, où le Messie tant attendu, s'identifiant avec eux, les élèvera à notre bonheur, en les faisant participer au vrai pain des Anges, & à ce vin toujours nouveau, qui ne se boit que dans la céleste Jérusalem! Mais ces sublimes mystères ne vous sont encore présentés que sous des ombres & des figures.¹⁴

In a similar vein, Le Clerc explains that the wholly spiritual nature of the devils languishing in hell attracts the fitting punishment of devouring remorse, despair, and rage but that God additionally invests them with a measure of incombustible matter, so that the rebel angels are further tormented by that sensation of consuming fires which is more properly reserved for material bodies.

In the light of Le Clerc's expansion of the marvellous component of his model, a procedure which makes his work more readily identifiable as epic, it might reasonably be supposed that Tobias's encounter with the fish would incur similar treatment to the same end. Surprisingly, despite the exaggeration of the fish into a fire-breathing, slavering monster, full advantage is not taken of the possibilities of the situation. When the monster attacks Tobias in the river Tigris, the scene seems set for a heroic struggle, especially in view of Anna's estimation of her son's potential prowess. In fact, the anticipated battle never materializes and the abiding impression of the incident is this rather pitiful picture of the fish out of its natural environment:

Mais à peine a-t-il quitté l'humide élément, tel qu'on vit jadis le crédule amant de Dalila perdre sa force surnaturelle avec sa chevelure mystérieuse, tel le monstre, sous sa dure écorce, impuissant & sans ressort, tente des efforts inutiles. Ses yeux sanglants sortent de leur orbite; sa queue terrible bat faiblement le sable; sa gueule se referme, & ne peut plus se r'ouvrir; ses nageoires dressés & inhabiles à le mouvoir, le livrent sans défense à son vainqueur, qui sent son coeur enflé de la joie d'un premier succès.¹⁵

14. Le Clerc, pp. 243-44.

15. Le Clerc, p. 76

This refusal to endow the fish episode with an invented element of physical conflict and the absence of any contest between supernatural forces indicate an unwillingness to supply one of the chief distinguishing features of the genre but by his inclusion of Homeric similes Le Clerc does at least attempt to characterize his style as epic. The points of comparison are drawn almost exclusively from the realm of nature. Tobias and Sarah at the wedding ceremony are likened to two intertwining palm trees and Tobias's words of comfort to the fearful Raguel and Edna resemble a cool breeze freshening the air which has been heated by the fiery rays of the noonday sun. The most extended simile is of like character and describes the consternation Tobias causes by demanding the hand of Sarah:

Ainsi qu'au lever de l'aurore, au retour de cette saison, qui ramène les doux plaisirs, une troupe d'oiseaux qui s'est abattue sur une poignée de grains qu'ont semé[sic] des mains insidieuses, expriment la joie qui les anime, par le trémoussement de leurs aîles; & par les concerts variés de leurs chants, semblent remercier le ciel qui leur donne la pâture; si tout-à-coup un chasseur, caché derrière un feuillage, a fait éclater le bruit du salpêtre enflammé, à l'instant la troupe étonnée s'élançe, se disperse avec effroi; l'air agité & fendu de leurs aîles, répète les cris lugubres qu'ils jettent en fuyant: ainsi la proposition de Tobie répandit la surprise, la douleur, l'épouvante, dans cette famille, qu'allarmoient des raisons inconnues au jeune amant.¹⁶

The simile makes a not inconsiderable contribution to the theatrical impact of this particular scene and Le Clerc's sense of the dramatic is further displayed in his handling of the question of Tobias and Sarah's conjugal relations. In the Apocrypha, the young couple abstain from sexual intercourse on their wedding night only and their self-denial constitutes no more than a secondary precaution against Asmodaeus, whom Tobias has already put to flight by burning the heart of the fish, when once he enters the bridal chamber. The extension of the period of restraint to three nights and Raphael's insistence on its absolute necessity infuse

16. Le Clerc, p. 114-15.

a note of tension into this matter of chastity, while the intensification of the successive temptations Tobias endures, together with the appearance of Satan himself for the final assault, ensures that the affair terminates at a climactic pitch.

The moralizing tone which is already a distinctive mark of the narrative of the Book of Tobit is preserved and even enhanced by Le Clerc. The various homilies by Tobit are reproduced in an augmented form and the addition of frequent admonitions by Raphael strengthens the edifying aspect of the tale. Such a treatment of a story which itself contains practical examples of model behaviour led to Tobie being envisaged as a palatable form of moral instruction for the children of France. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, one Cottard published a revised version of the poem,¹⁷ in which he suppressed passages he deemed to be beyond the comprehension of young readers and omitted some epic fictions which, to his mind, impaired the simplicity of the biblical original. Cottard argued in his preface that the critical oblivion into which Le Clerc had been cast was unworthy both of the man and his work and divined in the poem a deep religious conviction on the part of its author.¹⁸

17. L. M. Cottard, Tobie, poème en quatre chants, revu et mis à la portée des écoles primaires des deux sexes (Paris: Hachette, n.d.)

18. Cottard, Avant - Propos, p.6

Le Roy, La Tobiade, 1786¹⁹

Little more than a decade after the publication of Le Clerc's Tobie, another epic version of the Book of Tobit appeared. Apparently unaware of his predecessor's recent efforts, Le Roy expressed his surprise that such an instructive and interesting Christian subject had not previously been recast in epic form by any French poet and conjectured that this neglect stemmed from an excessive respect for Boileau's declaration of the unsuitability of biblical material for epic treatment.²⁰ Le Roy's personal contention that the Tobit theme was peculiarly appropriate to the genre gains indirect support from the high correspondence to the original he was able to claim for his poem: "Je ne me suis permis aucun changement, qui d'ailleurs n'étoit pas nécessaire; j'ai suivi la vérité de l'histoire presque à la lettre; j'ai seulement étendu quelques idées trop concises, détaillé ce qui n'étoit présenté qu'en général, & ajouté, pour l'ornement, quelques fictions que la nature du Poëme sembloit exiger."²¹

Despite this degree of fidelity, Le Roy still felt impelled to deny that his embellishments implied any lack of respect for the Scriptures and he cited Milton's Paradise Lost and Racine's Esther and Atalie as works which, though more presumptuous in this respect than his own, could nevertheless be read without offence to Christian piety.²²

19. Abbé N. Le Roy, La Tobiade, ou Tobie secouru par l'ange. Poëme épique en dix chants (Sedan: Morin, 1786). The curé of Marville Nicolas Le Roy (c.1740-c.1824) wrote tragedies on the Biblical Daniel and the French Saint Louis and in 1820 published Clangor tubae, a verse opusculé treating prophecies relating to the disasters which would precede the end of the world.

20. Le Roy, Préface, p. i. Even if he was aware of Le Clerc's Tobie but denied it true epic status on account of its prose medium, Le Roy was still incorrect. Saint-Peres had published a verse epic on the Tobit story in 1648. See Sayce, pp. 79-80.

21. Le Roy, Préface, p. i.

22. Le Roy, Préface, pp. i-ii.

The allegorical level on which Le Roy believed that the story of Tobit could be read from beginning to end provides further tacit substantiation of his view that the subject seemed expressly made for epic treatment. For, although he denies the essentiality of allegory in epic and, moreover, disputes its existence in Homeric poetry, Le Roy insists that, as a supplement to the prerequisites of the genre, allegory can only enhance an epic poem by increasing its instructive value for the reader.²³ That the didactic worth of the Tobiade was considerable in the eyes of its author must therefore be concluded from Le Roy's detailed interpretation of the allegorical significance of his tale,²⁴ the essentials of which are as follows: Tobit represents God (Father and Son), Tobias symbolizes Theophilus (Man) and the journey broadly stands for the passage through life; Raphael is to be equated with the grace of God and Sarah personifies wisdom, her seven previous husbands indicating the seven ages of the world when wisdom had few true worshippers; the fish betokens the crime into which Theophilus falls and the burning of the animal's heart depicts the penitence he subsequently embraces.

If much of Le Roy's exposition is persuasive and some quite ingenious, not a few of his explanations are contrived and unconvincing. The equation of Sarah with wisdom falls into this latter category and gains little more authority from the inclusion in Chant iv of a curious dream sequence, in which Tobias is transported on his wedding night to an ancient celestial palace, where the goddess Wisdom is attended by a thousand female moral abstractions. Following their marriage, Tobias and Wisdom stroll through a luxuriant garden, adorned with statues of major Old Testament figures in characteristic poses, among which is an unfinished representation of

23. Le Roy, Préface, p. iii.

24. Le Roy, Préface, pp. iv-vii.

Tobit carrying a blood-stained man on his back.

This consecration of the piety of Tobit in a piece of heavenly sculpture serves as a timely reminder of the true subject of the poem, of whom there has been little mention in the two previous cantos. For, unlike his predecessor, Le Roy firmly specifies Tobit as the hero of the work, although exact identification and amplifying detail are, in fact, delayed until the invocation. The proposition envisages the case of Tobit as an example of a wider policy on the part of God and thus strikes a more general religious note:

Je chante du Seigneur les oeuvres éclatantes,
Et la paix qu'il répand dans les ames constantes.
Souvent par l'infortune il éprouve les siens;
Mais après cette épreuve, il les comble de biens,
C'est ainsi qu'il traita le vertueux Tobie.²⁵

Just as Le Roy follows Le Clerc in observing the neoclassical traditions of the beginning of epic, so the Tobiade enjoys a structural pattern which is equally as regular as the construction of Tobie. The narrative opens in medias res and only the barest indication of Tobit's present state precedes his prayer for death, which appears at this point to be motivated solely by his deplorable physical and emotional condition. The contribution to Tobit's death-wish of Anna's anger over the incident of the kid is not revealed until Tobias's recital of his father's life-story in Chants vi and vii.

Although his solution of the formal problem the apocryphal story of Tobit presents for a neoclassical epicist is less successful than Le Clerc's, Le Roy, too, avoids any suspicion of duality of action. Reference to Sarah is postponed until Chant iii, when her history and prayer are narrated objectively. The possibility of Tobias marrying Sarah

25. Le Roy, p. 1.

is broached, as in the biblical account, by Azarias, shortly before the travellers reach Ecbatana, so that here, also, the motive for the peregrination is simply the recovery of the ten talents.

Le Clerc, it will be remembered, had warned his readers against expecting a warlike tale but Le Roy even invests his heaven with a decidedly martial aspect. At God's signal, legions of immortal spirits flock to his throne:

Tels on voit les guerriers, quand après la défaite,
La trompette bruyante annonce la retraite:
Elle sonne; à l'instant, on voit de toutes parts
Revenir au galop les escadrons épars,
Raccourir vers leur chef, & quitter la poursuite
De l'ennemi vaincu qu'ils avoient mis en fuite.
Ainsi font les Esprits.²⁶

The combative motif is continued in a description of two fights between Asmodaeus, properly the sole tempter of Tobias, and Raphael. After the first engagement, in which he is beaten but released, Asmodaeus flies to the moon, from where the demons keep earth under constant surveillance, and dons armour, which is engraved in the manner of the shield of Achilles in the Iliad. His mail avails him nothing, however, and having vainly sought escape through a series of metamorphoses, Asmodaeus meets his biblical fate, being bound by Raphael and left in the desert. Nor even does this encounter conclude the military theme in the poem, for in the final canto the infernal army launches a desperate and unsuccessful attack on God's forces.

Inexplicably, in view of his predilection for armed conflict, Le Roy makes no more of Tobias's encounter with the fish than did Le Clerc. As in the earlier work, the incident provides the occasion for a homily from Azarias, who once again becomes a convenient vehicle for the dissemination of moral and religious lessons. Tobias's bewilderment at the

26. Le Roy, p. 8.

seemingly inequitable fortunes on earth of the impious and the just elicits from his guide this explanation of God's designs:

Sur le juste, dit l'Ange, il a toujours les yeux;
 Mais réservant pour lui des biens plus précieux,
 Il éprouve, & souvent par de longues souffrances,
 Il lui fait mériter ses grandes récompenses.
 Le Ciel, heureux séjour de la félicité,
 Est le prix qu'il réserve à sa fidélité.
 Là Dieu sur ses amis verse des biens sans nombre;
 Là règne un jour serein, sans nuage & sans ombre:
 Là les justes, sans crainte & sans trouble à jamais,
 Goûteront les douceurs d'une ineffable paix.²⁷

The disguised archangel is also employed to vindicate for the reader the multiple widowing of Sarah by Asmodaeus. The terse apocryphal justification of the mass murder of the husbands on the grounds of Sarah's predestination as the bride of Tobias was obviously deemed inadequate, for the spouses are firmly indicted as the authors of their own destruction. Tobias, nervous at the prospect of sharing the fate of his predecessors, is reassured by his mentor:

Ami, ce n'est pas vous que ce péril menace.
 Ceux que Satan poursuit avec autorité,
 Ce sont ces vils mortels, qui par lubricité,
 Du lien conjugal profanent le mystère;
 Ceux dont l'unique but est de se satisfaire,
 Sans porter vers le ciel un regard attentif,
 Etouffant dans leur cœur tout honnête motif,
 Pareils à des chevaux, dont la fureur éclate
 A l'aspect imprévu d'un objet qui les flatte.²⁸

Occasionally, Le Roy's tendency to enlarge on his model leads to the introduction of somewhat dubious material. An allusion in the Book of Tobit to Tobias's pet dog, for example, results in a fanciful fiction, in which the demon Belphegor assumes identical canine form in order to torment Tobit and Anna with fears for their son's safety. Furthermore, this particular incident contributes to the impression that the poem

27. Le Roy, p. 20. Cf. Le Clerc, pp. 65-66.

28. Le Roy, p. 42.

encompasses an excessive variation in tone. While the concept that the wedding guests hugely enjoy the spectacle of hideous beggars fighting over alms debases the prevailing atmosphere of the original, conversely the canticle intoned at the feast celebrating Tobias's homecoming, with its anticipation of the Messianic era, transcends Tobit's prayer for rejoicing in the Apocrypha. Again, little critical sensitivity is evident in a simile which compares the majestic aspect of the rising sun to a superb and confident giant, about to engage in combat with an imprudent pygmy.

The ten cantos of the Tobiade total just under 5500 lines, a length which necessitates considerable padding of the slight biblical theme. In the final instance, it is the over-expansion of sermonizing passages more than the interpolation of epic elements which makes the reading of the poem a rather tedious experience.

Bitaubé, Joseph, 1767²⁹

To turn from the Apocrypha to the Bible proper, chronologically the earliest theme from the Old Testament to be accorded epic treatment in the later eighteenth century was the story of Joseph recounted in Genesis.

29. P.-J. Bitaubé, Joseph, en neuf chants (Paris: Prault, 1767). References are to the seventh edition, namely Joseph in Oeuvres complètes, 9 vols. (Paris: Dentu, 1804), vol. VII. Paul-Jérémie Bitaubé (1732-1808) was born and bred in Prussia but wrote in the language of Voltaire and of Frederick the Great. Principally famous for his prose translations of the Iliad (1764) and the Odyssey (1785), he allegedly wrote Joseph in order to champion the cause of the prose poem. Bitaubé's lengthy periods of residence in France incurred him the displeasure of his Emperor but the esteem in which he was held in his adopted country is reflected by his election as President of the Institut de France some two years after its inception.

Bitaubé's own denial of any pretension to epic status for his prose poem³⁰ should not be taken at its face value but may be dismissed as an example of a fairly stereotyped ploy by writers of prose epic to obviate possible criticism of their medium by traditionalists of the genre. That Bitaubé was alive to the implications of his avoidance of prosody is evidenced by his claim that the language he employs is not entirely dissimilar from poetic diction and by his contention that, in any case, prose is a more appropriate vehicle for a simple subject, which exploits a pastoral setting and depicts patriarchal customs.³¹ The insincerity of Bitaubé's disclaimer is demonstrated within the same prefatory essay by his specification of the action his work celebrates and his insistence on its unity,³² together with his justification within the European epic tradition of his inclusion of the supernatural.³³ The final proof that Bitaubé's Joseph can confidently be ascribed to the category of epic is internal and lies in the adherence of the poem to those structural elements recognized as peculiar to the genre.

It is, perhaps, on account of the expectations aroused by the argumentation within the context of epic in the preface that Bitaubé feels obliged to precise the nature of his subject from the very outset of the proem. Preliminary references to the originality of his inspiration and the peaceful but nevertheless noble character of his theme initiate this process but the tenor of Joseph really becomes apparent in the proposition and especially in Bitaubé's ensuing challenge to the reader to appreciate a tone which diverges from the martial strain of the heroic

30. Bitaubé, Préface, p. i.

31. Bitaubé, Préface, p. i.

32. Bitaubé, Préface, p. ii.

33. Bitaubé, Préface, pp. iii-xii.

Muse:

Je célèbre cet homme vertueux qui, vendu par ses frères, précipité de malheurs en malheurs, élevé enfin de l'abîme des disgrâces au faite de la grandeur et de la puissance, bienfaiteur du pays où il porta des fers, jeune encore, se montra, dans l'une et l'autre fortune, un modèle accompli de sagesse.

Mortels, aimeriez-vous assez peu la vertu pour qu'un tel sujet vous parût austère? Enflammés par la trompette héroïque, qui fait retentir à votre oreille le fracas des armes, les cris et les combats, où pour la plupart vous n'êtes point appelés, vos coeurs seraient-ils insensibles à la voix douce et touchante des vertus pacifiques qui peuvent être votre partage?³⁴

Doubtless assuming that these equations between literary taste and innate moral virtue will have discouraged an immediate negative response to his particular plot, Bitaubé is emboldened to give a practical demonstration of the dominant atmosphere of his poem. An early simile expands on the manner of Joseph's displacement from the paternal abode in terms which prove to reflect accurately the general flavour of the treatment. In this comparison, Joseph is likened to a flower which, accustomed to the warm caresses of the west wind, is suddenly assailed by a cold blast from the north and uprooted from the tranquillity and serenity of its natural habitat. As if to emphasize that this rather affected image is no aberration, there follows a direct transcription of Joseph's daily elegiac lament, as he pastures his flock of sheep in a secluded spot near the Nile. Any remaining doubt concerning the mood of the work is definitively dispelled by an effusive physical portrait of the protagonist, which also firmly designates him as a recognizable literary type. For, with his shoulder-length blond ringlets, rosy complexion and sky-blue eyes, glistening with unshed tears, Joseph enjoys the effeminate appearance and emotional sensibility of many a preromantic hero.

34. Bitaubé, pp. 1-2.

Perhaps fortunately in view of his hermaphrodite mien, Bitaubé's Joseph is no more required to exhibit martial instincts and military skill than was his biblical counterpart. An abject fear of the overseer, Butophis, is even imputed to him, although this same dread invests his plea for the non-imprisonment of a fellow-slave with additional credit. In a work of sustained lyricism, which celebrates a pacific central character, the introduction of heroic overtones must be effected with care, if they are not to seem entirely misplaced. Such a calculated approach is noticeably absent in the imaginary scene where Joseph, bidding a fond farewell to his erstwhile companions following his release by Potiphar, is arrested for the alleged attempted rape of his mistress and swoons with shocked disappointment. An extended simile of singular inappropriateness compares this ignoble faint with the demise of a youthful warrior, struck down when seemingly at safety, amid rejoicing at his valour in the field:

Tel un jeune héros, sortant du champ de bataille où il a signalé sa valeur, est reçu aux portes de la ville avec transport, lorsqu'au milieu des embrassemens des citoyens et de sa famille un ennemi l'atteint d'un plomb mortel: il tombe; l'audace de la victoire s'éteint dans ses yeux mourans; le sang coule sur les lauriers dont on a couronné son front; et les bras entrelacés qui le serraient en témoignage de joie et de tendresse, ne lui servent plus que de soutien.³⁵

Bitaubé here appears totally unaware that the most signal victory of which his hero can boast lies in his escape from the amorous embraces of a beautiful woman.

If Bitaubé's narrative is essentially unheroic in tone, the basic reason can be sought in the author's preoccupation with Joseph's affective state at the expense of that concentration on the accomplishment of the

35. Bitaubé, pp. 99-100.

exploit, which is the practice in regular neoclassical epic. This absorption with the emotional universe of the hero betrays, of course, the increasing influence of the preromantic movement in French literature but rather more interesting in the present context is the possibly unconscious justification that this bias receives within the text.

The point centres on two independent and divergent elucidations of the benefits accruing from Joseph's captivity in Egypt. In his exculpation of his brothers in Genesis, Joseph attributes his experiences to a divine plan to ensure the survival of his family during the famine and this public and rather impersonal view of his function is duly reiterated in the poem. Joseph declares:

Dieu a permis ces infortunes afin que je pusse veiller sur
l'Egypte et sur le hameau paternel.³⁶

However, in God's earlier reply to the intercession on Joseph's behalf of the heavenly host, another motivation is enunciated and it is this invented explanation which more closely mirrors Bitaubé's treatment of the biblical story. God reveals:

J'ai voulu épurer la sagesse par le malheur; j'ai voulu
apprendre à la terre que jeune on peut être vertueux, et au ciel,
que l'homme, inférieur aux anges, est leur égal quand il conserve
son innocence au sein des disgraces.³⁷

The emphasis here on the moral improvement of a private individual and his consequent value as a spiritual example neatly condones Bitaubé's interest in the psychological life of his hero.

This is, perhaps, a convenient point to mention another preromantic motif which makes an early appearance in Joseph, namely the nature theme. Since Potiphar's country estate outside Memphis provides the locus for much of the action, the setting of the poem can be said to be largely pastoral. The rusticity of the environment is further emphasized by the terminology employed, which transforms the settlement into a hamlet and

36. Bitaubé, p. 247.

37. Bitaubé, pp. 129-30.

the slaves into shepherds and shepherdesses. It must also be recorded that the quality of life of these rural captives is quite consonant with their idyllic milieu and the cheerful songs they sing to the accompaniment of home-made lyres reflect the measure of their lot. Nature, however, does not merely constitute a decorative adjunct but, in the fashion of the new movement, is endowed with an ability to conform with the human mood, which occasionally empowers her active participation in the affairs of mankind. For example, nature's complicity in the seduction of Joseph is blatant:

Zaluca s'était retirée sous un berceau de myrte qui paraissait consacré à l'amour. Un lit de gazon tendre et fleuri tapissait la terre. Au bout du berceau l'on voyait Vénus dans les bras de Mars: le marbre peignait l'ardeur et l'ivresse de leurs transports: on croyait entendre leurs soupirs, qu'exprimaient le feuillage mollement agité et le cours interrompu d'un ruisseau. Le myrte ménageait l'entrée à une lumière plus tendre que celle de la lune: l'haleine caressante des zéphyrus semblait être celle des amours, et les oiseaux qu'attirait cet asile y adoucissaient leurs ramages.³⁸

Small wonder that the author makes the following comment on nature's conspiracy with Zaluca to weaken the resolve of the young Hebrew:

Que de pièges dont la volupté l'entoure! Les feux du midi portaient dans l'ame une douce langueur; les oiseaux retirés sous cet ombrage, affaiblissaient leurs chants et se livraient à l'amour; le myrte, sensible à leurs plaisirs, agitait plus mollement son feuillage.³⁹

In sharp contradistinction to this sensuous and immoral aspect, nature also constitutes for Bitaubé, as earlier for Rousseau and later for Chateaubriand, a visible demonstration of the existence of a primum movens. The slave Itobal's interest in the Hebrew religion is fanned into complete acceptance by Joseph's enthusiastic exposition of the Divine Creator's self-revelation through the natural world.

38. Bitaubé, p. 91.

39. Bitaubé, p. 93.

If, as the foregoing survey suggests, the spirit of Bitaubé's poem is foreign to the biblical account and reflects, rather, contemporary literary trends, his narrative adheres in all essentials reasonably closely to Old Testament data. The principal instance of invention concerns the introduction of an orphan girl, to whom Joseph is eventually betrothed and who becomes a major source of conflict within the family. The underlying reasons for Joseph's alienation from his brothers that can be detected in Genesis are not omitted, however, so that the suppression of the dream of the sheaves can be attributed to a commendable regard for concision in the recital to Zaluca in Book ii, which chronicles Joseph's early history. The pre-eminent place that Joseph occupied in his father's affections is duly recorded but the ill-report of his brothers he brings to Jacob in Genesis is transmuted into a homily he delivers to them following his discovery that they neglected their flocks to pursue their dissolute merrymaking. All the same, in Bitaubé's version it is Simeon's smouldering resentment of Joseph's wholly fictitious engagement that flares into an assassination attempt and ensures Joseph's enslavement on the very day of his nuptials.

The addition in the poem of a new and fabricated dimension to Joseph's adolescence is balanced by an embellishment on the infatuation of Potiphar's wife for the Hebrew slave. Bitaubé's interpretation of the biblical comment on Joseph's good looks has been seen above to result in a typical preromantic physiognomy, to which it is supposed that Zaluca has been preconditioned to respond by infernal interference. The vision of a young man that Zaluca has received in a temple of Venus and the oracular pronouncement that he alone can satisfy her emotional needs predetermines her pursuit of Joseph and foreshadows her melodramatic suicide over the robe she had earlier snatched from him.

The exact diabolic motivation behind the fatal hallucination is not detailed and so remains somewhat obscure but less ambiguity surrounds the other numerous examples of supernatural activity in the poem. Personified abstractions of both celestial and infernal persuasion are introduced to vastly different ends, while the range of angelic function proves to be extremely diverse. If one heavenly spirit creates the conditions for famine by dispersing rain clouds and destroying the fertility of the soil, a colleague performs the rather more pleasant task of proclaiming the virtues of the worthiest mortals, so that their merits are recognized in Heaven and, occasionally, even on earth.

It is not the moderate employment of the marvellous, however, any more than an artificial chronology of events or a regular opening, that can account for the contemporary fame of Bitaubé's Joseph. The secret of its success lay less in its observance of much of the canonical practice of neoclassical epic than in its translation into elegant French prose of the reading public's preoccupation with sentiment and romance.

Lemercier, Moyse, 1823⁴⁰

To find the next biblical subject treated by epic poets of the later eighteenth century in France, it is necessary to turn from Joseph, who was responsible for the descent of the Israelites into Egypt, to Moses,

40. L.-J.-N. Lemercier, Mosye, poëme en quatre chants (Paris: Bossange, 1823). Népomucène Lemercier (1771-1840) was the author of a prodigious number of works spanning various genres. He composed tragedies on such historical figures as Agamemnon, Charlemagne, Clovis, Charles VI, Louis IX and wrote cyclical, regular and comic epics. His literature lectures at the Athénée between 1811 and 1814 were published later as Cours analytique de la littérature générale, ou 4 vols. (Paris: Nepveu, 1817). Elected to the Académie Française in 1810, Lemercier was replaced on his death by Victor Hugo.

who engineered the escape of his people from that land and what had allegedly become intolerable slavery.

If Lemer cier himself is to be believed, Moyse, although published in its entirety only in 1823, can be included in this study by reason of its date of composition. In his preface,⁴¹ Lemer cier claims that Moyse was the first to be written but the last to appear of the four poems comprising the epic cycle which he opened with Homère⁴² and Alexandre⁴³ in 1800, and continued with L'Atlantiade⁴⁴ in 1812. Lemer cier's contention is substantiated by the grounds he alleges for the considerable lapse in time between the composition and publication of Moyse: the proscription by the Terror of works of a pious and moral nature; his personal dislike of the imperially-orientated politics of the following epoch and, finally, his unwillingness for his poem to be confounded with a spate of mystical literature.⁴⁵

While it thus complies with the chronological limits set for this examination of the French epic, Moyse differs radically in conception, if not in actual practice, from the other poems treating a biblical theme which are analysed in the present chapter. A full appreciation of Lemer cier's intention in Moyse is possible only if reference is made to the overall design of the quartet of epics and no better account of Lemer cier's project can be given than that which he himself provides in

41. Lemer cier, Avertissement, pp. i-ii.

42. L.-J.-N. Lemer cier, Homère, poème en quatre chants (Paris: Renouard, 1800).

43. L.-J.-N. Lemer cier, Alexandre, poème en quatre chants (Paris: Renouard, 1800).

44. L.-J.-N. Lemer cier, L'Atlantiade, ou la théogonie newtonienne, poème en six chants (Paris: Pichard, 1812).

45. Lemer cier, Moyse, Avertissement, p. ii.

his various prefaces.

In his preliminary remarks to the Atlantiade,⁴⁶ Lemer cier reveals that an attempt to define the essence, aim and peculiar merits of narrative poetry had led him to conclude that the genre was originally an instructive vehicle, in which the principles of legislation, of the sciences and the arts, together with the laws of nature, were expounded in the form of entertaining fictions. In an effort to remedy the complete absence he noted in modern French literature of such allegorical narratives, as distinct from purely didactic poetry, he conceived of four epics which, though self-contained and independent, would together form a single corpus. The individual poems would celebrate, in the order in which they figured in his scheme, the physical sciences, legislation, poetry and war and would conjointly form a poetic summary of human knowledge.

Lemer cier later disclosed in the preface to Moyse that these particular categories corresponded to the four distinct principles he claimed to distinguish in human intelligence and he also explained his decision to depict them via the supreme geniuses in each domain, Newton, Moses, Homer, and Alexander respectively: "A la personne de ces fondateurs des choses, m ont paru se rattacher aisément les types de la perfection idéale, dont ils offrent les premiers modèles; et j'ai entrepris d'exposer, sous leurs traits, un tableau complet des facultés de l'entendement humain, qu'ils ont si hautement manifestées."⁴⁷

According to Lemer cier, the historical and cultural milieu proper to each of these representative figures demanded an appropriate literary

46. Lemer cier, L'Atlantiade, Discours préparatoire, pp. iii-lxxx, passim.

47. Lemer cier, Moyse, Avertissement, p. i.

approach and the varied subject-matter of the four elements comprising his epic cycle hence enabled him to adopt a like number of poetic styles.⁴⁸

As support for his choice of Moses as the archetypal figure in the annals of human legislation, Lemerrier declared continued Jewish observance of primitive statutes to be an unique phenomenon in world history and cited the persistence of that tradition as incontestable proof of the Hebrew prophet's genius. Yet he was careful to establish that his use of Jewish laws implied no approval on his part of the barbarous elements they contained but was prompted by their exceptional harmony with the historico-social environment that produced them. Lemerrier gave as an additional reason for his preference his belief that the French nation, which he saw as naturally inclined to inconstancy, could usefully be offered a striking example of the preservation of national legislation.⁴⁹

In the poem under discussion, therefore, chronologically the earliest of the four epics constituting the cycle but actually forming the second part of the total work, Lemerrier extols Moses the historic law-giver, as this rather imprecise proposition announces:

Mon luth va célébrer le saint Législateur,
Du troupeau d'Israël vénérable pasteur,
Dont la voix rassembla les premières familles,
Mère des nations dont les nôtres sont filles.⁵⁰

This general theme is encapsulated, in the manner neoclassical epic theory demanded, in a specific action provided by the rebellion Korah, Dathan and Abiram are recorded in Chapter xvi of the Book of Numbers as leading against the authority of Moses.

48. Lemerrier, L'Atlantiade, Discours préparatoire, p. xviii.

49. Lemerrier, Moyse, Avertissement, pp. vi-vii.

50. Lemerrier, Moyse, p. 3.

In Lemer cier's tale, the insurrection is fostered by Satan, who seeks to obliterate Moses and his theocratic government in the knowledge that the original seduction of the human race in the persons of Adam and Eve is invalidated, if a whole nation obeys constant laws and follows just ways. Satan is fully alive to the far-reaching implications of the legislative role of Moses:

Quoi donc! insecte altier, pétri de fange immonde,
Crois-tu donner la règle et l'équilibre au monde?51

Satan conjectures anxiously and himself provides the following evaluation of the status of the law-giver:

Rois, ministres, guerriers, vous êtes ces étoiles
Que la nuit sombre en foule étale dans ses voiles:
Mais le Législateur, tel que l'astre des jours,
Des âges qu'il conduit dominant tout le cours,
Brille, au loin, sans rivaux, comme aux cieus qu'il éclaire
Rayonne du soleil la splendeur solitaire.52

Fittingly, the receiving of the Tables of Law is the final incident Moses mentions in the report he gives Job in Chants ii and iii of his activities as God's instrument on earth from the time of his calling in Midian. The introduction into the poem of Job, whom Lemer cier makes journey from the deserts of Arabia to pay homage to the friend of his youth, seems inspired merely by the need to establish a pretext for the recital, which itself serves to throw the revolt into relief by underlining the absolute pre-eminence of Moses among men.

For Lemer cier's purposes, however, Moses represents the supreme embodiment of the legislative principle he believed to be inherent in man and stands as the symbolic initiator of a sphere of universal human activity.

51. Lemer cier, Moyse, p. 13.

52. Lemer cier, Moyse, pp. 13-14. Lemer cier had previously extolled the legislator above the creative artist in 1800. In an imaginary conversation with Lycurgus, Homer concedes: "Donner des lois à l'homme est la première gloire". See Lemer cier, Homère, p. 62.

As such, the historical significance of the Hebrew prophet's promulgation of a legal code among the Israelites needs to be clearly demonstrated and, consequently, following the demise of the conspirators, who are swallowed up in a fissure, which opens beneath their feet, Gabriel enters the holy tabernacle with Moses and affords him a preview of the legislative destiny of mankind in a prediction of some 480 lines.⁵³ The prophecy is nothing if not comprehensive in scope, for it begins with the republican and monarchic theocracies of the Hebrews under the Judges and Kings and closes with a tableau of late eighteenth-century France, touching in the meantime on the Zoroastrian laws of the Persians, the constitutions of a succession of pagan republics, Christianity and Islamism, with the triumph of Charles-Martel over the Saracens providing a convenient transition from militant Mohammedanism to the successive ages of Lemer cier's native France.

The above reference to Gabriel and the earlier allusion to Satan indicate the inclusion in Moyse of the merveilleux chrétien. If recourse to the supernatural inevitably resulted from Lemer cier's determination to provide his contemporaries with a practical illustration of the educative function and allegorical manner of early narrative poetry, he at least exhibits a welcome historical sense in his choice of divinities. In his introductory comments to the Atlantiade, Lemer cier had argued that his conception of a quadripartite work celebrating four distinct fields of human achievement necessitated the use of as many forms of the marvellous, the precise nature of which would be determined by the historical setting of

53. Lemer cier gave a public reading of this portion of the epic at a session of the Institut Royal de France on 24 April, 1821. See L.-J.-N. Lemer cier, Tableau des législations successives du monde, tiré d'un poème sur Moyse (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1821).

each individual epic.⁵⁴ Since the supernatural component of a particular poem of the quartet was to be consistent with the intellectual and cultural climate in which the protagonist lived, Lemer cier recognized that the machinery proper to a narrative concerning Moses must be culled from the Bible: "Le feu des cantiques sacrés, l'esprit saint de Jéhovah, les lutt es des anges célestes contre Satan et les autres démons des ténèbres, concouraient à diviniser les querelles du prophète avec Dathan, Abiron et Coré, de qui le châ timent est le fonds de l'un des sujets."⁵⁵

Therefore, in addition to the miraculous events associated with the Exodus, the poem presents the familiar picture of Satan retreating to his infernal kingdom, after emerging yet again the loser in his customary contest with a militant archangel. A rather more painful fate befalls Anarchy, Satan's able lieutenant in the venture to incite sedition among the Israelites, for he is bound by Gabriel to a rock on a lake of burning fire in hell.

A further instance of supernatural intervention affords Lemer cier the opportunity to incorporate a love episode in his poem. The incident is drawn from the Book of Numbers, Chapter xxv, which records Israel's sexual and religious transgressions in Shittim and the slaying of Zimri and his concubine, Cozbi, daughter of the Midianite prince, Zur, by Phinehas, grandson of Aaron the priest. In Moyse, the false gods Peor and Belial induce the men of Israel to couple with the daughters of the

54. Lemer cier, L'Atlantiade, Discours préparatoire, p. xvii.

55. Lemer cier, L'Atlantiade, Discours préparatoire, pp. xviii-xix. By the same principle, Lemer cier was forced to innovate in the Atlantiade and create a supernatural system in keeping with the advanced physical theories (Newtonian in essence) he ascribes to the Symphytes, the intellectually precocious race inhabiting the island of Eugeia/Atlantis. The ensuing theogony is a bizarre concoction, consisting largely of personified natural phenomena, such as centripetal and centrifugal forces, etc.

Moabites in order to corrupt the pure morals of the Hebrews and thereby encompass their downfall. The terse biblical account of the particular trespass of Zimri is humanized by Lemercier's assumption of a bond of friendship between the two men and rendered more atmospheric by an evocation of the seductive charms of the virgin, Cozbi. The killing of the lovers, a spontaneous expression of righteous indignation in the Old Testament, here enjoys the heightened drama of a premeditated act, for it follows Zimri's disregard of Phinehas's symbolic declaration of intent in the form of a sword the latter leaves by the bed in which his comrade is sleeping. If there is a slight variation in the precise weapon used, the general circumstances in which retribution is exacted are preserved and the youthful lovers are transfixed by a single arrow as they lie in an amorous embrace.

Lemercier further adds to the skeletal biblical narrative in the distinct personalities he allots to the principal conspirators, who are little more than named in the original version. The least complex character is the avaricious Abiram, who is motivated almost exclusively by an overwhelming lust for gold, while Dathan's participation in the rebellion stems from the contrast he affects to discern between the present authoritative conduct of Moses and the promises of equality and liberty, with which he persuaded the Israelites to leave Egypt. Lemercier suggests, however, that Dathan's ostensibly egalitarian principles conceal in reality a deep-seated and possibly unconscious envy, which renders his actions rather less sympathetic. Korah bears more than a superficial resemblance to Dathan in his opposition to the predominance of one family in Israel and his resentment of the exclusive control Moses and Aaron exercise over the ark of the covenant. But calculating ambition ensures that Korah's energies are more positively channelled and he aspires to high office, which he hopes to attain by usurping Aaron's position. Lemercier establishes beyond any doubt Korah's leadership in the conspiracy and the astuteness and

intellectual flexibility he imputes to the arch plotter are most clearly discernible in a speech nerving his companions to opposition, in which Korah cleverly includes remarks calculated to whet the particular appetites of his fellow-rebels.

It will be remembered that, in the prefatory discourse to the Atlantiade, Lemer cier claimed that the use of allegorical fictions constituted the principal stylistic feature of early narrative poetry and remarked on the dearth of this device in modern French literature.⁵⁶ A good example of the literary form which resulted from Lemer cier's self-imposed task of repairing this deficiency occurs in Chant ii of Moyse, when Aaron takes up his lute to continue in song Moses's recital to Job. The particular event he celebrates is the drawing of water from the rock in Horeb, which is recorded in Chapter xvii of Exodus.⁵⁷ There, the people of Israel camp at Rephidim but Moses renames the place Meribah, or "Contention", because the Hebrews complained of the lack of water and found fault with their leader. In Lemer cier's fiction, the desert is allegorized as the Titan, Rephidim, and the stream as the nymph, Meribah. Fleeing from the importunings of the giant, the water nymph escapes underground with the connivance of Mother Nature but gushes forth again at God's command, when Moses strikes the rock. Meribah then discovers that the

56. Lemer cier, L'Atlantiade, Discours préparatoire, p. xiv.

57. This allegorical fiction was published in 1804 as "Le frap pement du rocher d'Horeb" in L.-J.-N. Lemer cier, Hérologues ou chants des poètes rois; et l'homme renouvelé, récit moral en vers (Paris: Renouard, 1804), pp. 129-39.

lustful Rephidim has been transformed into a mountain. The presentation is novel and not without charm but hardly justifies Lemer cier's high confidence in this literary artifice.⁵⁸

This reservation about the Meribah fiction must, unhappily, also be extended to the overall judgement on the 3000 or so lines of Lemer cier's epic on legislation. Lemer cier's lack of true linguistic artistry cannot be adequately offset by the occasional powerful passage like, for example, Korah's 70-line monologue, which opens Chant iv. In this fine thematic meditation, Korah voices his inability to accept the concept of an invisible but omnipresent God in view of the lamentable human condition and his pessimistic observations on the universal situation provoke him to a Lucretian profession of materialist faith. But if Korah's defiantly blasphemous challenge to God inaugurates the final canto on a high note, then the abrupt ending of the epic is more representative of Lemer cier's general deficiency in literary craft.

Gabriel's prophecy in the latter part of the fourth canto is interrupted by the intervention of the author, who relates personally what was revealed to Moses concerning the destiny of France. Wishing, no doubt, to intimate his horror at the looming menace of the Revolution, which clouds his glorification of the legislative achievement of eighteenth-century France, Lemer cier terminates his epic with this distich:

Ah! déposons mon luth ... le trouble de mes sens
Écarte mon esprit du sujet de ses chants.⁵⁹

58. In 1800, Lemer cier made this justification for his epics: "... J'aurai reçu le prix de mes efforts si je puis porter des émotions aux âmes élevées, et opposer avec un peu de succès l'usage des fictions qui échauffent la poésie, à l'abus des sentences et des dissertations qui la glacent, et qui ont fait des meilleurs poèmes publiés depuis le Lutrin, de purs discours philosophiques." Lemer cier, Alexandre, p. 202.

59. Lemer cier, Moyse, p. 164.

The absence of any concluding reference to the actual biblical setting of the tale indicates a certain incompatibility between framework and content and symbolizes Lemer cier's inability adequately to disguise his instructive purpose under a compelling narrative.

Bérault-Bercastel, La conquête de la terre promise, 1766⁶⁰

If Moses was the protagonist of only one epic in the period under study, his successor, Joshua, inspired no less than three poets to take up their pens. In the only copy it has been possible to find of the earliest of these works, the first of its two volumes is missing. Fortunately, the impossibility of consulting the first six cantos of Bérault-Bercastel's epic does not seriously impair a consideration of the second half of the poem, the contents of which are virtually self-contained. Since Chant vii opens shortly before the Israelites are repulsed before the city of Ai, it can be advanced with some confidence that earlier cantos treat the crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho.

The latter part of Bérault-Bercastel's poem draws its source material, then, from Chapters vii to x of the Book of Joshua, the highlights of which are the capture of Ai by stratagem and at the second attempt and the Israelite victory over the allied army besieging the city of Gibeon. For Bérault-Bercastel's purposes, this latter conquest of the five Amorite kings of South Canaan becomes a military success of such magnitude and

60. Abbé A.-H.-J.-F. de Bérault-Bercastel, La conquête de la terre promise. Poëme, 2 vols. (Paris: Delain, 1766). Bérault-Bercastel (1720-94) was the curé of Omerville (Seine-et-Oise) and chanoine of Noyon and author of a number of works. His earliest literary effort appears to have been Le serin de Canarie of 1755, a didactic poem on the breeding of canaries but the best of his works, although it is often slipshod, was his monumental Histoire de l'église, 24 vols. (Paris: Moutard, 1778-90).

comprehensiveness that it delivers, conveniently but inaccurately, the whole land of Canaan into Hebrew control and provides a suitably martial conclusion to the poem. Into this basic Old Testament material, however, Bérault-Bercastel has woven themes taken from elsewhere in the Bible, situations reminiscent of the most celebrated epic models and wholly fabricated episodes.

The most signal example of Bérault-Bercastel's inventive talents occurs in connection with the Gibeonite saga. Chapter ix of the Book of Joshua describes how the people of the Hivite city of Gibeon, by means of an elaborate imposture, contrive to negotiate a treaty of friendship with the Israelites, who are deceived into believing that the strangers inhabit a remote country. Possibly on account of his repugnance for this blatant deceitfulness, a not-infrequent practice in the Old Testament, Bérault-Bercastel attempts to mitigate the duplicity of the Gibeonites by lending their tale of distant provenance at least some element of veracity. The method he adopts is to suppose that the Gibeonite emissaries included in their number several Gauls, the legitimacy of whose claim to have travelled from far-off lands cannot be impugned.⁶¹ To account for their presence, Bérault-Bercastel adduces the fanciful story of one Melsi, the son of a Gibeonite senator, who is shipwrecked in his extreme infancy on an uninhabited island, suckled by a hind, rescued finally by a Gaulish crew and returned by them to his native city in time for him to advise an alliance with the invading Hebrews.

Although it is even suggested that the adventures of Melsi were divinely inspired in order to accommodate the Gibeonites, a more plausible reason for the inclusion of the episode than the delicate sensibilities of

61. Bérault-Bercastel comments thus on the ruse: "Enfans de Canaan, d'imposture coupables, / Mais, pour leur fin pieuse, imposteurs pardonnables." Bérault-Bercastel, II, 192.

the author lies in the opportunity it eventually presents for Bérault-Bercastel to instil a measure of national interest into his narrative. The description the Gauls offer of their country and its principal cities goes some way to meet the critical requirement that writers of epic treating non-patriotic themes should endeavour to make their subject-matter relevant to the public for whom it was destined. In the present instance, however, no meaningful relationship between the Old Testament and ancient France is established and the incidental nature of the recital by the Gauls denies it any real authority in the poem.

Another extended episode embroiders on the theme of the absent champion, which was introduced into epic by Homer and imitated by Tasso. The central figure is Othoniel, who is recorded in verses 16 and 17 of chapter xv of the Book of Joshua as being granted the hand of Achsah, daughter of Caleb, in recognition of his capture of the city of Kirjath-Sepher, which lay in Caleb's portion of the land allotted by Joshua to the tribe of Judah. Othoniel does not properly figure, therefore, in the events the poem celebrates but is nevertheless pre-ordained in the Conquête to make an unique and indispensable contribution to victory over the giants in the battle for Gibeon.

Othoniel's temporary absence from the Israelite ranks results from a complicated incident during the unsuccessful attack on Ai, when he leaves the field of battle to follow the fictitious Midianite princess with whom he has been infernally induced to fall in love. In reality, the Hebrew warrior pursues Uraniel, the angel of Pure Love, who assumes the form of Sephira in order to frustrate the designs of Astarte and Uriel, demon of Impure Love, but in his infatuation he fails to realize that his departure will be construed as cowardice.

Further reminiscenssss of classical epic are discernible in the combat between the earthly Sephira and Adoni-zedek, the biblical king of Jerusalem, which has unmistakable overtones of the Achilles-Hector contest in the Iliad. Moreover, the fate of the warrior-maiden is closely modelled on that of the Trojan hero, for her corpse is similarly dragged behind the chariot of her conqueror and is also miraculously preserved from damage, here by Uraniel with a liquid distilled from the Tree of Eden.

An even more bizarre example of the transposition of Greek epic atmosphere into a biblical framework occurs when, in an emulation of the Homeric Zeus, God informs the assembled celestial and infernal powers that they can fight freely in the battle between the Israelites and the five Amorite kings. It might be added that, as in the Iliad, supernatural status does not ensure immunity from mortal thrusts, for Othoniel wounds Astarte and Joshua injures Moloch.

Certain of these borrowings from pagan epic - such as the idea of the god of the winds holding court between Europe and Africa - lie uneasily in a Christian theme but Bérault-Bercastel is nothing if not eclectic and the Conquête also embodies numerous adaptations of passages from both the Old and New Testaments. For his description of heaven, Bérault-Bercastel is indebted to Chapter xxi of the Book of Revelation and the Book of Job, Chapter i, supplies the inspiration for the picture of Satan requesting permission from God for Mammon to tempt the Israelites. The Canaanite champions taunt the Hebrews in terms which the Philistine Goliath employs in Chapter xvii of the First Book of Samuel, while Raphael's speech in the Book of Tobit, Chapter xii, provides the basis for the public discourse heralding Othoniel's return to the Israelite army.

The Melsi episode apart, therefore, little of the material contained in the second part of Bérault-Bercastel's epic can be deemed original.

Unfortunately, neither can the author be commended for the stylistic qualities of his poem. A tortuous use of periphrastic expression and a surfeit of obscure allusions (most of which are, admittedly, explained in footnotes) rob the narrative of both clarity and verve.

Collet, Josué, 1807⁶²

Like Bérault-Bercastel's poem, Collet's account of the conquest of the Promised Land is in verse and in twelve cantos but, unlike its predecessors, it has survived intact. The edition of 1807, with its rather more than 6500 alexandrines, represents the second of three stages, through which this epic passed. Two Lettres à l'auteur Collet includes⁶³ reveals that a first version, later considerably retouched, was submitted to Pope Pius VI in the spring of 1797, while the work was also reissued in a revised form in 1817.⁶⁴ It is by reason of its long genesis that Collet's Josué is discussed before Madame Cottin's La prise de Jéricho, which was actually published a year earlier.

The three versions of the Josué were successively dedicated to Pius, Napoleon and Louis XVIII but it was only in the edition under consideration that a close parallel between the recipient and the protagonist of the poem could be drawn.⁶⁵ Insisting that any attempt on his part to describe the remarkable achievements of Bonaparte would have resulted in a repetition of

62. Abbé L. Collet, Josué, ou la conquête de la terre promise, poème en douze chants (Bourg: Janinet, 1807). This epic seems to be the sole literary offering of Louis Collet (1754-1826). Admitted to the priesthood in 1778, after studying at a seminary in Lyon, Collet went to Bourg to teach at the Collège and returned to the town as vicaire, after a period of exile in Terni during the Revolution.

63. Collet, pp. 13-15.

64. Abbé L. Collet, Josué, ou la conquête de la terre promise; poème en douze chants. Nouvelle édition, revue et corrigée par l'auteur (Paris: Le Clere, 1817).

65. The two-page dedication to Napoleon is not paginated.

his portrait of Joshua, Collet claimed that, in addition to the same intrepidity in danger and clemency in victory, the two heroes also enjoyed in common outstanding intellectual and affective qualities. This eulogistic note is not confined to the preliminaries, either, for a plea to Napoleon to strengthen the author's courage and inspire his song is appended to a more conventional invocation of distinct Christian inspiration

Identification with the Israelite leader constitutes no mean praise of the Emperor, considering the figure that emerges from the pages of Collet's poem. First presented to the reader as God evaluates the principal chiefs of Israel in his search for a successor to Moses, Joshua impresses by his valour, steadfastness and the sublimity of his soul, characteristics which are physiognomically evident and which are actively demonstrated in the course of the narrative.

The martial qualities of the biblical Joshua are supplemented in Collet's hero by a reasonableness and fair-mindedness, for which no parallel exists in the Scriptures. Joshua's moral justification of the Israelite invasion on the grounds that Canaan constituted former Hebrew territory and his invitation to the inhabitants of Jericho to leave peacefully and establish themselves in another fertile region are reminiscent, not of Old Testament attitudes, but of eighteenth-century modes of conduct. Indeed, Joshua's innate dislike of carnage conflicts with his dutifulness to God's commands during the sack of the city:

Josué, dans le sang, ne se plonge qu'à peine;
 Il voudrait s'épargner cette effrayante scène:
 Mais il connaît d'un Dieu les ordres redoutés;
 Il sait de Canaan les destins arrêtés,
 Il sait que l'épargner, quand la mort le menace,
 Ce serait encourir l'éternelle disgrâce.⁶⁶

66. Collet, p. 167.

Although his pre-eminence is never seriously contested, Joshua is not the unique hero of this epic and Collet spotlights the adventures of two other valorous Israelites. Of lesser importance in the story is Othniel who, in Bérault-Bercastel's poem, was assigned a vital but unauthentic role in the battle against the five Amorite kings. Whereas in the Conquête it was Othniel's absence which cast doubt on the outcome of this struggle for Gibeon, here his biblical winning of the maiden Achsah is jeopardized by the temporary loss to the army of the young warrior, Salmon. The attack on Kirjath-Sepher (renamed Bethel, on account of the author's dislike of the unpoetic Old Testament place-name) is falsified chronologically and placed before the fight against the army from South Canaan, while its capture is made dependent, quite without biblical justification, on the participation of Salmon. The latter returns in time to rally the Hebrew army when Othniel is injured and enables him to win his bride. To mitigate the apparent callousness in the way Caleb offers his daughter as a reward for military success, Collet invents a prior association on the part of the young couple, inserting to that end an incident in which the maiden (called Aza in this work) is saved from a wild animal by the attentive Othniel.

More closely linked with the main argument of the poem is the aforementioned Salmon, who is not recorded in the Old Testament as contributing to the conquest of Canaan but is included by Collet on the strength of indirect evidence. In the genealogy of Christ listed in Chapter i of the Gospel of Mathew, Salmon and Rahab are given as the parents of Boaz and the popular identification of the woman of that name with the harlot of Jericho referred to in the Book of Joshua leads Collet to assume that Salmon was one of the two Hebrew spies she sheltered.⁶⁷

67. On no grounds other than those of artistic convenience, the other spy is identified as Othniel.

Salmon's attachment to Rahab serves as the pretext for a number of fictitious incidents, the most notable of which is foreshadowed when the young Israelite's character is briefly sketched during the enumeration in the first canto of the chiefs summoned to assembly by Joshua. The predicted momentary but fatal flash of anger results in Salmon stabbing the man who disputes his claim to Rahab but his culpability is somewhat diminished by the intemperate and sadistic nature given to Cares and the suggestion that the affair is provoked by Baal in revenge for Salmon's frustration of the infernal plot to destroy his future bride. All the same, Salmon's sorrow is such that he leaves the Israelite camp to repent in solitude, until he is recalled by the archangel, Michael.

That this unsavoury incident is incorporated in order to facilitate a borrowing from classical epic seems likely, considering the parallelism between Salmon's remorse and the grief of Achilles at the death of Patroclus, and is placed beyond doubt when the new armour, with which Salmon is supernaturally supplied, is explicitly compared to that similarly forged for the Myrmidon hero.

Repeated references to the divine issue from their line confer elevated status on Salmon and Rahab but the prospect of presenting a harlot as the direct ancestress of Christ evidently disturbed Collet. The portrait of Rahab is therefore idealized:

Rahab (c'était le nom de cette rare fille),
 Faisait, par ses attraits, l'espoir de sa famille;
 Jeune encore, elle avait l'acquis de l'âge mûr
 Et ne paraissait point sortir d'un sang impur.
 Les roses de son teint, sa blonde chevelure,
 Sur l'épaule, sans art, composent sa parure.⁶⁸

68. Collet, p. 42.

Moreover, the choice of Rahab as a sacrificial offering to Baal reveals her as both a matchless beauty and a virgin, for these are the qualities the demon specifies in the victim in order to ensure Rahab's death. And if Collet is concerned to amend the sexual proclivities of the biblical personage, then he is equally anxious to establish the receptivity of his heroine to the Hebrew faith. Rahab's defiant speech before Artabal, tyrant of Jericho, in Chant vi shows her as a worshipper of the God of Israel by that point in the tale but, after only minimal exposure to the religion of the spies, Rahab already realizes that her lie (inspired in the present version more by a nascent love for Salmon than by her realistic appraisal of the military situation in the original) is not condoned by a deity, who admits of no infringement of his strict moral code.

Collet's preoccupation with the character of Rahab is the more understandable, in view of his ecclesiastical calling, for, in his prefatory remarks, he appears to class himself among the "prêtres déportés", who sought sanctuary in Italy from the excesses of the Terror.⁶⁹ This insight into Collet's personal misfortunes also explains the appearance in the Josué of an allegory, which is unique in French biblical epic of the eighteenth century. A catalogue of the crimes of Kirjath-Sepher and a series of pen-portraits of its most evil inhabitants constitute a thinly-veiled and virulent attack on Paris and the principal figures of the French Revolution. Prominent among the blackest villains of the Canaanite city are such traitors as Nachor, who under the pretext of serving the crown struck the first blow to undermine it, Mirabel, who dealt the monarchy its death-blow,

69. Collet, Avertissement, p. 8.

Orléas, a prince unworthy of his rank, and Barnaval, who had made a profound study of different means of shedding blood.

Exile from France is also adduced by Collet to counter any accusations of plagiarism that might be levelled against his epic. Collet uses the fact that he composed the poem in the episcopal town of Terni, in Umbria, without a single French text to hand, to argue that any literary reminiscences of French works are purely inadvertent and he additionally indicates the difficulty of avoiding any similarity of expression with authors treating the same subject.⁷⁰

In fact, the style of the Josué is not unpleasing, with little obfuscatory periphrasis and an absence of erudite terminology. Footnotes are thus reduced to a minimum and largely supply the Latin originals of those phrases from the Vulgate, which have been rendered into French verse. The narrative gives an impression, therefore, of rapidity and the direct speech which Collet employs whenever possible, even in recitals, adds an air of dramatic immediacy to the tale. A section in his preliminary essay reveals that Collet deliberately sought to reproduce in his epic the unpretentious style of the Scriptures, in opposition to the poetic tastes of many of his countrymen:

Quant au style, j'ai tâché d'imiter la noble simplicité du Langage des Livres Saints; simplicité qui pourrait bien n'être pas du goût de tout le monde: mais non but n'est nullement de plaire à ceux qui font consister la poésie dans de grands mots, dans l'enflure et le boursouflé ... Encore moins dois-je rechercher l'approbation de ces esprits superficiels qui courent après le style à la mode, qui veulent du joli, c'est-à-dire, du guindé, du maniéré, des phrases à facettes, des antithèses et des jeux de mots. A de tels approbateurs, je dois préférer, sans doute, le suffrage de ce petit nombre de vrais connaisseurs à qui Horace voulait donner à lire ses ouvrages, et qui, s'étant préservés de la tache de corruption, savent faire la différence entre l'or et le clinquant, entre le beau, le bon, le naturel, le solide et ce qui n'en a que l'apparence.⁷¹

70. Collet, Avertissement, p. 11.

71. Collet, Avertissement, pp. 10-11.

Collet's Josué constitutes a comprehensive account of the conquest of Canaan (symbolized, as for Bérault-Bercastel, by the victory over the five Amorite kings of South Canaan), in a form which would have been regarded as unmistakably epic by any contemporary reader. Salmon's recital to Rahab in Chants ii and iii of the principal incidents from the calling of Moses to the arrival at the Jordan satisfies the traditional structural requirement of epic, while there is regular recourse to the Christian supernatural. In Chant xi, the ghost of Moses reveals to Joshua the future history of the Jewish people and love interest and episodic ornament are also supplied. The main ingredients of neoclassical French epic are thus much in evidence and Collet has at least succeeded in avoiding the monotony and turgidity of many examples of the genre.

Cottin, La prise de Jéricho, 1806⁷²

If Collet's Josué exemplifies the application to a biblical theme of the full procedure of French neoclassical epic, then the third treatment of the Israelite conquest of Canaan in the period under review, Madame Cottin's prose poem, La prise de Jéricho, must be assigned to the periphery of the genre. Epic overtones are apparent in the nomenclature of the work and conformity with epic tradition is evident in its division into books,

72. M.-S. Cottin, La prise de Jéricho, ou la pécheresse convertie in Elisabeth, ou les exilés de Sibérie; suivi de la prise de Jéricho, poème, 2 vols. (Paris: Giguet & Michaud, 1806), II, 113-223. A very prolific and hugely successful novelist during her lifetime, Marie-Sophie Cottin (née Risteau), was born in Paris in 1770 and died there in 1807. Widowed at the age of 23, she became a leading exponent of the "romantisme larmoyant" movement with such novels as Claire d'Albe (1799), Malvina (1800), Amélie Mansfield (1803), Mathilde (1805) and, perhaps especially, Elisabeth (1806), which was translated into a variety of European languages.

while the proem, although combining invocation and proposition in the less common Homeric manner, is also orthodox. Conversely, however, that habitual component of regular neoclassical epic, the marvellous, is introduced only rarely and tentatively. No infernal interference is recorded and such instances of celestial intervention as occur in the action proper do not necessitate the physical descent from heaven of any divine agent. Although the subject of the poem is ostensibly military, direct description of hostilities is avoided and the sack of Jericho is conveyed obliquely and discreetly by passing allusions from Rahab and her grief at the fate of her compatriots. Additionally, there is a noticeable absence of other conventional devices of epic, although some of the latter, like councils of war, ekphrasis and the prophetic vision of the national future, would seem to have been eminently suitable for incorporation into the argument of the prose poem.

Rather than the comprehensive account of her male rivals, Madame Cottin already promises in her title the narrower perspective of one particular victory in the conquest of Canaan but it is in reality the sub-title which provides a more accurate pointer to the content of the poem. The capture of Jericho merely serves as a background, against which the author delineates the love-story of the Canaanite, Rahab, and the Israelite spy, Issachar, from whose union, in this version, was born that Rahab who married Salmon, son of Naasson, and who gave birth to Boaz. The real theme of the work is thus more sentimental than martial and finds its best expression in the declaration by an angel to Rahab that:

... [le Très-Haut] veut que de ton sang naisse le Messie, qui doit apprendre au monde qu'il y a plus de joie au ciel pour un pécheur qui s'amende que pour dix justes qui n'ont jamais failli.⁷³

73. Cottin, p. 152.

Although the precise identity of the heroine remains a mystery in the opening book, an initial preparation for her eventual appearance comes in the revelation in a pen-portrait of Issachar that a prophecy by Moses had indicated him as the forebearer of the Messiah and foretold his betrothal before the end of the year. The way is further paved for the presentation of Rahab to the reader by Issachar's musings on this pledge in Book ii and the realization of the young Judaite that his incursion into Canaanite territory on the last day of the Hebrew calendar means that his predestined bride will be drawn from a heathen race rather than from among the maidens of his tribe.

When, after this calculated fostering of interest in Issachar's unknown future partner, Rahab is finally introduced into the poem in person, Madame Cottin does not imitate Collet's complete disregard of the biblical verdict on her sexual activities but seeks to depict her as one who repents deeply of her past sins. However implausible, the way in which Rahab ignores Issachar's question concerning her identity and concentrates on denying the maidenly status the terms of his greeting had attributed to her is intended to reveal a constant and bitter preoccupation with earlier lapses from virtue. Even so, there is some mitigation of the Old Testament judgement, for Rahab's misdemeanors are ascribed to the abuse of her youth and innocence by the priests of Baal.

Any supposition on the part of the reader that Issachar would have been surprised at Rahab's unsolicited confession should, logically, lead him to imagine also the young Hebrew's astonishment at Rahab's religious convictions, for her lamentations betray not only a knowledge of the God of Israel but a fervent desire to feel pardoned by him. The origins of her conversion to the faith of the Hebrews are retraced by Rahab in a subsequent recital to the spies to a sudden and inexplicable nausea at the

sight of the temple of the Canaanite deity, an experience which precluded the divine disclosure to her of theological truth.

The religious note unexpectedly struck by Rahab is sustained in the description of the early relations between the Hebrews and their ally and an emphasis on the predestination of the union of Rahab and Issachar replaces an extensive dwelling on their reciprocal attachment (for which, incidentally, exceedingly handsome reparation is made in the later concentration on Issachar's emotional turmoil). If Issachar's attraction to Rahab is instantaneous, he properly delays explicit expression of his feelings until his supposition that the Canaanite might indeed be his promised spouse receives divine confirmation. The heavenly sign takes the form of Rahab's revelatory recital, which concludes with the admission that she has received even more direct assurance than Issachar concerning the issue of her line, namely from an angel in a vision.

To convey the profound impression these supernatural experiences have exercised on Rahab, Madame Cottin attributes to her an exalted submission to the will of God and, more especially, supposes in the Canaanite a firm refusal to compromise her virtue, following Issachar's assurance of the approval her repentance and purity of soul will have won in heaven. The combination of abstract trust and practical conduct is effective but less felicitous, is the choice of the agent of that carnal temptation, which can alone test Rahab's revised standards of sexual morality.

If Rahab's commitment to her new religious and moral code is underlined by her rejection of Issachar's amorous advances, the ardour of her future husband, while psychologically plausible on the purely human plane, appears misplaced in one whom foreknowledge of his unique posterity allegedly inspires to a deliberate attempt at abnegation and altruism. In Issachar, infatuation is taken to the point where verbal declarations of love soon

fail to serve as an adequate expression of affection and physical demonstrations of his passion become inevitable. The occasion on which Rahab is forced to flee from his importunate embraces provides, perhaps, the most extreme instance of the tension inherent in Madame Cottin's presentation of a preromantic man of feeling in the guise of a creditable hero of biblical epic.

It is indubitably the former aspect of Issachar's dual identity which predominates in Books iii and iv, in which selected details from the Book of Joshua are judiciously employed to account for the protagonist's excessive emotionalism and extravagant conduct. The three days the Bible tersely records that the spies spent in the mountains to avoid capture is transformed into a period of agonized suspense for Issachar, as he awaits Rahab's arrival with food and information. It is in this context that the single extended simile of the poem occurs and its reproduction here owes more to the general indication it gives of Issachar's personality than to any intrinsic aptness, for it is altogether too restrained to describe a lover who indifferently spends his nights on the wet ground and his days in the burning sun, bewailing the absence of his loved-one:

Tel le passereau solitaire exhale ses tendres plaintes sur le palmier où il attend sa compagne; depuis qu'il en est séparé, il ne chante plus, il néglige son plumage, il dédaigne la figue succulente et la datte sucrée; il languit, il mourra si ses amours lui sont ôtées. Eh! qui pourrait vivre sans aimer?⁷⁴

Similarly, the biblical decision not to launch an immediate attack on Jericho after the crossing of the Jordan provides the occasion for Issachar's night-long lament outside the impenetrable walls of that city.

While Madame Cottin alleges that more than one virgin of Israel had sighed over Issachar's classic features and mane of curly black hair, the

74. Cottin, p. 177.

note of sensuality that pervades her poem is principally attributable to Issachar's own insistence on Rahab's physical charms. Her blond hair and the ivory whiteness of her neck are singled out for mention when the Hebrew spies first happen on Rahab as she draws water from a well and, subsequently, Issachar extols her slim figure, gazelle-like eyes, the freshness of her lips and the sweetness of her breath. The tone is sustained by the seemingly incessant erotic urge of Issachar and a possible tendency to prurience in the reader is encouraged by his speculation that one of the frequent sexual advances the Israelite makes to Rahab might prove successful. In the event, however, any such lascivious hopes are frustrated and consummation is delayed until the union has been legitimized, thus allowing Madame Cottin to close her prose poem in all good conscience, with this picture of the heroine on her wedding night:

... Rahab, sur un lit de mousse, de violettes et de muguet,
n'ayant pour ornement que sa beauté, pour voile que sa pudeur,
et pour pavillon que le ciel, apprit dans les bras d'Issachar
que les seuls plaisirs vrais sont ceux qu'embellit l'innocence,
que permet le devoir et que consacrent à jamais des serments
prononcés au pied des autels du Seigneur.⁷⁵

It is regrettable that Madame Cottin did not see fit to supplement her chronological narrative with a preliminary discourse explicitly expounding her personal theory of the epic. As it stands, the Prise de Jéricho published only shortly before the terminal date of the period covered in this study, apparently exemplifies an attitude which diverges significantly from the neoclassical norm. The mood is at variance with the usual spirit of the genre, being closer to the prevailing atmosphere of the effusive novels in which Madame Cottin specialized and it is finally only the retention of certain structural features which typify the poem as pertaining to the category of epic.

75. Cottin, p. 223.

La Baume-Desdossat, La Christiade, 1753⁷⁶

While seven writers of epic have been seen to celebrate themes from the Apocrypha and the Old Testament during the years under review, only two turned to the New Testament for inspiration. Their basic source apart, La Baume-Desdossat and Dubourg share little common ground and they differ in subject, medium, length and, especially, in the orthodoxy of their treatment.

Abbé La Baume-Desdossat's Christiade comprises nearly 2500 duodecimo pages of prose text, including footnotes, divided into twelve cantos and published in six volumes, and takes as its argument Christ's deliverance of the human race from Satan and death by his expiation on the cross of Adam's original sin. This theme encompasses the subject-matter of the Gospels and is additionally made to bear a summary of Old Testament material in Chants ii and iii, as Satan recounts to an assembly of demons his conflict with God over mankind from the creation up to the baptism of Jesus.

That the Christiade is a work of exceptional scope will be readily accepted from the details so far supplied but more difficult to convey than its comprehensiveness is an appreciation of the wealth of erudition and theological argumentation contained in the mass of footnotes which seem to buttress almost every line of the narrative. However much it impresses the lay twentieth-century reader, though, La Baume-Desdossat's academic underpinning of the details of his story failed to persuade the contemporary legal authorities to tolerate his views on the Scriptures.

76. Abbé J.-F. de La Baume-Desdossat, La Christiade ou le paradis reconquis, pour servir de suite au paradis perdu de Milton, 6 vols. (Bruxelles: Vase, 1753). In addition to his notorious epic, abbé Jacques-François (1705-56) published an ode to peace, a comic novel, a heroic pastoral and, under the pseudonym Croquet, four prose plays.

The Christiade was judged to be blasphemous by an arrest de la cour de Parlement of 9 April 1756 and the day after this condemnation was ceremonially shredded and burned at the foot of the great staircase of the Palais de Justice.

The dramatic fate with which this New Testament epic met would seem to invest any relevant authorial comments with more than the usual significance and interest and it appears somehow appropriate that the preliminary essay La Baume-Desdossat appended to the Christiade is commensurate in length and range with the text itself.

Abbé La Baume-Desdossat opens the two hundred pages of his preface with the statement that his epic is intended as a sequel to Milton's Paradise Lost and a rival to the same author's Paradise Regained and he firmly attributes his initial creative impulse to an awareness of the greatness of the former work and the triviality of the latter.⁷⁷ He disputes the very concept underlying Milton's shorter epic, namely that paradise was regained by Christ's triumph over Satan in the wilderness, on the grounds that such a view made the crucifixion redundant and he postulates in his turn that the victory was won only when Christ's death reconciled sinful man with his God and provided access to a heavenly paradise.⁷⁸

This attack on the validity of Milton's argument in Paradise Regained already comprehends some justification of his own subject and La Baume-Desdossat proceeds to value his divine protagonist above the mortal heroes celebrated by the vast majority of the great ancient and modern epic poets, comparing in particular and to its detriment the narrowly national

77. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, i-ii.

78. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, iii-v.

interest of the Aeneid with the immortal and universal appeal of his own Christiade.⁷⁹

Cognizance of the difficulties which were proper to biblical, as opposed to secular, subjects, however, is shown in the extensive section that is devoted to the question of the use of scriptural topics in the writing of epic.⁸⁰ An examination of the aims of Homer, Virgil and the Hebrew prophets purports to prove that the essential purpose of poetry lies in the celebration of God, religion and religious mysteries but, as might have been expected, it is with special reference to Boileau's comments in the Art poétique that the discussion is conducted. Boileau's contention that the fictional ornamentation necessary in epic could not decently be brought to bear on Christian truth is denied universal application and restricted to inventions of a profane and indecent nature. Suggesting that the seventeenth-century critic's outburst was predominantly a reaction against the excesses of foreign modern epic poets, La Baume-Desdossat concludes by proclaiming the legitimacy of fictions in sacred subjects and the susceptibility of Christian mysteries to prudent poetic adornment of that sort. Although he doubtless considered his fictions to fall within the permitted category of responsible embellishment, La Baume-Desdossat was to owe the destruction of his epic largely to his additions to bare Gospel narrative.

La Baume-Desdossat's concern to validate his recourse to fictions in a New Testament theme is matched by a determination to ensure that the Christiade is assigned to the loftiest literary division in the neoclassical hierarchy. Obviously aware that its prose medium could be used to classify

79. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, xii-xv.

80. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, xvii-lxvii.

the Christiade as a novel rather than as an epic, he differentiates between the two genres at some length.⁸¹ To establish its identity beyond any doubt, the Christiade is then systematically analysed in terms of the ordinances of epic theory and its conformity with the most exacting requirements is inexorably indicated.⁸² It emerges as a divine epic, the action of which is simple and unique (depicting the destruction of Satan's empire and the deliverance of man from sin), great (resulting in the overthrow of paganism), heroic (for God incarnate delivers himself up to death to save mankind from that same fate) and marvellous (since the forces of heaven and hell participate); the noeud is interesting (centering on the attempts to gain mastery over the other of both Jesus and Satan), unity of place is respected (the action takes place in Judea, with Jerusalem as its main theatre) and the plot is supplemented by episodes (comprising incidents borrowed from the Gospels or the Scriptures generally).

As the following quotation indicates unequivocally, the Christiade thus represented for its author an exercise in the supreme literary genre rather than a method of religious instruction, although its underlying evangelistic intent is also stressed: "La Christiade n'est point un Catéchisme: c'est un Poëme dans lequel j'ai tâché, en conciliant sous les grands traits de la Poësie les grandeurs & les humiliations du Sauveur, de le rendre aimable à ceux que son nom seul effarouche, & de le faire aimer de tous les hommes, par reconnoissance de ce qu'il a fait pour l'homme".⁸³

81. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, lxxi-lxxx.

82. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, lxxx-lxxxiii.

83. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, lxxxix-xc.

The fact does not figure among the epic characteristics claimed for it in the preface but the Christiade adopts the traditional in medias res structure still recommended by the pursuits among French theorists of the genre in the later eighteenth century. The dramatic advantages of the device are particularly noticeable in this instance, for the baptism of Jesus, which opens the tale, conveniently provides an early entry into the crucial temptations which follow his withdrawal into the wilderness. The construction also strengthens the cohesion of the main narrative by restricting it to the public ministry of Christ, to which the baptism was the immediate prelude. The informative but, in the present context, less strictly relevant details of the birth and childhood of Christ are delayed until midway through the epic, when they are conveyed to Peter, James and John by Gabriel on the Mount of Transfiguration.

In also recalling for these disciples the revolt of Satan, the creation of the world and the fall of man, the archangel situates the incarnation on the cosmic time-scale, revealing it as the fulfilment of Christ's promise to the Father in the days of Adam and Eve to atone for human sin. A corresponding forward movement in time is effected at the very end of the epic, when Peter is taken to heaven by the spirit of God and reads from the book of destiny. An account of his perusal fills nearly four hundred pages and chronicles the history of Christianity in both its temporal and spiritual aspects, up to modern times. In the case of the former aspect, much space is devoted to the pageant of the most worthy Christian monarchs in which, although the scope is European, the kings of France are especially well represented numerically, so establishing, albeit highly artificially, some link between the New Testament theme and the author's compatriots.

If its classic structural pattern helps to categorize the Christiade as epic, other distinguishing features of the genre are deliberately

incorporated to reinforce that identification. La Baume-Desdossat has been seen above to argue that Christ's self-sacrifice on man's behalf was essentially heroic and this latter note is carefully fostered in the poem. Two interesting examples involving Christ may first be noted.

The temptation in the wilderness is envisaged as a single combat and the heroic trumpet is explicitly invoked to proclaim this initial duel between Christ and Satan, as witnesses to which the inhabitants of the earth are urgently summoned. Similarly, the exorcism of the Gadarene demoniac, whose unclean spirits were permitted to enter a herd of swine, is invested with a distinct element of physical confrontation. In the Gospel account, the demoniac, whose extraordinary strength caused him to snap the fetters and chains with which he had often been bound, runs to worship Jesus. To heighten the atmosphere, stature is here specified and romance detail added, so that he is described as a giant, capable of uprooting whole pine trees, whose fiery breath scorches the earth. The title of hero, with which Christ is hailed for his unique bravery in approaching the demoniac, who vomits fire and flame before he is prostrated and healed, clearly indicates the spirit in which the author relates the incident.

The incidental presentation of Christ as a quasi-combative figure illustrates the heroic motif which is woven into the Christiade and which consists more substantially of accounts of martial conflict on both the human and supernatural levels. Satan's recital to the council of demons includes in Chant ii a composite version of Israel's battles before and after the crossing of the Jordan. A descriptive roll-call of the heathen nations composing the allied enemy army ensures a grandiose atmosphere for the stirring narration, which imagines a personal duel between Joshua and the biblical giant, Og, Amorite king of Bashan. On the supernatural plane, in the final canto Michael and the celestial legions scatter the infernal

forces, who are rejoicing at the sight of Christ on the cross, and drive them back to hell.

Diabolic intervention in the plot of the Christiade is incessant and is predictably held to have instigated the massacre of the male infants in Bethlehem, the decapitation of John the Baptist, the sollicitation of rewards in heaven for James and John by their mother, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot and Pilate's consent to the crucifixion for political reasons. But if his particular suppositions are somewhat pedestrian in character, La Baume-Desdossat's overall success in injecting some genuine interest into his pervasive use of infernal machinery sets him apart from most of his contemporaries. The substantial orientation of diabolic activity in the poem towards the undermining of Christ's mission, if hardly original, already creates a purposeful impression in its assumption of a co-ordinated fiendish attack. The issue assumes a truly dramatic dimension, however, in the hypothesis that the motivation for such unremitting interference, especially in its early stages, lies in a pressing and unresolved need to ascertain the precise identity of Christ.

The tension generated by this presumed ignorance derives from a combination of imaginative speculation, theological argument and structural design. Satan's uncertainty as to which of the two figures in the Jordan God's acknowledgement of his Son denominates provides the initial factor. The arch rebel, whose pride discovers a worthy adversary only in the Son of God, is allegedly roused by the voice from heaven from the drowsiness which has kept him inactive on the summit of Mount Lebanon for thirty years. Satan's mystification gains credibility from his later dismissal as a human misconception of the prescience traditionally attributed to inhabitants of the nether regions. The temptations in the wilderness represent a

first attempt to penetrate the mystery and, although Christ's refusal to perform the miracles requested originally argues to the contrary, his subsequent actions bring ultimate conviction that it was his person that the divine pronouncement designated.

At this point, the contention of the Church Fathers that the incarnation was incomprehensible to the forces of evil is invoked to argue that infernal identification of Christ as the promised Messiah falls short of an appreciation of his heavenly origins. La Baume-Desdossat credits Satan's perspicacious intellectual genius with some glimmer of the truth but the Jewish concept of a temporal Saviour and a Pharisaic-style judgement of various acts of Jesus are adduced by his fellow-fiends as reasons for precluding any possibility that Christ enjoys a celestial lineage. The unique phenomenon of a divine presence on earth concealed in human form becomes evident to the inhabitants of hell only at Christ's death, so that the artificial narrative order of the Christiade maintains the interest of this enigma for virtually the whole of the action proper.

The assumption that the powers of darkness were unable to understand the incarnation thus entails undoubted literary advantages but also led to the invention of an episode which incurred the wrath of the authorities. From supposing that the infernal council of Chants ii and iii proclaimed Christ's complete mortality, La Baume-Desdossat proceeds to imagine that the pardoning of the woman taken in adultery is there construed as an indication of Christ's susceptibility to sensual temptation. As the agent of this presumed assault on the Messiah, the author selects the biblical Mary, called Magdalene, whom he identifies with the similarly-named sister of Martha and Lazarus. In supplying a mass of invented detail to flesh out this New Testament character, he takes pains to emphasize that, despite her

penchant for passion and voluptuousness, Magdalene's sinfulness lies in a vainglorious delight in the power she exercises over a host of devoted male admirers and not in sexual promiscuity. La Baume-Desdossat argues, therefore, that Magdalene's fictitious attempt to captivate Christ stems from intellectual vanity rather than from any physically impure motive. Textual corroboration comes in the fact that Belial's insistence on Christ's absolute pre-eminence among men alone induces Magdalene to solicit his unspoken recognition of her own outstanding beauty.

The biblical statement that Mary Magdalene was cured of seven demons provides the outcome of this infernal plot, for the gaze that Jesus indeed bestows upon Magdalene drives out the demon of vanity and his six mute companions and awakens her consciousness of sin. In this version, it is Mary Magdalene who performs as an act of repentance the celebrated gesture recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter vii, where an unnamed penitent woman anoints Christ's feet with ointment in the house of Simon the Pharisee.

To dupe Magdalene into testing his personal belief that Christ is subject to the temptations of the flesh, Belial adopts the guise of an angel of light but the unlikely appearance ascribed to him presupposes an unacceptably high level of credulity in his victim. Other instances of invraisemblance must also unfortunately be recorded. The ministration which, in the Gospels of Mathew and Mark, Christ received from angels after the sojourn in the wilderness, is interpreted by La Baume-Desdossat as the preparation of a sumptuous feast of which, if the portrayal of his physical condition after his fasting is to be believed, Christ would have been quite unable to partake. Gabriel's lengthy explanation of Christ's mission, which wins Mary's necessary consent to her son's death, is mistimed coming,

as it does, when Jesus already hangs on the cross. A similar implausibility mars the long speech based on the Psalms which Christ addresses to the Father immediately after a harrowing description of his sufferings.

But if he does not always avoid the improbable, La Baume-Desdossat provides, as may already have been gathered, several compelling passages. Perhaps the most sustained of these occurs in Chant vii and professedly reproduces the transactions of a secret meeting of the Jewish Sanhedrin, at which the death of Jesus is decided and the services of Iscariot are procured for thirty pieces of silver. The drama of the occasion derives largely from the fabrication of a pro-Christ party in the persons of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night and provided the spices to embalm his body, Joseph of Arimathea, who successfully claimed Christ's corpse from Pilate, and one, Gamaliel, probably the Pharisaic teacher of the law mentioned in Chapter v of the Acts of the Apostles. The invented speech of Nicodemus, based on Old Testament prophecies and drawing heavily on Isaiah in particular, constitutes an especially powerful defence of Jesus but the intransigent opposition to the self-proclaimed Messiah receives equally striking expression. Impassioned interventions punctuate the cut and thrust of debate and this whole Sanhedrin scene achieves a high degree of realism.

An extended description in the third canto of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem furnishes another example of narrative skill in the Christiade. The fact that Satan relates the massacre in his address to the council of demons eventually gives rise to some incongruity, in that the increasingly compassionate tone of the account becomes inconsistent with the character of the speaker, the temper of his audience and the nature of the discourse. This failure to maintain the initial perspective, however, does not seriously impair the impact of the passage, the inclusion and

the style of which the author defends in his preface.⁸⁴ Arguing that its appearance in the Gospel of Mathew authenticates the Bethlehem slaughter, despite the silence of contemporary sources, La Baume-Desdossat claims the literary right to supply an invented and dramatic report of this briefly-mentioned event. His imagination dictates a graphic picture of gruesome mass murder, the sheer atrocity of which is cleverly highlighted by the rapturous welcome Herod supposedly receives from the people, among whom women carrying their offspring figure prominently. The appropriate choice of night for the staging of this dark deed permits the author to restrict himself in the main to the symbolic colours of death, the blood-red flames from the houses fired to drive their inhabitants into the streets being thrown into relief by the funerary blackness of the sky. The breaking of dawn brings with it a change from impressionistic technique to more precise reporting and an alternation between panoramic vistas and particular spectacles. The passage comes to a climactic finish by chronicling the abortive attempt to escape of a heroic Jewish widow, who finally jumps into the flames with her two infants, after calling down vengeance on the head of Herod.

It is with such imaginative reconstructions as the above that La Baume-Desdossat rounds out his narrative and a more detailed analysis of the Christiade than is here possible would examine the pen-portraits, enumerations and examples of ekphrasis which supply other topoi of epic. The genre to which the work belongs is, therefore, unmistakable but it was precisely La Baume-Desdossat's epic treatment of his New Testament theme that aroused the wrath of the Parlement. As a final comment on the Christiade, the accusations of the prosecutor, M. Omer Joly de Fleury, may

84. La Baume-Desdossat, Discours préliminaire, I, cxvi-cxx.

usefully be quoted:

Cet ouvrage ... ne présente autre chose que l'Histoire de J. C. mêlée de fictions & d'incidens fabuleux. L'Autcur se livrant à toute la fougue de son imagination, travestit l'Evangile, prête à la Divinité de langage que les Poëtes mettent dans la bouche de leurs Dieux, insère dans le récit des actions de J.C. des Episodes indécentes, & copiées d'après celles du Héros de Virgile. Ecrivain hardi & téméraire, loin de mesurer ses expressions sur le respect dû au sujet qu'il traite, il en admet qui ne sont propres qu'à scandaliser la foi & les moeurs des Chrétiens, Génie vif & ardent dans ses descriptions, libre dans ses portraits, il s'égare, se perd dans ses fictions, se contredit; il parle en Poëte, & il s'oublie.⁸⁵

Dubourg, Le Messie, 1777⁸⁶

It was partly with reference to La Baume-Desdossat's prose poem that Dubourg justified the argument of his own verse epic, for his introductory comments reveal that he envisaged the Messie as a corrective to both La Christiade and to Milton's earlier Paradise Lost.

Dubourg contends that the subject of Milton's great epic lacks intrinsic appeal, since it entails constant awareness of the condemnation of the human race, and argues that the genius of the English poet alone enables the reader to offset his grief at the theme with enjoyment of sublime concepts and sustained stylistic elegance.⁸⁷ Like La Baume-Desdossat before him, Dubourg dismisses Milton's attempt to console man in his Paradise Regained as abortive on the grounds that the poem does not actually deal with the regeneration of human nature, as its title appears

85. Arrest de la cour de Parlement du 9 avril 1756, pp. 12-13.

86. Dubourg, Le Messie, poëme (Paris: Musier, 1777). The exact identity of the author apparently remains unknown. It can be conjectured that the poem was written by M.-J.-P. Du Bourg (1751-1822), who was ordained in 1775, held a canonicate at Toulouse Cathedral and became Bishop of Limoges in 1802.

87. Dubourg, Préface, p. 1.

to promise.⁸⁸ Dubourg recognizes that La Baume-Desdossat supplements Milton's subject-matter, treating the harrowing of hell and the redemption of man; but maintains that, although the Christiade offers greater human comfort than Paradise Lost, it nevertheless depicts the tribulations and sufferings of Christ.⁸⁹

With these reservations in mind, Dubourg offers the public what he claims is an unmitigatedly joyful and an original topic, which records an indispensable preliminary to the redemption of mankind itself.⁹⁰ In the poem, he proposes the birth of the Messiah in these terms:

Je chante le berceau du Monarque suprême
 Qui du plus haut des Cieux & de la grandeur même
 Descendit jusqu'à nous pour venger l'Univers,
 Répara nos malheurs & dompta les Enfers.
 Pour fonder son Empire, en vain l'Ange parjure
 Crut avoir à son char enchaîné la Nature;
 Le Christ, pour son ouvrage épuisant son amour,
 Lui rend ses premiers droits & le rappelle au jour.⁹¹

This statement of achievement enunciates orthodox Christian belief and its note, the restraint of which is entirely in keeping with the recommendations of theorists of epic, is one of unalloyed triumph. The omission of any mention of the means by which these accomplishments were effected is evident, if not irregular, but such careful avoidance of reference to the crucifixion cannot be sustained throughout the poem. Indeed, the first allusion to Christ's death follows immediately in the invocation to the heavenly muse and thereafter the vocabulary of the passion recurs sufficiently frequently to form a distinct motif.

God's characterization of the Son as "invincible courage" in his warning in Chant ii of the imminence of the incarnation is ominously sug-

88. Dubourg, Préface, pp. 1-2.

89. Dubourg, Préface, p. 2.

90. Dubourg, Préface, p. 2.

91. Dubourg, p. 9.

gestive and his promise that Christ's divine blood will cleanse human crime provides a rather sinister justification of that appellation. In the same canto, Future's description of Christ on the cross makes heaven weep, although Mary's later response to Gabriel's revelation that the child to be born to her will die to save mankind is rather one of bewilderment that a mere command from God will not suffice.

Some reference to Christ's predestined fate on earth in an epic on the birth of the Messiah would seem to be inevitable on both artistic and theological grounds but the constant emphasis on that point in Dubourg's poem contrasts strangely with his pretension, noted above, to treat a wholly joyous theme.

Dubourg unwittingly casts another shadow over his entire narrative by the consolation he allows the forces of darkness, meeting in council to consider the birth of the Messiah, to draw in the opening canto from their precognition of the history of mankind. The fallen angels enjoy foreknowledge of the incarnation and its object and their discussions centre on methods of perverting Christ's mission and of retaining the maximum control possible over the human race. That the extent of their success will be considerable emerges from the observations of individual deities and inevitably impairs the jubilation that Dubourg anticipates that his subject will inspire. Continued infernal sway over the human heart, the spread of the Moslem religion, Jewish adherence to the Mosaic law and the persecution of that race, the appearance of schisms and the birth of heresies within the Christian church are all adduced to indict Moloch's view that the race of Adam should be exterminated as an unnecessarily pessimistic solution to the threat that the incarnation poses for the damned spirits.

Dubourg's decision to inaugurate his celebration of the birth of Christ with this canto of wholly infernal motivation and location appears

to be artistically unsound. It hardly is necessary to note that the inspiration derives substantially from the initial book of Paradise Lost and it must therefore be supposed that Dubourg failed to appreciate the fundamental difference between Milton's theme and his own which would invalidate such a close emulation. His judgement was probably clouded in part by his declared intention of providing the greatest diversity of material the scope of his subject would allow,⁹² for there seems to be a deliberate attempt to vary the settings of the divisions of the poem.

As has been seen, the epic opens in hell but the locus of Chant ii switches to heaven, whither Religion ascends to seek some respite for human beings from the depredations of the demons on earth. In the first two sections a diametrical opposition in surroundings is established and there is a marked movement from dark to light but thereafter the variation is less violent. In the third canto, the reader initially follows the retreat of the devils before the celestial army ever deeper into the infernal regions and then accompanies Gabriel to witness the annunciation. In Chant iv, Gabriel recounts to Mary the tale of the fall of man, so that the action is set in Eden, and the epic ends with the story of the birth of Jesus Christ as told by Saint Luke.

Dubourg condenses the subject-matter of his five cantos, which are of homogeneous length, into something less than 2200 alexandrines, a total which precludes any extensive description or elaboration in the text. Despite the addition of footnotes, he was clearly conscious of his brevity in a genre where diffuseness was the norm, for he proposed that the Messie should be envisaged as an essay at epic rather than as an epic poem itself.⁹³ That this invitation was not meant to be taken seriously is revealed by

92. Dubourg, Préface, p. 4.

93. Dubourg, Préface, p. 3.

the very next paragraph in his preliminary discourse, in which Dubourg doubted that length was a necessary quality of epic and catalogued derisively those literary artifices which, to his mind, led to irrelevance and prolixity but which he saw fellow-practitioners of the genre favour in their quest for thematic development.⁹⁴

Dubourg's own concision stands as one of the few redeeming features of his epic. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that he mismanaged his subject, which proves to be rather more intractable than he anticipated. The approach to his allegedly novel theme is derivative and the diction provides no adequate compensation.

Conclusion

Although the spirit of the age might have been thought to be antipathetic to the writing of biblical epic, the later eighteenth century in France produced nine poems on themes taken from the Apocrypha and the Old and New Testament. The Bible therefore constituted a rather more popular source of epic matter than the annals of the discovery and conquest of the New World but it not unexpectedly failed to attract as much attention as French history.

The incidence of subjects within the category of biblical epic is itself of some significance. Taken together, topics from the Apocrypha and the Old Testament achieved an overwhelming numerical superiority, the reason for which might perhaps be found in their remoteness in time and their consequent greater tractability. Certainly, the hazards attendant upon the epic treatment of the Gospel story become alarmingly manifest in the case of La Baume-Desdossat's Christiade.

94. Dubourg, Préface, pp. 3-4.

The Old Testament proper provided the source-material for more than half the biblical epics written during the years under review, yet only minimal use was made of the wealth of subject-matter it offered. Of the five poems which drew their inspiration from the Old Testament, no less than four celebrated the exodus and the conquest of Canaan. The predilection of writers of epic for this particular period of Hebrew history can be explained by the inherently heroic nature of the national achievement and the dramatic and occasionally cataclysmic confrontation of divergent cultures and faiths.

This examination of biblical epic has also revealed that the Scriptures attracted precisely the same literary techniques as secular material. The imperious requirement of epic theory that unity of action should be respected necessitated a fundamental alteration to the apocryphal structure of the story of Tobit and the imposition of an artificial order of events on biblical themes was widespread. Invented matter, episodic embellishment, the celestial and infernal supernatural and the standard topoi of epic all duly made their appearance. Indeed, a more conventional specimen of neoclassical epic than Collet's poem on Joshua probably did not appear in France between 1745 and 1809.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EPIC GENRE

The initial chapter of this thesis studied in some detail the theory of epic as it was elaborated in France in the later eighteenth century and subsequent chapters have examined French epics actually produced during that period. The analysis within the context of the critical injunctions then in force of various practical attempts at epic between 1745 and 1809 has so far elicited comments which have been largely confined to noting the particular practice of individual epicists and a broader perspective of the genre as a whole now seems desirable. So as to arrive at an overall picture, it is therefore proposed in the present chapter to discuss briefly the general features of epic during the years under review.

A necessary, if seemingly obvious, preliminary observation to be made is that the writers of epic themselves were certainly conscious of the status of their chosen medium and apparently alive to the peculiar difficulties it presented. Prefatory statements reminded the reader of the superiority of epic over other literary forms but also advised him that the number of accredited epic masterpieces in the history of world literature was exceedingly small. While this recognition of the inherent problems of epic was undoubtedly genuine in the majority of aspirants to the supreme literary prize, the exaggerated awareness of the audacity of their enterprise that certain authors professed would seem to contain a hint of disbelief. Certainly, some managed to dispense with the long period of gestation that critical opinion regarded as essential for the composition of an epic poem. For example, although they are admittedly short epics of some

3500 and 4000 lines each respectively, Pagès de Vixouze's La France républicaine (1793) and Lesur's Les Francs (1797) both appeared in the very same year as the events they celebrated.

An examination of the themes employed by poets between 1745 and 1809 confirms the anticipated preference for profane material and reveals an almost total compliance with the precept that secular epic should have an historical basis. But the recommendation that subjects of a certain historical remoteness should be chosen was less widely observed. More than one half of the patriotic poems analysed in this thesis deal with events which had taken place less than a century or so earlier and the majority of these in fact record exactly contemporary history.

The epics based on recent history provide a practical demonstration of the soundness of the advice concerning the derivation of subject-matter, which was offered with a view to facilitating the introduction of that element of fiction which constituted a distinguishing feature of epic. They show that the epic poet treating a modern argument could avail himself only with difficulty of his right to modify historical fact in the overriding interests of artistic purpose. The prerogative did not authorize any infringement of the laws of verisimilitude and consequently did not extend to the contradiction of well-known data. Because the details of its story were often common knowledge, the national epic on a modern subject was often constrained to confine itself to preponderantly factual content and therefore failed to meet the fictional requirements of the genre. The alternative to what was in essence a purely historical work was almost always equally unfortunate. A refusal to recognize, or be bound by,

the restrictions that his recent material imposed on his freedom to invent led more than one poet to damage the plausibility of his tale. Lesur's fabricated account of the death of General Marceau contravenes the truth so blatantly that no contemporary reader could possibly have given it credence.¹

The disadvantages of a modern, patriotic story were doubtless counterbalanced in the estimation of an eighteenth-century author by the inherent attraction his national subject would hold for the public. When the critical command that all Christian historical narratives in particular should be of special interest to the nation was ignored, an attempt to forge some link with France was often in evidence. In Le Suire's Le Nouveau Monde, it is the much-favoured interpreter episode which furnishes this connection. The tall, sun-tanned figure, clad in a wild boar's skin, who acts as translator for the Indians proves to be a descendant of the counts of Toulouse and his recital introduces a distinctly French flavour in its account of the Albigensian crusade. Indeed, the need to establish a national association in his poem was even felt by one writer of Old Testament epic and Bérault-Bercastel contrived to include a description of ancient Gaul in his work, La conquête de la terre promise.

To move from the themes of post-Voltairean French epic to the question of its structure, it may first be noted that the customary use of the terms "books" or "cantos" to designate the divisions of the tale was almost universally retained. Marmontel alone shunned this external sign of epic intent and Les Incas comprises 53 chapters. Marmontel was far from unique, however, in his decision to abandon the

1. See above, p. 135.

artificial sequence of events which had become a hallmark of French neoclassical epic and the high incidence of narratives which followed the natural order of history marks a major divergence by eighteenth-century writers of epic from the practice of their seventeenth-century predecessors.

It is interesting to observe that some correlation seems to exist between the structural procedure of a given poem and the category of epic to which it belonged. Among the examples of biblical epic, only Madame Cottin's slight work, La prise de Jéricho, adopts a chronological approach, whereas Madame Du Boccage's La Colombiade provides the sole instance of the traditional in medias res order among the poems on the discovery and conquest of the New World. The authors of patriotic epics were not so united in their preference but they nevertheless displayed a very marked predilection for the straightforward natural sequence of events. In the period under review, then, the poets who worked on profane material overwhelmingly rejected the idea that disturbed chronological order was a requisite of epic.

Unlike the inverted narrative order, the standard proem is habitually found in all three categories of epic studied in this thesis. In Marmontel's Les Incas alone does it completely fail to appear. The Virgilian opening, in which the proposition and invocation were given as separate entities and in that order, stayed the more in favour but the Homeric pattern, which combined the two, beginning with the invocation, also received some support. Occasionally, the proem was excessively extended and in this respect La Pariséïde, by Claude Godard d'Aucour, may be mentioned. Godard commences by differentiating his tale from previous versions of the Trojan saga and apostrophizes his

native France, imploring knowledge of the past and announcing his patriotic intention of celebrating the origins of his country; a plea to the Muses to forgive his neglect of them precedes an invocation to the Genius of France, in which stylistic aid is especially solicited; to conclude, Godard offers a fuller statement of the precise subject of his work. The whole proem fills some four pages.

The propositions of the epic works composed in France between 1745 and 1809 and the way in which they were translated into practice demonstrate a continuing belief that the subject of epic should constitute an action. In this context, Vernes' La Franciade is unusual in that it neither proposes nor narrates a clearly-defined mission. Furthermore, the poems scrutinized commonly betray an attempt to ensure that this action should itself possess unity and Le Clerc and Le Roy both modified the internal structure of the Book of Tobit which violated this principle. But Le Clerc came close to transgressing the very rule he had sought to preserve when he appended to his tale the details the Apocrypha gives of the future history of the Tobit family and thus could have been construed as recording the full biography of his protagonist. However, Le Suire's Le Nouveau Monde shows the only flagrant disregard in the period under review for the neoclassical tenet that the precept of unity disqualified the whole career of a hero as a fit subject for epic.

The infractions of the unity of action that occur in the epics considered here derive less frequently from an excess of subject-matter or a plurality of objectives than from the inability of poets to handle properly the episodic matter that they incorporated in response to the dictates of the neoclassical canon. Although they lent

themselves to a number of purposes, the basic function of episodes was to extend the single action of epic by exploring its possible ramifications but without damaging its sovereignty. They were required to emanate naturally from, and remain subordinate to, the principal story. In practice, however, sufficient care was not always taken to integrate them into the narrative and their frequently digressive character often obscured the central action. Vernes exhibits to an unparalleled degree the havoc which a poet could wreak in a work by an injudicious use of episodes. His Franciade abounds with gratuitous interpolations which lack any valid connection with the main argument and in places the major narrative thread becomes extremely tenuous.

If the episodic amplification of the action of epic varied considerably in extent and efficacy from one poet to another, the same can be said of the introduction of the supernatural into the story. Significantly, the absence of the marvellous in any of its manifestations is most complete in the two works which conform the least to regular neoclassical epic practice in France, Marmontel's Les Incas and Madame Cottin's La prise de Jéricho. The supernatural also performs a restricted role in Pagès de Vixouze's Louis XIV and Le Suire's Le Nouveau Monde, where it is limited to the occasional insertion of allegorical figures. Although the theorists of epic generally regarded allegory as a minor variety of the marvellous, personified abstractions of both good and evil disposition undoubtedly constituted the most popular form of divine intervention in epic composition of the period.

Recourse to specifically Christian supernatural machinery was not

inconsiderable, however. The forces of heaven and hell opposed each other in several poems of modern, that is, Christian, inspiration and even came into conflict in tales drawn from the Old Testament, where the presence of the Christian marvellous in a Jewish setting was, strictly speaking, anachronistic. Since the Old Testament can be viewed in the light of the New with some legitimacy, such pre-figurations are artistically acceptable but the same tolerance cannot be extended to the appearance in a Christian epic of blatantly pagan agents. The god of Love to whom the Angel of France resorts for help in Chant vii of Dorion's Bataille d'Hastings is unmistakably classical in conception and this mythological figure strikes a discordant note in a poem which postulates orthodox celestial and infernal interference in the action it celebrates.

Perhaps Dorion's real fault lay less in the inconsistency itself than in its flagrancy for, with a little subtlety, an author could avail himself of the resources of pagan mythology and still comply with the exigencies of a Christian subject. Madame Du Boccage's procedure in La Colombiade provides an example of the case in point.

According to the consensus of critical opinion, a poem on the discovery of the New World was restricted to the Christian marvellous and the deities of classical mythology were inadmissible in the story. But by drawing on the traditional argument that all the false gods in history were Christian devils in disguise, Madame Du Boccage effectively introduced the Greco-Roman pantheon into a modern theme. She merely supposed that the demons of Christian theology were worshipped in America in the same form as they had been in classical antiquity but under different names and to all intents and purposes converted the diabolic component of her Christian supernatural into pagan mythological

machinery.

Madame Du Boccage was patently obedient to the letter rather than to the spirit of the laws governing the merveilleux in epic and, for all its ingenuity, her solution inevitably vitiated the Christian atmosphere of her poem. This is not to say, however, that no instance of the successful use of the pagan marvellous exists in French epic of the later eighteenth century. Dulard found the correct formula when he restricted himself to pagan machinery in his Protis and demonstrated its viability for a modern writer when it was justified within the historical setting of the narrative by its conformity with the religious beliefs of the characters.

This discussion of the marvellous in epic has so far centred on the question of supernatural intervention in the story but, since the epic pen was allegedly wielded under the guidance of one divine force or another, a consideration of the various beings on whom French poets of the later eighteenth century called for information and inspiration might not be misplaced at this point.

Only Madame Du Boccage and Ménégaux invoked the Muse of epic poetry, Calliope, by name and, while Boesnier appealed somewhat inexplicably to Urania, Muse of astronomy, for assistance in his account of the conquest of Mexico, some six authors contented themselves with an entreaty to an unspecified sister. These requests of the daughters of Zeus were rarely consonant with the subject-matter the poets wished to celebrate and supplications were addressed rather more felicitously to a number of abstractions. In his Louis XIV, Pagès de Vixouze besought the aid of Philosophy and in 1781 Le Suire petitioned Truth. In the second edition of Le Nouveau Monde, that of an VIII, however,

he turned to Liberty, as Vernes in La Franciade (1789) and Pagès de Vixouze in La France républicaine (1793) had done before him. Although Le Clerc invoked Nature and Madame Cottin invited the walls of Jericho to tell their tale, by and large the authors of biblical epic prayed to fairly nebulous but theological-sounding conceptions. Dubourg's "Souveraine du Ciel" and Collet's "divine lumière" are typical examples.

If epic poets almost always continued to solicit divine inspiration for their creative enterprise, they no longer felt required to adopt metrical form. That more than two-thirds of the works examined here were written in verse, however, demonstrates substantial adherence to traditional French epic practice. The actual metre employed was invariably the alexandrine but Pagès de Vixouze did also introduce decasyllabic and octosyllabic lines into his Louis XIV, though not to any discernible pattern.

A significant minority of writers in the period under review, ultimately deriving their authority from Fénelon's Télémaque of 1699, decided that prose was a suitable vehicle for epic. Although they are found in each category, by far the highest proportion of prose poems occurs in the field of biblical epic, where they account for just under half the total of nine epics. Two of these prose works, Bitaubé's Joseph and La prise de Jéricho by Madame Cottin, display a marked affinity of spirit with the preromantic novel and their medium is perhaps more appropriate to deal with their emphasis on the psychology of their protagonists.

Just as the traditional verse form was not considered to be indispensable for epic in the years between Piron and Chateaubriand,

so durability of inspiration was also abandoned as an imperative. Some poems did indeed attain the proportions which had habitually been associated with the genre. Bourgeois' Christophe Colomb ran to almost 12000 lines and Théveneau's Charlemagne was projected to be in about 10000. La Harpe completed six of his intended twelve cantos and wrote some 4800 alexandrines. Such length, whether achieved or contemplated, far exceeded the norm and a work of about 5000 to 6000 lines appears to have been deemed respectable. Many authors were satisfied with less. The ten cantos of Pagès de Vixouze's La France républicaine and of Lesur's Les Francs failed to reach 4000 lines, while Dubourg and Le Manissier composed less than 3000. The 1700 lines of Dulard's Protis hardly suggest that the founding of Marseilles involved the expenditure of much time and effort and the similar length of Ménégault's glorification of the victories of Napoleon also implies a lack of epic scope. Renaud-Blanchet was perhaps the most presumptuous poet of all, for he claimed epic status for L'école des empires even though it boasted less than 1100 lines.

While it is obviously more difficult to evaluate the precise length of prose epics, it may be noted that the extremes are represented by the 100 duodecimo pages of Madame Cottin's La prise de Jéricho and the near 2500 leaves of La Baume-Desdossat's Christiade, which was published in the same format. The majority of prose works appeared in octavo and range from the 327 pages of the first edition of Bitaubé's Joseph in 1767 to the 718 pages of Marmontel's two volumes of Les Incas.

As a conclusion to this brief review of the principal features of epic in France from 1745 to 1809, some attempt to define the contemporary view of the genre might be appropriate. The observations made

in this chapter decree that, in the general estimation of its exponents, epic was a narrative work, of variable length, in verse or in prose, relating a single great action which should be extended by the use of subordinate episodes so employed as to maintain a unified structure. The theme of this work was to be of a sufficiently elevated nature to be capable of bearing supernatural intervention and should have an historical basis, although the exact degree of its historical remoteness differed widely. If its subject-matter were sacred, then epic preferably drew on the Apocrypha and the historical parts of the Old Testament.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has hopefully proved that interest in epic in France between 1745 and 1809 was not confined to the theoretical plane but, despite what some modern literary historians would like to claim, also manifested itself in substantial creative activity. Against the background of a considerable corpus of contemporary critical writing, it has examined in detail twenty-nine works within the three principal areas which attracted writers of epic in this period, namely, national history, the annals of the discovery and conquest of the New World and the Bible.

The allure of epic composition has been seen to derive from the pre-eminence of epic among literary forms and the consequent desire to succeed at the highest level of artistic endeavour. The epic laurels were valued on both the individual and national levels, for it was fully recognized that the glory resulting from the production of an epic masterpiece in French would reflect not solely on the person of its author but also on France and her literature.

In the conclusion to the Essai sur la poésie épique, Voltaire had keenly lamented French deficiency in epic¹ and it must be admitted that, taken together, the works composed from Piron to Chateaubriand miserably fail to impress. If an occasional poem appears to merit some indulgence, it is less through any positive worth than through comparison with more tedious examples of the genre.

In accounting for the failure of epic in later eighteenth-century

1. Voltaire, VIII, 360.

France, the intricacies of French versification, the monotony of its rhyme and an antipathetic national spirit - which were variously adduced to explain its lack of success - can all largely be discounted. The root cause undoubtedly lay in an inability to escape from the narrow confines of an outworn tradition. During the years under review, the concept of epic bore an excessively restrictive interpretation and its very identity was held to depend on the inclusion of conventional structural and stylistic topoi. Canonical practice in epic composition inevitably restricted spontaneity and ultimately led to sterility. Perhaps the greatest indictment of the form is to be found in the fact that it is almost invariably predictable.

This unfavourable assessment of the French epic poem from 1745 to 1809 in no way invalidates the investigation undertaken in this thesis. For the critical writing it provoked and the creative effort it stimulated, the subject is deserving of attention. In its basic assumptions, the present thesis therefore begs to differ with the following observation by La Harpe:

Les mauvais poèmes ... de ce siècle n'ont pas fait plus de bruit à leur mort qu'à leur naissance, et personne ne les a troublés dans la tranquille possession de l'oubli. Il n'y a nulle raison pour les en tirer; et vous engager dans cette route, ce serait vous faire voyager dans un désert.²

2. La Harpe, VIII, 198.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF EPICS

Dates given are those of the first edition. A plus sign indicates that the epic was incomplete and an asterisk that it was written in verse.

1745	Píron	<u>La Louisiade*</u>	1 canto
1752	Boesnier	<u>Le Mexique conquis</u>	12 books
1753	La Baume-Desdossat	<u>La Christiade</u>	12 cantos
1756	Du Boccage	<u>La Colombiade*</u>	10 cantos
1758	Dulard	<u>Protis*</u>	4 cantos
1766	Bérault-Bercastel	<u>La terre promise*</u>	12 cantos
1767	Bitaubé	<u>Joseph</u>	9 cantos
1773	Bourgeois	<u>Christophe Colomb*</u>	24 cantos
1773	Godard d'Aucour	<u>La Pariséide</u>	12 books
1773	Le Clerc	<u>Tobie</u>	4 cantos
1777	Dubourg	<u>Le Messie*</u>	5 cantos
1777	Marmontel	<u>Les Incas</u>	53 chapters
1778	Pagès de Vixouze	<u>Louis XIV*</u>	15 cantos
1781	Le Suire	<u>Le Nouveau Monde*</u>	26 cantos
1786	Le Roy	<u>La Tobiade*</u>	10 cantos
1787	Le Manissier	<u>La Louisiade*</u>	8 cantos
1789	Vernes	<u>La Franciade</u>	16 cantos
1793	Pagès de Vixouze	<u>La France républicaine*</u>	10 cantos
1797	Lesur	<u>Les Francs*</u>	10 cantos
1804	Renaud-Blanchet	<u>L'école des empires*</u>	4 cantos
1806	Cottin	<u>La prise de Jéricho</u>	4 books
1806	Dorion	<u>Bataille d'Hastings*</u>	10 cantos
1806	Ménégault	<u>La Napoléide*</u>	6 cantos
1806	Saint-Marcel	<u>Charles-Martel*</u>	12 cantos
1807	Collet	<u>Josué*</u>	12 cantos
1809	Roure	<u>La Cortésiade+*</u>	6 cantos
1814	La Harpe	<u>Le triomphe de la religion+*</u>	6 cantos
1816	Théveneau	<u>Charlemagne+*</u>	2 cantos
1823	Lemercier	<u>Moyse*</u>	4 cantos

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