

From the website of Robert Darnton (www.robertdarnton.org).

Correspondance de J.-P. Brissot

1. Introduction

The 185 letters published here provide a trail through the literary world of the Old Regime. By documenting the efforts of Jacques-Pierre Brissot to establish himself as a writer, they show how writing appealed to young men in the 1780s and how it was pursued as a new kind of career, one that could lead to a prestigious place in the ranks of the *philosophes*. In Brissot's case, it led to the Bastille and the collapse of his ambitions, but it also prepared him for another career: in 1789 he became a revolutionary journalist, and two years later he emerged as the leader of the "Brissotin" radicals, who rose to power with the war of 1792 and fell with the onset of the Terror. The letters in this edition cover only the period 1779 to 1787; but they cover it so thoroughly that, if taken with Brissot's memoirs and his other writings, they provide the richest source of information available anywhere about the early life of a prominent revolutionary.

They also reveal a great deal about the history of books. Most of the letters were exchanged between Brissot and his publisher, the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN). Thanks to its strategic position in the Prussian principality of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, the STN produced French books outside the control of the French censorship and marketed them everywhere in Europe. It did an enormous trade in France, relying on an elaborate underground distribution system for its illegal books and using ordinary commercial circuits for its extensive wholesale business. At first, it merely acted as Brissot's printer. But it eventually became drawn so deeply into his attempts to market his wares that it assumed the functions of his publisher. Week by week and book by book, the correspondence of the STN and Brissot shows how an author and a publisher collaborated in the struggle to survive in the literary market place. For the most part, they are business letters. Their main theme is money. That may make them especially interesting for students of literature, paradoxical as it seems; because unlike the more familiar correspondence of famous writers, they provide a vivid picture of the hard facts of literary life.

2. Brissot and the Société typographique de Neuchâtel

In 1779, when the correspondence began, Brissot was 25 years old. He came from a large family: 16 children, of whom 7 survived into adulthood. His father, a *maître cuisinier et traiteur* in Chartres, accumulated a sizeable fortune, 150,000-200,000 livres tournois, and gave Jacques-Pierre a good education, which led from the local *collège* to a training period as a clerk to attorneys in Chartres (1769-1774) and Paris (1774-1776). According to his memoirs, Brissot gave up the law for literature, published some pamphlets and essays, but fell into a Grub-Street type of existence: "misère cachée sous l'apparence de l'aisance, liaisons dangereuses, expédients peu délicats". (1) He escaped to Boulogne-sur-Mer and a job preparing a reprint edition of *Le Courrier de l'Europe*, a French newspaper published in London. It was there from 1778 to early 1779 that Brissot had his apprenticeship in journalism. He also made the acquaintance of his future wife, Félicité Dupont, and her mother, a well-to-do widow, who provided him with an introduction to Edme Mentelle, a family friend and professor of geography at the Ecole militaire in Paris.

Back in Paris under Mentelle's tutelage – and living for a while under his roof – Brissot began to frequent the company of some serious men of letters and to attempt some serious writing himself. About this time he began drafting his most ambitious work, *Théorie des lois criminelles*, a philosophic tract on criminology derived from the famous treatise by Beccaria. But how did he support himself? In one of his first letters to the STN, dated 17 December 1779 [[letter 9](#) in the correspondence published below; all such letters will be identified by their number in square brackets], he described his situation as follows:

Je vis dans la solitude, borné à mes livres et à la fréquentation de quelques gens de lettres. Vivant comme eux, dans mes meubles, du peu de talents que je puis avoir, je me fais à Paris un sort de cent louis, même de mille écus; ce n'est pas pour faire fracas, mais c'est assez pour remplir les engagements que je prends; au reste la

fortune que peuvent me laisser mes parents me fait peu craindre des coups du sort. Je suis à mon aise si le malheur veut que j'en perde un.

In fact Brissot's father died a week later, but Jacques-Pierre inherited only 4,000-5,000 livres, much less than he had hoped to receive, although he had also feared that he might be disinherited: his Voltairean views had alienated him from his father, a severe, patriarchal character, whose piety had been turned against his son by a hostile canon from the cathedral. (2) Jacques-Pierre spent 600 l. of his inheritance to purchase a law degree at the notoriously mercenary university of Reims, but then quarrelled with the Paris bar and abandoned the law for good: "Libre désormais, je résolu de me vouer entièrement à la profession d'auteur." (3) From this point onwards, Brissot tried to live from his pen.

How could an unknown author, in his mid-twenties with a small inheritance and a large ambition, make his way in the republic of letters? Brissot tells the story in his memoirs, casting himself in a heroic role: the innocent idealist from the provinces wrote his heart out, pleading the cause of humanity and enlightenment, only to be undone by the rogues and thieves in the capital. The story corresponded to a standard narrative – provincial purity vs. urban wickedness – which can be found everywhere in eighteenth-century writing, notably in the works of Brissot's contemporaries, P. F. N. Fabre d'Eglantine and Louis Sébastien Mercier, and in Rousseau's *Confessions*; but that does not mean it was false. Brissot's correspondence with the STN confirms the main drift of the memoirs; yet it puts them in a different light, exposing inaccuracies and inconsistencies and revealing a great deal of new information. Above all, it shows the tactics he pursued. He competed in prize essay contests, sought places in academies, struggled to win recognition by enlightened monarchs, cultivated protectors, lobbied journalists, churned out pamphlets, cobbled together compilations, launched speculations, piled up debts, cut deals with booksellers, took risks in the illegal sector of the trade, ran into bankruptcy, and was saved from ruin only by the generosity of his friends and the indulgence of his publisher.

Of course Brissot could not foresee this dénouement, when he took his first steps in the world of letters. Hoping to find a path that would lead directly to fame, he enlisted as a *philosophe* and flew his colours boldly (but anonymously) in early works like *L'Autorité législative de Rome anéantie* and *Lettres philosophiques sur Saint Paul [...] traduit de l'anglais par le philosophe de Ferney*. Having knocked at the door of Voltaire's "church", he expected it to open; but he discovered that the *philosophes* did not readily make room in their ranks for new recruits and would not pull strings or grease wheels by acting as protectors. In 1777 he had produced a plan for a grand philosophical work, a treatise on pyrrhonism, which, as he described it in his memoirs, "respirait l'énergie et la tristesse d'un homme ardent pour les sciences, pour la vérité, mais malheureux, mais recherchant un appui, un ami, des secours enfin pour s'élancer dans la carrière qu'il brûlait de parcourir." He submitted it to d'Alembert and received a non-committal, two-sentence note in reply. Undeterred, he asked d'Alembert to send another letter, which he planned to print in the preface to the book. Back came a second note, more tepid than the first, and Brissot abandoned the project. (4) A year later, he attempted the same manoeuvre with Voltaire, who had arrived on his final, triumphant tour of Paris. This time, Brissot sought endorsement for an equally ambitious work, *Théorie des lois criminelles* which he was then composing. Trembling with awe and fear, he ventured into the great man's antichambre and left him a flattering letter with a draft of the introduction. In return, he received a letter like d'Alembert's, also two-sentences long. Brissot judged it effective enough to publish in the introduction, but it did not work as a passport to the inner circle of the *philosophes*. (5)

While preparing philosophical treatises, Brissot turned out topical and polemical pamphlets. One, *Le Pot-pourri, étrennes aux gens de lettres*, satirised some fashionable literary figures and mocked the leader of a salon as though she were a prostitute. This time, the letter he received in return was a *lettre de cachet*. The police gave him enough of an advance warning to clear out of his room before they raided it; so he escaped the Bastille. But the lesson was clear: the literary landscape was mined, and it was far more complex than he had imagined. *Philosophes* fought *l'infâme*, but they did not offer a helping hand to young writers who wanted to join the battle; the police reinforced the authority of the state and church, but they also protected the reputation of people with pull; and it could be more dangerous to libel influential persons than to make fun of religion. (6)

Such was the state of Brissot's literary apprenticeship when he entered the circle of Edme Mentelle and began dealing with the STN. Fortified by his inheritance and his contacts with a milieu of respectable writers, he concentrated on ambitious works, which he hoped would make his name as a *philosophe*. But he continued to dash off anonymous pamphlets, to patch together compilations, and to hatch plans for all sorts of literary enterprises. Their titles jostle one another at an amazing rate in the letters that he sent to Neuchâtel. They include works that never appeared in print and printed works that were never attributed to Brissot. Brissot's correspondence with his publisher therefore provides a picture of his literary career that differs considerably from the philosopher-turned-revolutionary to be found in the standard accounts of his life and times. (7)

Brissot addressed his first letter, dated 31 August 1779, to Anne-Gédéon Lafitte, marquis de Pelleport, an intimate of Mentelle's circle who had studied at the Ecole militaire and drifted into the life of a literary adventurer. By 1779 Pelleport had established himself in Neuchâtel as a schoolmaster and occasional contributor to the *Journal helvétique*, a literary review published by the STN. He had also acquired a family, having married a chambermaid in the household of Pierre-Alexandre Du Peyrou, the Neuchâtel host of Rousseau. Sometime around 1780 Pelleport left his wife and children to pursue his fortune in Paris and London, where he collaborated in a smutty pamphleteering and blackmailing operation mounted by a group of expatriate Frenchmen and directed against the French court. Brissot frequented this company in 1783-1784, when he, too, took up the life of an expatriate writer in London. He downplayed his connections to the London libellers in his memoirs, which suggested that he had not met Pelleport earlier and that they were never close. But Brissot's first letters to Neuchâtel show that they had formed an intimate friendship in Mentelle's house, where Brissot, as he confided to Pelleport, had also developed an attachment to "la belle voisine" [[letter 2](#)] – evidently Félicité Dupont, his future wife. In a letter to Pelleport of 5 October 1779, Brissot signed off in an unusually familiar manner: "Addio il mio caro. Je vous embrasse bien sincèrement. Tout à vous" [[letter 5](#)].

The letters also provide the first information about Brissot's publishing plans, because he had the impression that Pelleport worked for the STN. Eager to avoid the censorship and high printing costs in Paris, he sent off the manuscripts of two anonymous works, a philosophical tract, *Recherches philosophiques sur le droit de la propriété*, and a gossipy pamphlet, *Observations sur la littérature*. Pelleport passed the manuscripts on to Frédéric Samuel Ostervald, who directed the STN in company with his son-in-law, Jean-Elie Bertrand, and a local businessman, Abram Bosset de Luze. By the end of October the confusion had been sorted out; Pelleport disappeared from the picture; and Brissot sent his letters directly to the STN.

In the eighteenth century letters did not have stamps. Normally the recipient paid whatever charges they accumulated en route. The STN had an arrangement with the postmaster of Pontarlier near the Swiss border to forward letters at a reduced rate. But the return mail could be ruinously expensive, especially if it included proof sheets; and if it looked suspicious, it might be opened by spies in the redoubtable "cabinet noir" of the French administration. Like many authors, Brissot got round this problem by cultivating a go-between, M.-C. Pahin de La Blancherie, another intimate of Mentelle's circle, who styled himself "agent général de la littérature" and conducted a great deal of correspondence as the head of a literary society, the Musée de Paris. La Blancherie in turn had cultivated a secretary to J. A. Amelot, minister for the king's household and the department of Paris, who enjoyed the privilege of receiving mail free and without inspection. The STN's letters to Brissot went out under a "triple enveloppe": on the outside a cover addressed to Amelot, which the secretary would open; beneath it a letter addressed to La Blancherie, which would be forwarded to him by the secretary; and thirdly a letter addressed to Brissot under the name he used before 1789: "de Warville", an anglicised version of Ouarville, a village near Chartres where Brissot's father owned some land. By adding the *particule*, Brissot claimed that he was conforming to local usage, not affecting an aristocratic air. (8) In any case, the letters reached him at his various Parisian addresses, though there were some close calls. On one occasion the minister opened the outer envelope, thinking the thickness of the packet indicated the presence of some engravings. Brissot then warned the STN never to seal the envelopes with wax but to stick them together with a thin coating of moist bread. Sometimes he used other covers, including that of another minister, L. J.-B. de Bertin, and another third-rate man of letters, Henique de Chevilly. The postal service, like many institutions under the Old Regime, worked through a combination of payment, privilege, and fraud. It actually worked quite well: a letter

normally covered the 500 kilometers between Neuchâtel and Paris in four days, as fast or faster than it takes today. (Of course, fewer people used the mail and it was more costly.) But sending letters was child's play in comparison with shipping books.

Before confronting the problem of shipment, the STN needed to know who Brissot was and whether it could trust him. His letters made him sound like an energetic young man-on-the-make. In addition to the two short books, he proposed a translation of Milton's works; he enquired about the costs of printing a bi-weekly journal like the *Courrier de l'Europe*; and he volunteered to send a weekly article on "nouvelles littéraires" for the STN's own *Journal helvétique*. The STN received similar letters from many such authors, usually obscure writers who wanted to sell their manuscripts but would also pay to have them printed, hoping to cover the payment by an arrangement with a local bookseller. If the bookseller failed to honour a promissory note (the general terms were *effet* and *billet*) or a bill of exchange (*lettre de change*) drawn on him, the STN could be left with a bad debt. The column of "mauvais débiteurs" in its account books grew prodigiously in the 1770s; so it rarely accepted commissions from authors who could not provide evidence of their solidity, "solide" being the most desirable adjective that could be attached to a customer's name.

In Brissot's case, the STN asked him to call on their Parisian banker, Jean-Frédéric Perregaux, a canny financier who would be a backer of Bonaparte and a founder of the Banque de France in 1800. Perregaux found no clear sign of *solidité*; but on 31 December 1779, Brissot wrote that he had come into his inheritance, and Mentelle added a note offering to guarantee the payment of his printing bill. By this time Brissot had sent off the manuscript of a third anonymous pamphlet, *Le Café politique de Londres*, and he announced that more substantial works were on their way. Convinced at last that it could accord him its "confiance" (another key term in the moral economy of the book trade), the STN began setting type. By 26 January Brissot had received the first copy of his *Observations sur la littérature* and was pleased, although his scribbled handwriting had caused the STN to get some proper names wrong and it had changed the title (he had planned to call it *Coup d'oeil d'un observateur*) He had also sent the manuscript of another topical pamphlet, this one on foreign affairs: *Testament politique de l'Angleterre*. He exhorted the STN to rush it through the press, as it was sure to interest the public, and also to keep his authorship secret: although mere "bagatelles", the pamphlets could get him in trouble [[letter 12](#)].

In February 1780 Ostervald and Bosset arrived on a business trip in Paris. Among their many affairs they settled the printing account with Brissot. A letter from the home office in Neuchâtel provided them with precise details about the costs of composition and presswork. They charged Brissot their standard rate of 1 French sol per printed sheet, and he accepted their standard conditions for payment: half the debt would be acquitted upon the arrival of the merchandise in Paris, the other half in a bill of exchange that matured six months later. Brissot met with them several times, explaining his publishing plans and arranging details for the shipping and marketing of his work. The negotiations were interrupted in April, when Brissot went to Chartres for the final settlement of his father's will, but they seem to have gone well. After collecting his legacy, Brissot paid his first printing bill, 300 l. (the equivalent of three to six months' wages for a journeyman printer), and arranged for the balance to be paid by a promissory note from E.-M.-P. Desauges, the bookseller who stocked and sold his works in Paris.

Having established his fiscal soundness, Brissot treated the publishers to a panorama of his plans to win glory as a writer. Only scattered references survive from the notes that he addressed to them in Paris, but taken together with his subsequent letters to Neuchâtel they show that he was hatching projects on a grand scale. The most important was the first work that he sent to Neuchâtel after the Paris meeting, his two-volume *Théorie des lois criminelles*: "Je vous prie d'observer que cet ouvrage est de la plus grande importance pour moi et que c'est la raison pour laquelle je ne veux négliger aucun des soins que je puis lui donner à tant de distance du lieu de l'impression" [[letter 23](#)]. He had had his manuscript copied so as to avoid the errors that had disfigured his pamphlets. The foreman of the printing shop should take special care with everything, especially the notes, and Brissot would correct the proofs himself, despite the distance and the difficulties of sending bulky packets under the three-envelope system.

At the same time Brissot proposed elaborate publications designed to bring in money as well as prestige. Having laboured briefly in the stable of authors who were to produce a French edition of Milton's works – a project that turned into a swindle, as the books never appeared and the subscribers never got their money back (9) – he had learned to appreciate the possibilities of enlisting hack writers to turn out multi-volume compilations. A ten-volume digest of the proceedings of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres could sell well: "Je dirigerais en sous-ordre quelques manoeuvres littéraires qui rempliraient nos vues" [[letter 88](#)]. He saw promise in a compilation of works about education [[letter 83](#)]. He could cobble together a ten-volume *Biographie universelle des gens de lettres*, following a plan that he sent to Ostervald in Paris [[letter 16](#)]. At the same time he produced an outline of a monumental *Analyse philosophiques de toutes les langues* [[letter 13](#) and [letter 38](#)] and a still more vast *Histoire philosophique de la législation criminelle de tous les pays et de tous les siècles* [[letter 36](#)]. None of these works ever made it into print, but some of them contained the germ of grandiose projects that were to occupy Brissot for the next few years and whose titles alone suggest the boundless character of his ambition: *Bibliothèque philosophique du législateur, du politique, du jurisconsulte* (1782-1785), 10 volumes; *Correspondance universelle sur ce qui intéresse le bonheur de l'homme et de la société* (1783-1784), 2 volumes; and *De la vérité ou méditation sur les moyens de parvenir à la vérité dans toutes les connaissances humaines* (1782), 1 volume.

Just how the sober Swiss publishers became drawn into the enterprises of this unknown, French *homme à projets* can be seen by following both sides of their correspondence. (Unfortunately the STN's letters are missing from 1779 until October 1780 and from December 1781 until September 1784; and some of Brissot's letters are missing from 1786.) In February 1780, when they first met in Paris, Ostervald was 67 and Brissot 26. The older man seems to have been impressed with the energy and ambition of the youth. Not only did "Warville" appear to have plenty of money as well as ideas, he was also eager to be helpful. He arranged for sales of the STN's edition of the *Encyclopédie* and recruited a contributor to its own encyclopedic project, the *Description des arts et métiers*. After Ostervald's return to Neuchâtel, Brissot continued to perform all sorts of services. He sent articles for the *Journal helvétique*, reported on literary news (the burning of Raynal's *Histoire philosophique*, the *embastillement* of Linguet, reactions to Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*), distributed the occasional prospectus for an STN publication, arranged for the STN to print manuscripts of his friends, and sent warnings about special measures by the police to confiscate books.

Little by little the tone of the letters became more friendly. Departing from the usual business-like style of the STN, Ostervald used the first person instead of the impersonal "nous", and Brissot replied in a respectful manner, which became increasingly informal and at times almost intimate. By November 1780 Ostervald invoked their "amitié" in asking Brissot to recommend the STN to the Parisian writer, J.-B.-C. I. Delisle de Sales [[letter 34](#)]. In March 1782 he agreed to an extension of a promissory note that Brissot had drawn on his bookseller Desauges, who had an inexhaustible ability to avoid parting with cash; and Brissot replied with effusive thanks for "l'estime et l'amitié que vous avez conçues pour moi [...]. Je vois qu'à la différence des personnes du même état que vous, vous rendez justice aux gens de lettres et que, les trouvant déjà assez malheureux d'être obligés de passer par les mains des libraires, vous ne les rendez pas responsables au moins des fautes de ces derniers. Ce trait ne peut venir que d'un homme de lettres ou d'un ami des lettres" [[letter 98](#)]. Ostervald did indeed qualify as a man of letters, having written two treatises on geography. He seems to have sympathised with the literary ambitions and the noble ideals of his young friend, who reciprocated with appeals for moral as well as typographical support: "En un mot, faites pour moi comme vous feriez pour votre ami, pour votre enfant, pour vous. Je m'en rapporte à votre prudence et à votre amitié" [[letter 40](#)].

This last remark belonged to a series of letters about Brissot's *Théorie des lois criminelles*, the work that he hoped would make his name. Ostervald took an active part in its production and diffusion. He corrected the proofs himself and even provided some material about judicial practices in Switzerland. For his part, Brissot aimed the *Théorie* at a prize essay contest sponsored by the Société économique de Berne. The prizes offered by academies provided one of the few ways for obscure writers to attract attention, as Thomas, La Harpe, and many others had demonstrated, following the famous example of Rousseau's prize discourse of 1750. Brissot had carried off two prizes from the Academy of Châlons-sur-Marne, which also elected him as one of its

members. But they were for slight works, *Les Moyens d'adoucir la rigueur des lois pénales en France sans nuire à la sûreté publique*, published in the proceedings of the academy in 1780, and *Le Sang innocent vengé, ou discours sur les réparations dues aux accusés innocents*, a pamphlet that he published with the STN in 1781.

The *Théorie des lois criminelles*, by contrast, was a two-volume treatise, the most ambitious philosophical work that Brissot ever attempted. Again and again in his correspondence with Ostervald, he came back to his hopes of winning the prize: "Vous devinez aisément, si l'ouvrage peut mériter d'être couronné, quelle influence cette annonce mise en tête de l'ouvrage aura sur le débit du livre [...] Ce n'est pas tant l'argent du prix que je considère que la gloire que procurera ce laurier dans toute l'Europe et l'avantage de débit à son ouvrage" [[letter 30](#)]. But he faced a difficulty: the Society kept postponing its decision as the STN approached the end of its printing. He hoped to proclaim the prize-winning character of the book on its title page, but the competitors were required to remain anonymous; so Brissot would disqualify himself if he announced his authorship or published the book before the Society proclaimed the winner. Impatient to burst into print, Brissot tried to move heaven and earth in order to get inside information about the Society's plans. He succeeded only in moving Ostervald, who took some discreet soundings in Bern and reported that the Society might dither indefinitely. There was nothing to do but proceed with the printing and try to promote the book by other means.

An endorsement by an enlightened monarch might do wonders. Brissot asked Ostervald to send specially bound editions to Frederick II, Catherine II, and other princes: "Je débute dans les lettres et mon nom n'est point connu [...]. Mais comme je veux que cet ouvrage fasse sensation, il faut lui donner la plus grande publicité, le répandre partout, chez toutes les têtes couronnées, et je n'épargnerais rien pour cela" [[letter 38](#)]. Having learned how little Frederick was inclined to help publishers in his far-off Swiss principality, Ostervald warned Brissot not to expect much. The monarchs did not deign to notice him, and in the end the most favourable publicity that the *Théorie* received was a review in the STN's own *Journal helvétique*. So Brissot's triumphal march through the academies did not get beyond Châlons-sur-Marne, although his two prizes there provided him with something of a calling card. In his memoirs he claimed to scorn academies, (10) and he attacked them in some of his later pamphlets, but in his correspondence with Ostervald he included a notice for another issue of the *Journal helvétique* in which he described himself as: "M. Brissot de Warville, avocat au Parlement de Paris, membre de diverses académies, déjà connu avantageusement par sa *Théorie des lois criminelles* dont nous avons parlé dans nos précédentes feuilles et par un mémoire sur le même sujet couronné à l'Académie de Châlons l'année dernière" [[letter 68](#)].

Despite the disappointments, the effort to launch the *Théorie* brought author and publisher closer together. Through it all, Brissot continued to send Ostervald less weighty manuscripts, the kind that he did not want to appear under his name: *Lettre d'un hollandais sur la guerre actuelle*, *Méthode analytique pour apprendre des langues*, and *Lettre d'un sauvage des Alpes*. Judging from a casual remark about "une bagatelle politique" [[letter 56](#)] that he had printed on the outskirts of Paris, he probably continued to do a good deal of hack writing. His attempt to gain recognition as a *philosophe* did not interrupt his development as a journalist and pamphleteer. But even when he wrote as an anonymous hack, Brissot struck a note of high-mindedness, casting himself as a revolutionary Philadelphian or an incorruptible Swiss. The Swiss stereotype was fashionable in France at that time, thanks in large part to the influence of Rousseau. As Brissot expressed it in his letters to Ostervald, the "âme helvétique" [[letter 87](#)] stood for honesty, simplicity, frankness, closeness to nature, and a penchant for republicanism. Those were the qualities he invoked while trying to persuade Ostervald to hire him as the Parisian correspondent of the *Journal helvétique*: "Je vous parle avec toute la franchise helvétique, quoique je ne sois pas de ce pays. Quand vous voudrez, nous ferons affaire, mais pas simplement une affaire de commerce. J'aime à mettre de la chaleur aux ouvrages que je touche et je serais charmé d'écrire sur la littérature avec ce désintéressement que tous les savants affichent mais qui se trouve rarement chez eux" [[letter 33](#)].

In the summer of 1782 Brissot got to know Switzerland at first hand. The main purpose of his trip was to settle his account and arrange new publishing ventures with the STN, but he arrived in Neuchâtel via Geneva, which was convulsed in a democratic revolution directly inspired by the principles of Rousseau. Threatened by the intervention of French and Sardinian troops, the leaders of the democratic "Représentant" party fled to

Neuchâtel, which then was Prussian territory. Brissot spent a great deal of time with them, especially with Etienne Clavière, a wealthy, radical financier, who became one of his closest friends, "mon ami [...] mon Mentor" (11) and contributed greatly to his political education. The result appeared a year later in *Le Philadelphien à Genève*, a violent political tract that Brissot wrote in favour of the Représentants. He did not publish it with the STN. In fact, he hid his authorship of it from Ostervald, perhaps because of its violence. Nonetheless, he cemented his ties with Ostervald, Bosset, and their families. After his return to Paris in August, he filled his letters with expressions of friendship: "Adieu, mon cher Monsieur. J'embrasse toute votre famille de tout mon coeur" [[letter 110](#)].

The trip to Switzerland marks a turning point in Brissot's life. He shifted his view away from France, towards distant vistas – Geneva, England, Ireland, the United States, the first signs of a world-wide tide towards democracy. On 13 August 1782, in his first letter to Ostervald after his arrival back in Paris, Brissot wrote, "Je suis arrivé dimanche au soir, mon cher Monsieur, et depuis je me suis tenu exactement renfermé pour me reposer, mettre un peu d'ordre et dans mes idées et dans mes affaires. Il me semble que je tombe ici dans un nouvel hémisphère et j'ai besoin de me refaire une autre âme, une autre manière de vivre et de voir." A few days later, he returned to the usual discussion of books and bills of exchange. Yet he had seen a revolution, discussed politics with men who had translated ideas into actions, and taken pilgrimages to sites still warm with the memories of the thinker who had inspired them: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Brissot's Rousseauism shows through everywhere in his writings. It was a genuine, generous faith, and one should keep it in mind while reading his letters to the STN. For the most part, however, the correspondence concerns the business side of culture and the obstacles an author had to overcome in order to reach the marketplace with works that did not find favour with the French authorities.

3. Publishing the *Théorie des lois criminelles*

When the young Brissot embarked on a career as a writer, he knew little about how to get books into the hands of readers. He realised, of course, that none of the books he planned to write would pass the censorship and qualify for a royal privilege. Some might be granted *permissions tacites*, *permissions de police*, or *simples tolérances* – that is, semi-legal status in the graduated spectrum of legality/illegality that had evolved under the baroque bureaucracy charged with supervision of the book trade. Officials in the Direction de la librairie and the police turned a blind eye to relatively inoffensive works, which could be printed in France, decked out with false addresses on their title pages, and passed off as products of foreign presses. More outspoken books were usually printed beyond France's border; but they, too, were often allowed to circulate inside the kingdom – unless an offended party, usually in the Church or one of the parlements, protested: then the book police (*inspecteurs de la librairie*) would confiscate copies and, if the booksellers pulled strings or greased palms, release them with the proviso that they be shipped back to their place of origin. In such cases the books fell into the category of forbidden works, and they had to be handled with care. They might come back again into France, but this time they would have to be smuggled. Books that openly attacked the Church, the State, or conventional morality remained underground throughout their life cycle. (12)

The underground was as complex as the terrain occupied by the legal and semi-legal book dealers. Some officials in the police and the provincial booksellers' guilds waged war against the under-the-cloak trade; some cooperated with it. A large population of middlemen operated smuggling routes, clandestine warehouses, and delivery services. Booksellers differed, taking risks when they smelled the prospect of unusual profits or siding with the law when they saw an opportunity to destroy a competitor. On the whole the more marginal dealers handled the more dangerous books, but a wealthy and well-established master bookseller-printer might speculate on forbidden works, if he could count on support from the local intendant or *inspecteur de la librairie*. Alliances and alignments developed throughout the book business, and they changed over time; so publishers and retailers were constantly adjusting their supply lines and outlets. Moreover, the rules of the game changed, too; for the trade was regulated, in principle, by general *règlements*, notably those of 1723 and 1777, supplemented by an endless flow of edicts. The concept of literary property was modified, legal loopholes

opened and closed, guilds and masterships were created and destroyed, inspection stations moved around the map, and periods of repression and permissiveness succeeded each other with bewildering rapidity.

Through it all, some consistency in the mechanism for repression was maintained by a key device: the *acquit à caution*, a customs certificate issued for imports at a border station and discharged by the officials responsible for inspecting a shipment at its destination. The officials were officers of the local book guild – a *communauté de libraires et d'imprimeurs* acting through a *chambre syndicale* – reinforced by an *inspecteur de la librairie*, who belonged to the police. They might be rigorous or – especially if bribed or allied with a supplier – negligent. But they had to sign the *acquit* and return it to the wagon driver, who would deliver it back to its point of origin as evidence that the shipment had received the proper vetting. In order to prevent fraud, the *acquits* and the crates themselves were stamped with wax and lead seals, but expert smugglers developed techniques of breaking and replicating them, removing the illegal books, substituting legal ones, and sending the crate on its way, while forwarding the clandestine wares as a domestic shipment, often as textiles, which would be exempt from further searches. They usually sent the forbidden books aimed at the Parisian market to secret warehouses in the Versailles area, often in the palace itself, where there was an active market in underground literature. The books would then be smuggled past the customs barrier of Paris in small quantities, which could be hidden in princely coaches or under ladies' dresses. Once safely inside the city they would be sold "under the counter" or peddled "under the coat" by professionals attached to bookshops that speculated in the illegal trade in order to fend off bankruptcy or to exploit the dangerous sector of the market left to them by the wealthy members of the guild.

Brissot did not have a professional's knowledge of this difficult terrain when he began to do business with the STN; but having published a few polemical pamphlets, he knew the lie of the land. He understood that an unorthodox philosophical treatise like the *Théorie des lois criminelles* could not be produced and distributed legally in France, though he might persuade the authorities to look the other way if the text were sufficiently moderate and the printing were done outside the kingdom. On the production side he turned to the STN, because it had been recommended to him by Pelleport, a veteran of the literary underground. For distribution, he relied on Desauges, who explained the contraband tactics that Brissot recommended to the STN in a letter of 2 November 1779: the STN should handle the smuggling as far as Dijon. Then the crates would be repacked and forwarded to Mme La Noue, a shipping agent who operated a secret warehouse from an office near the Grille du petit Montreuil at Versailles. "Mais surtout point d'acquit à caution depuis Dijon, car cela perdrait tout" [[letter 7](#)]. In fact most of the shipments took another route: via Lyon, where the STN's principal smuggler, Jacques Revol, had developed a large repertory of techniques for undoing and counterfeiting *acquits*. He relayed the books to Versailles, where they were stocked by Mme La Noue until Desauges could arrange for them to be smuggled to his shop in Versailles. The transport costs accumulated as the shipments made their way across the kingdom and were paid according to a system of collection on delivery. In order to collect the shipments, Desauges had to reimburse Mme La Noue, who had paid the wagoners. He expected to cover those costs by sales, while Brissot hoped to tap enough from the sales to pay the printing bill of the STN and clear a profit for himself. The final step in the financing would be a payment from Desauges to Brissot in the form of bills of exchange or promissory notes, which matured at a future date and which Brissot could endorse over to the STN. According to standard practice, Brissot would pay half the bill in cash – or an immediately negotiable note delivered to the STN's banker in Paris – as soon as the shipment arrived. He would pay the other half in a note that would mature six months later. Having collected its money, the STN would close the account for that book and be ready to open new accounts as Brissot speculated on subsequent works.

As described in this general manner, the system seems fairly straightforward. But if followed through Brissot's correspondence, it appears to be so exposed to chicanery and fraud that one wonders how it functioned at all. Everyone cheated along the way, perhaps even the STN, which apparently overprinted some of Brissot's books so that it could sell them on the sly. The greatest cheat, according to Brissot, was Desauges, who seems to have been a particularly tough customer when he bought books and a sharp operator when he sold them. He had learned the tricks of the trade from his father, an under-the-cloak peddler-bouquiniste, and had perfected his education in the Bastille, where he did time for trafficking in forbidden books in 1775 and 1777. (13) When he

encountered Brissot, he had no compunctions about squeezing money from starry-eyed authors. But Brissot may not have been quite so naive as he made himself out to be in his correspondence and memoirs, where he consistently appears as the embodiment of innocence in a world of knaves. His naiveté, if such it was, cost his publishers dearly; for in the end, he dumped most of his debts on them. The first disaster was the *Théorie des lois criminelles*. Its publishing history is worth considering in some detail, because it shows how an author, printer, and bookseller combined forces and also undercut one another in the attempt to get a book to market.

Desauges kept a shop on the rue Saint-Louis du Palais just behind the Palais de Justice, where Brissot probably got to know him while shopping for books during his early days as a law clerk and apprentice attorney. In 1779, when he produced his first pamphlets with the STN, Brissot arranged with Desauges to have them smuggled and sold in Paris; and he wrote a note on Desauges to cover half their printing cost. That experience worked out well enough for Brissot to turn to Desauges when he needed help with the marketing of his first important book, the *Théorie des lois criminelles*. According to Brissot's account of their arrangements [[letter 44](#)], they set its price at 6 livres retail, for the two volumes stitched but not bound; 5 livres wholesale. They estimated that each volume would cost 2 livres for transport, storing, and smuggling and that it would bring in 3 livres from sales at the wholesale level. Desauges said he felt certain of being able to sell 300-400 copies in Paris and the provinces, and he expected especially high sales in cities with parlements, where the demand for law books was strong. He was to receive the exclusive right to market the book in France in exchange for a payment that he would settle with Brissot once he had decided how many copies to order. For his part, Ostervald agreed to promote the book through the STN's commercial correspondence and its *Journal helvétique* – impartiality was not a quality of book-reviewing in the eighteenth century – but he refused to sell it as part of the STN's own stock – that is, in effect, to become Brissot's publisher. The STN had contracted only to be Brissot's printer, but it served him well in this capacity. Not only did it produce crisp editions, which pleased his eye and were relatively free of typographical errors, but it also reduced its standard price of 1 sous (12 deniers) per sheet to 10 deniers, in view of the extensive business it expected to do with him in the future.

Everything went well at first. Brissot sent the manuscript to the STN on 1 July 1780: 282 dense pages, which he expected to make two octavo volumes at 30-32 lines a page in print. He considered it "assez bien copié" [[letter 21](#)], unlike his earlier work, which had arrived so badly botched by the copyist that the STN had had difficulty in producing correct texts. Even so, Ostervald complained that the copyist had made many gross mistakes and therefore gave the proofs a second reading after the shop foreman had corrected them. He reserved this unusual attention for manuscripts that especially interested him, as he explained in a letter to Brissot's friend, P. C. Blot: "Quand il s'agit d'un ouvrage aussi intéressant que celui qui nous est proposé, je me charge avec plaisir de revoir toutes les épreuves, non seulement pour corriger les fautes de sens qui échappent quelques fois au prote, mais aussi pour réparer certaines petites négligences de style que l'auteur ne peut pas remarquer dans la chaleur de la composition." (14) Ostervald sent the corrected proofs to Brissot at the beginning of September along with compliments about the general quality of the book. Touched by the flattery, Brissot resolved to show the proofs to Linguet and others who might promote the book. He asked the STN to delay printing the title page until the last minute, hoping that the Société économique de Berne would finally decide to award him a prize so that he could add "ouvrage couronné par la Société de Berne" after the title [[letter 25](#)]. In the end he had to abandon that hope, and he also decided to tone down his praise for Linguet, who had just been imprisoned in the Bastille. While correcting the proof, he changed a phrase – which he attributed to an error by his copyist – that put Linguet on the same level as Locke, Montesquieu, and Beccaria. Otherwise, Brissot's revisions involved small changes of phrasing and occasional slips – for example, replacing "impudemment" with "imprudemment" [[letter 27](#)].

Brissot considered the final proofs clean enough and innocent enough for submission to Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir, the lieutenant general of police in Paris, "afin qu'il en tolère l'entrée" [[letter 38](#)]. Brissot did not explain what he meant by this kind of tolerance, but it was probably not a *permission tacite*, because he made no application to the Direction de la librairie, where such quasi-legal status was dispensed after the approval of a censor and Le Camus de Néville, the hard-boiled Directeur de la librairie. In later letters Brissot mentioned that he was assembling the sheets into a volume that was "nécessaire pour avoir la permission secrète de faire entrer

à Paris" [[letter 40](#)]. He seemed to have in mind an informal arrangement, possibly a *simple tolérance*, whereby the police would ignore the clandestine distribution of works that they did not consider truly offensive. To expedite things, Brissot instructed the STN to put the false addresses of Berlin and London, without mentioning Desauges, on the title pages of the volumes destined for France. 500 copies that he originally expected to sell outside France were to carry the address "à Neuchâtel et se vend à Paris chez Desauges, Libraire, rue St.-Louis du Palais". These measures were adequate, he thought, to prevent trouble with the authorities. "Tout est en ordre et à l'examen", he assured the STN in early January. "Je crois que l'entrée n'en souffrira point de difficultés" [[letter 42](#)].

Back in July, Brissot had counted on the STN's assurances that it could complete the printing in three months, or by the end of October at the latest. But it did not send off the first two crates with 500 copies until 28 December, and the shipment seemed to take forever – at least to Brissot, an eager author, whose impatience grew with every mail delivery that failed to announce the arrival of his books. They made it safely to Lyon, and Revol forwarded them to Versailles on 20 January; but they had not arrived by 18 February, when Brissot complained bitterly about the delay: "Cela est terrible et désespérant. Je maudis les voituriers" [[letter 49](#)]. At last, early in March, Mme La Noue sent word that she had stashed them in one of her secret storerooms. (She had so many hiding places scattered around Versailles that she sometimes lost track of the stock. A shipment of Rousseau's works had sat forgotten in an attic through most of the spring in 1781.)

The last leg of the journey turned out to be the most difficult. Counting on his contacts with the police, Brissot had the 500 copies shipped directly to the headquarters of the lieutenant general in Paris. That manœuvre got them past the customs and the danger of confiscation by the officers of the booksellers' guild, but Lenoir found certain passages "trop hardis" and required them to be replaced by cancels. Then he sent a copy to Le Camus de Néville for inspection.. "et vous savez quel homme est ce M. de N-", Brissot lamented to Ostervald [[letter 54](#)]. Still, Brissot expected to have the books released in early May. The additional delay meant that he could not conclude his sale to Desauges; and until that deal was done, he could not write a note on Desauges for the payment of his printing bill to the STN. The bill came to 1740 l., a hefty sum – far more, Brissot claimed, than the 1200-1300 l. that he had expected to pay. But in the course of the printing, he had urged the STN to make extra expenses – for footnotes, revisions, the binding of gift copies for presentation to princes – in order to make the book look as impressive as possible. And in any case, he had contracted to pay half the printing costs upon the arrival of the crates and half in a note to mature six months later: his arrangement with Desauges had no bearing on his obligation to the STN. Like many of its other customers who could not pay their bills on time, he began to complain about poor service and excessive costs: the delays had been disastrous, the shipping charges exorbitant. Revol, in particular, had gouged him, because the Neuchâtel-Lyon segment of the shipment had cost three times as much as the Lyon-Paris segment, even though the latter was three times as long. In view of all the over-charging, the total cost of the book had come to 2500 l., Brissot claimed, adding that he could have had it printed in Paris for that price. Conclusion: the STN should be patient about the delay in payment: "Mon ouvrage va me donner bien du trac. Plaignez-moi et ne murmurez pas des retards" [[letter 54](#)].

Ostervald sent a sympathetic reply, promising to demand satisfaction from Revol and offering to handle future shipments all the way to Versailles for a small set sum, 10 l. per quintal at the most. This arrangement boded well for Brissot's eight-volume *Bibliothèque philosophique*, which eventually grew to 10 volumes and took up most of his energy in 1781; but while preparing this new opus, he failed to pry the old one free from the police. They received him well, he wrote in May, and he expected that Desauges would be able to begin selling it in two weeks, though "avec des précautions, car on craint l'éclat" [[letter 56](#)]. Soon afterwards, however, the Parlement de Paris condemned and burned the outspoken new edition of Raynal's *Histoire philosophique de l'établissement et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Having watched the bonfire, Brissot warned that his *Théorie* might suffer the same fate, especially as it contained plenty of material that could offend the magistrates. Nonetheless, he expected that it would go on sale in early June, when he would settle with Desauges and send payment to the STN. Meanwhile, he took satisfaction in the laudatory reviews published by his friends on the *Courrier de l'Europe* and by the STN in its *Journal helvétique*.

On 2 July Brissot informed Ostervald that prospects for sales in France now looked bad: "Je n'ai jamais pu obtenir de permission directe de vendre mon ouvrage. Le ministre en craint l'effet. Cependant on en tolère la vente mais un peu secrète. Le retard et le secret me font perdre plus de 1,500 livres sur le marché que j'aurais dû faire" [[letter 60](#)]. In fact Lenoir released 100 of the 500 confiscated copies, which Desauges began to sell cautiously under the counter, while Brissot ordered the STN to send 300 more. As payment, Brissot sent four notes of 250 l. each. They were promissory notes, written by Desauges to him and endorsed by him to the STN. He added casually that the remaining 740 l. of his printing bill ought to be covered, more or less, by the STN's sales outside France. But Ostervald did not want to accept that arrangement. The staggered due dates on Desauges's notes made them mature on average in mid-1782; but Brissot had contracted to pay off his entire bill within six months of the books' arrival – that is, by September 1781. In principle the STN could charge him interest for the delay. Moreover, it had sold only 21 copies to its correspondents in northern Europe, and it had done so as a service to Brissot, not in lieu of payment for his debt.

Brissot had no answer to that argument. Instead, he held out hope that the STN would find compensation for this setback from the new works that he was preparing, especially the *Bibliothèque philosophique*, a huge printing job for the Neuchâtelois and a promising source of income for Brissot, as well. He sent the copy for its first two volumes on 26 July, along with the manuscripts of two small pamphlets and two articles for the *Journal helvétique*. As evidence of his devotion to the STN he also included a warning about a threat to its speculation on a pirated edition of Raynal's *Histoire philosophique*: the French authorities had received reports about four such editions then being printed outside France; they had issued special orders to prevent them from being smuggled across the border; and they had sent undercover agents to collect information in the printing shops and along the shipping routes. "Je ne vous en dis pas davantage mais ce que je vous dis, je le tiens de bonne part", he concluded [[letter 62](#)]. Evidently Brissot had inside access to the operations of the book police.

From this point on the correspondence shifted to the production of Brissot's next books. Its tone remained friendly. Ostervald offered to provide material for the *Bibliothèque philosophique* and to do everything possible to promote the sales of the remaining *Théories*. Rather than insisting on the irregularities in Brissot's payments, he waited for Desauges's notes to become due. He sounded an alert in September, when Desauges sent a request via Brissot for the STN to print a pornographic manuscript. He never accepted such commissions, Ostervald replied, and Brissot should know that booksellers who proposed them usually did so when they had run into financial difficulties. Ostervald's suspicions grew stronger a month later, when Desauges failed to pay for a shipment of other books that he had ordered from the STN, justifying his refusal by the pretext that he had had difficulties in retrieving them from Versailles. After years of experience with the chicanery of booksellers, Ostervald had learned to read such behaviour as a sign of bad faith or impending bankruptcy; and he warned that he was reluctant to accept any more notes drawn on Desauges as payment for debts.

Sure enough, when the first of Brissot's four notes on Desauges became due in February 1782, Desauges refused to honour it. This produced a stiff reprimand from Ostervald, the first harsh words that Brissot had received from Neuchâtel. Judging from his response, he did not feel implicated in the difficulties that he had foisted on the STN and did not assume full responsibility for the timely payment of his bill: "Je vous avoue que votre lettre m'a affligé surtout à cause de sa froideur. Vous ne devez point douter de ma bonne volonté. Et quand il y aurait des retards, devrait-on s'en prendre à l'homme de lettres qui vend toujours à perte?" [[letter 94](#)]. But he tried to repair the damage by confronting Desauges with Ostervald's letter and demanding payment. Desauges replied with some confusing verbiage accompanied by a promise that he would settle the affair with the STN's banker in Paris. Instead of doing so, however, he came back with a request for a further delay, explaining that he had done so much business recently that he had lost track of his payments. He would have all his debits cleared within a month. But a month later he refused once again, and again asked for a month's extension, this time until mid-April. His son, who had taken over the explaining, pacified Brissot with a long account of the expenses they had incurred and with a guarantee to honour the other three notes on the dates of their expiration.

While Desauges led Brissot on this merry chase in Paris, Ostervald watched helplessly from Neuchâtel and finally agreed to extend the extensions rather than to attempt to force payment by means of legal action before a commercial court of Juges consuls. But on 30 March, when the second note for 250 l. became due, Desauges refused to honour it. Brissot protested with an indignant letter. In reply, Desauges sent another string of excuses in a note that Brissot transcribed for the edification of Ostervald, commenting: "Tout devait me révolter dans cette lettre, l'indécence, la mauvaise foi" [[letter 99](#)]. He also transcribed his answer to Desauges's note, which showed that he had sold the 500 confiscated copies of the *Théorie* to Desauges at a rock-bottom price – 1000 l. instead of the normal wholesale price of 5000 l. – owing to the uncertainty of getting their release. But Desauges had used their confiscation as a pretext for refusing to pay the STN. The affair was embroiled by Brissot's personal account with Desauges, where he had run up a deficit for his own purchases of books. He also owed Desauges reimbursement for paying Mme La Noue's bill, which covered the smuggling, transport, and warehousing costs. Citing all sorts of confusing sums, Desauges insisted on a general squaring of accounts before honouring the promissory notes that Brissot had endorsed over to the STN.

That ploy belonged to the bag of tricks commonly used by booksellers: the more scrambled the accounts, the greater the opportunities for avoiding payments. But Brissot's version of the scrambling failed to take account of a basic fact: it was he, not Desauges, who was indebted to the STN. He skirted this fact by presenting himself in his letters as a high-minded author tormented by a rapacious bookseller. He was probably sincere and possibly correct, but he construed the affair in such a manner as to occlude the consideration of his own responsibility:

Je suis désolé de tous ces contretemps et vous n'avez pas d'idée combien la mauvaise foi de ce libraire m'a déchiré, combien il m'en a coûté de voir qu'après tant d'honnêteté de votre part vous êtes sa dupe et cela peut-être par ma faute. Mettez-vous à ma place et jugez enfin si je puis faire mieux. Je vous écris tout ce que je fais, tout ce que j'ai dessein de faire comme à un ami. Vous connaissez mieux que moi la partie et surtout les friponneries de ces libraires. De grâce aidez-moi de vos conseils. [[letter 99](#)]

After more tergiversations Brissot finally arrived at the only feasible solution: to separate his account with Desauges from his dealings with the STN, clearing away all the ambiguities about who owed what to whom. He announced that he would settle on his own with Desauges, and then, after taking another month to raise the money, he would make a direct payment to the STN's Parisian banker of the sums that Desauges had refused to pay. Thanks to this procedure – and despite a final round of trouble over the Desauges's fourth note – Brissot ultimately paid the printing bill for the *Théorie*.

Why had he not adopted such a straightforward plan in the beginning? He seems to have been short of cash. Although he had collected his inheritance, he kept launching new speculations while trying to make money from the old ones. In 1781 while struggling with the imbroglio over the *Théorie*, he sent a flood of copy to the presses of the STN: *Lettre d'un Hollandais sur la guerre actuelle*, *Méthode analytique pour apprendre les langues*, *Un Indépendant à l'ordre des avocats*, *Le Sang innocent vengé*, *Lettre d'un sauvage des Alpes*, and the first two volumes of the *Bibliothèque philosophique du législateur*. Some of these were short pamphlets, which could be produced quickly and financed by small short-term notes. For example, Brissot sent the manuscript for the *Lettre d'un Hollandais* to the STN on 26 July; the STN shipped back the printed brochure, 500 copies in octavo, on 23 August; it arrived in Versailles on 2 November; Brissot had it smuggled into Paris by 5 November; and he paid for it on 12 December with a promissory note due to mature six months later. But a large-scale treatise like the *Théorie* was another story. Brissot did not have enough capital to pay for its production, especially while financing other works. He expected to cover its costs by sales – that is, by contracting with a French bookseller to market the copies in France. This was standard practice, but it assumed that Brissot could get the books into the hands of the bookseller. He had shared that assumption, trusting that the police would allow the first shipment of 500 copies onto the market. When they proved to be less tolerant than he had expected, he had to lower his price in his negotiations with Desauges; and the whole speculation threatened to fall apart. To be sure, Desauges knew that he was buying confiscated books, and in July 1781 Brissot persuaded the police to allow Desauges to market 100 of the copies they had impounded, taking care to keep everything under the cloak. Nonetheless, when Desauges's notes matured, he refused to honour them on

the grounds that he had not received the equivalent value in merchandise. It was a disingenuous argument, but it might work or at least delay the reckoning while he paid off more pressing debts and Brissot continued to lobby for the release of the 400 other books. In fact, successful lobbying was the only way to satisfy everyone involved with the enterprise; so the last episode in the publishing history of the *Théorie* turned on Brissot's efforts to extract the book from the police.

Not surprisingly, his letters contain only suggestive allusions to his contacts with the police. As already mentioned, he tipped off the STN to undercover agents who had been dispatched to capture shipments of Raynal's *Histoire philosophique*. He also warned it about its edition of L.-S. Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*: "Prenez garde à vous pour le *Tableau de Paris*; vous serez surveillé de près. Je vous préviens et je sais cela de bonne part" [[letter 91](#); see also [letter 56](#)]. And he sent inside information about editions of Rousseau in which he revealed the name of his source: "A propos de Rousseau, j'oubliais de vous dire que M. Martin de la police me disait l'autre jour qu'il n'y en avait que neuf éditions en train, ce qui allait inonder la France" [[letter 54](#)]. Martin was Lenoir's secretary responsible for all affairs concerning forbidden books, and Brissot counted on his help for the release of the 400 copies of the *Théorie* that remained sequestered after Lenoir had allowed out the first 100: "Je vais m'occuper encore de la restitution des 400 exemplaires. J'y mettrai tout, quoique j'aie déjà employé les moyens les plus forts, les personnes qui pouvaient faire plus d'impression. M. Martin, qui a l'air de m'estimer, de m'être attaché, m'a protesté de tout son zèle" [[letter 98](#)].

In October 1781 Martin, or one of Brissot's other contacts, suggested a ploy to rescue the books: Brissot should get the STN to send him a "lettre ostensible" [[letter 80](#)] or a fake protest, demanding that he return the shipment since he had failed to pay for it. Brissot even dictated the terms to be used in this charade. In fact, he apparently took the instructions from the police: Ostervald was to protest indignantly at Brissot's refusal to honour his debt; the prohibition of the *Théorie* could not be used as an excuse for failing to pay the printing bill; it was astonishing that the French authorities would not permit the sale of such an excellent work; but if they really had refused to tolerate it, Brissot should send the shipment back to Neuchâtel.

Unfortunately, "lettres ostensibles" were common currency in the underground book trade, and this one did not work. In March 1782 Brissot wrote that Lenoir considered his *Théories* as definitely confiscated: "C'est une injustice atroce et cependant je suis obligé de me taire. Je perds à cela les fruits de mon travail et les frais de l'impression. Ce coup est terrible mais il ne m'abat pas" [[letter 96](#)]. Nonetheless, he kept trying to persuade Martin to come to his aid, and at last on 17 April he sent some good news: he had received a firm promise that the books would be released, although the police would probably insist that they be shipped back to the STN. By then Brissot was about to travel to Neuchâtel himself. En route, he wrote letters from Lyon and Geneva stating that he expected the 400 copies to be safely back in the STN's warehouse when he arrived. No doubt they were, because Brissot settled his general account with Ostervald at that time and discussed plans for winding up the *Théorie* enterprise with Ostervald's partner, Abram Bosset de Luze. Bosset told him that they had shipped the 400 copies back to Desauges. True to form, Desauges complained that the crates contained only 333 copies and continued to reject notes written on him. The paper trail of the *Théories* gives out at the end of 1782. It seems likely that a few hundred copies reached French readers before 1789, but to do so they had to shuttle three times across the Jura mountains and most of northern France. Not only did Brissot fail to gain any glory, but he never made a penny from the work that he hoped would make his name.

4. The Disasters of 1783 – 1784

Brissot dealt with his disappointment by shifting his hopes to other books. Already in July 1781 he had sent the manuscript for the first two volumes of the *Bibliothèque philosophique du législateur*, his ten-volume compilation of philosophic works on law reform, which the STN was to print in an edition of 1200 copies. He expected to sell it by subscription and to make a lot of money, despite some difficulties with the distribution of the prospectus. Although it was a scissors-and-paste job, he produced it with amazing speed. He sent off volumes 5 and 6 in November 1782, promising to complete it by the end of the year. It looked so lucrative to him that he considered doubling the print-run; and while completing it, he dashed off the first volume of a work

that seemed likely to grow to an equal size: the *Correspondance universelle sur ce qui intéresse le bonheur de l'homme et de la société*, which he planned to print at 1000. As he contemplated these overlapping projects – to be filled out further with a new edition of the *Théorie des lois criminelles* and *De la Vérité ou Méditation sur les moyens de parvenir à la vérité dans toutes les connaissances humaines* – Brissot saw vistas of limitless profitability stretching far into the future. His letters turned into lists of speculations, with extravagant figures attached: the new edition of the *Théorie*, on a printing of 4000, would bring in 25,200 l.; the *Bibliothèque philosophique*, 36,000 l. This was not merely wishful thinking. It was a way of pyramiding debts. By subscriptions and sales, each speculation was supposed to bring in enough money to cover the costs of its predecessors. But none of them sold. By the end of 1782, when Brissot's hopes were highest, the whole edifice looked ready to come crashing down.

Why did he not see the disaster that threatened him? Aside from his capacity for wishful thinking about the success of his books, he had fixed his hopes on a vast enterprise which, he believed, was certain both to spread Enlightenment and to make his fortune at a safe distance from the French police: the Lycée de Londres. The idea derived from the Musée de Paris, a literary society organised by M.-C. Pahin de La Blancherie, the self-styled "agent général de la littérature, des arts, et des sciences", whom Brissot met in Mentelle's house. Unlike the salons and academies, the Musée was open to any writer who wanted to declaim selections from his portfolio or debate literary topics with other *littérateurs*. It also functioned as a *bureau de correspondance*, which could put writers in contact with one another through the mail, and it published a weekly journal, *Les Nouvelles de la république des lettres*, supplemented by a *Salon de la correspondance pour les sciences et les arts*. After frequenting the Musée and collaborating on its journal, Brissot decided to create a similar establishment in London, where its publications would be free from the repression that had ruined his attempts to market the *Théorie des lois criminelles*.

Brissot had made a quick trip to London in 1779 while working for the Boulogne edition of the *Courrier de l'Europe*. At that time he met two literary adventurers who lived in a colony of French expatriates: Serres de La Tour, the editor of the fabulously profitable London edition of the *Courrier*, and Théveneau de Morande, a pamphleteer, blackmailer, and police spy. Together with the *Courrier's* publisher, a Scotsman named Swinton – who also ran a gambling house, where Brissot lost most of his wages – they opened Brissot's eyes to the possibility of striking it rich as a French writer protected by the liberty of the press in Britain. Pelleport was soon to seek his fortune in this manner by collaborating with the London *libellistes*. But Brissot claimed to have been repelled by their immorality. As he explained it in his memoirs, the secret purpose of the Lycée de Londres was to "abattre le despotisme": "Il fallait, pour préparer une insurrection générale contre les gouvernements absolus, éclairer sans cesse les esprits, non pas par des ouvrages bien raisonnés et volumineux, car le peuple ne les lit pas, mais par de petits écrits, tels que ceux répandus par Voltaire pour détruire la superstition religieuse." (15)

This recollection may have seemed convincing to Brissot when he was preparing to defend his commitment to the Revolution before the Revolutionary Tribunal in 1793, but it does not conform to the letters he wrote in 1782. Along with shock from the confiscation of his books, they register a need to make money. They also show that he had found backers – all of them from the circle of Mentelle. The most important, Desforges d'Hurecourt, a musician and *bel esprit*, promised 15,000 l. The others, N.-G.-L. Villar, a well-connected man of letters, and J.-B.-J. Elie de Beaumont, the famous lawyer and ally of Voltaire in the Calas Affair, provided encouragement and contacts. Fortified by their assurances of support from famous writers and enlightened ministers, Brissot developed his plan. He would establish a meeting place in London, something like a philosophic club, where writers and savants from around the world could assemble every week; he would publish accounts of their activities in a *Journal du Lycée de Londres*; and he would promote exchanges among them through correspondence, which would also be published in installments as *Correspondance universelle sur ce qui intéresse le bonheur de l'homme et de la société*. It was to prepare these projects, while making arrangements to pay off his debts, that Brissot travelled to Neuchâtel in the summer of 1782. The STN was to publish the *Correspondance universelle* in tandem with editions to come out of Hamburg and Venice and while it forged ahead with his other projects, especially the *Bibliothèque philosophique*. After his return to Paris in

August, Brissot wrote rather vaguely about "les personnes qui s'intéressent à mon entreprise nouvelle" [[letter 107](#)], but evidently he had reassured Ostervald in Neuchâtel about the new influx of capital that was to fuel his publications. When they settled his account on 10 July 1782, he paid off only 1553 livres, 12 sous and 2 deniers of a deficit that came to 5153 livres, 18 sous, 4 deniers. But apparently he painted a rosy picture of his prospects. Far from cutting him off from the STN, his emigration to England would incorporate it in his attempt to establish himself at the head of a European-wide network of *gens de lettres*. The STN would print prospectuses and spread them among his agents in a growing distribution system – Labotière in Bordeaux, Rosset in Lyon, Dufour in Maestricht, Virchaux in Hamburg, de Lunel in Venice. In the light of this expanding literary empire, Desauge's shop and his disingenuous ploys to avoid paying for the *Théorie des lois criminelles* seemed rather small. And Brissot's affection for Ostervald and the STN was greater than ever: "Je vous aime, j'aime votre entreprise" [[letter 106](#)].

Nevertheless, Brissot's letters to Neuchâtel after his arrival in London in January 1783 mainly concern his attempts to cope with the debts that he had built up over the past three years. His situation was complicated by a further source of pressure: the need to support a family. He married Félicité Dupont on 12 September 1782, but they kept the wedding secret, because Félicité was employed under Mme de Genlis in the household of the duc d'Orléans, and the news that she had tied herself to an impecunious writer might be enough to get her dismissed. She joined Brissot in mid-1783, and on 29 April 1784 she gave birth to their first child, Félix. By then the household had expanded to include Félicité's two sisters, Anne-Marie and Thérèse, her brother François; and, at least for a while, Brissot's younger brother Pierre-Louis, who called himself Brissot de Thivars.

How was Brissot to feed so many mouths? In hard times, he could count on help from Félicité's mother, a fairly prosperous widow, who continued her husband's trade as a merchant in Boulogne. Félicité herself seems to have brought in a few shillings by translating English books. Brissot earned 2400 l. by writing the "variétés" section of the *Courrier de l'Europe* from February to November 1783. Clavière had loaned him another 2400, perhaps as a subsidy for Brissot's defense of the Genevan Représentants in *Le Philadelphien à Genève*. But on top of his old printing bills from Neuchâtel, he was piling up new ones from Cox, the London printer of the *Correspondance universelle* and the *Journal du Lycée de Londres*, a monthly which began to appear in January 1784 and which Brissot supplemented with yet another compilation, *Tableau de la situation actuelle des Anglais dans l'Hindoustan et de l'Inde en général*.

Brissot's letters to the STN provide only tangential information about his activities in London, but they certainly document the increasingly desperate state of his finances. In the first months of 1783, they mainly concern his efforts to promote the *Correspondance universelle* and to get permission for it to circulate in France. Pierre-Louis Brissot de Thivars acted as his brother's agent in Paris until August, when he joined the family in London and a friend named Larrivée replaced him. Their letters to the STN registered one setback after another. In March Thivars warned that the French authorities seemed unlikely to allow the *Correspondance universelle* into the kingdom. In April he complained that a shipment of *Correspondances*, sent despite that advice, had not arrived. In May he reiterated his complaints, blaming the STN as well as the usual suspects, La Noue and Desauges, who was still Brissot's distributor in Paris, despite their quarrels over the *Théorie des lois criminelles*.

In July the cause of the difficulty finally became clear: while the STN had delayed dispatching the crates, the French government changed the basic rules governing book imports. After 10 June 1783, foreign suppliers were no longer permitted to ship books directly to their customers in the provinces. Instead, all shipments had to be sent with an *acquit à caution* to Paris, where agents from the Parisian booksellers' guild and a police inspector would examine them, discharge the *acquit*, and send them to their final destination. Not only did this requirement burden shipments with crushing transport costs, but, as the government intended, it also ruined the smuggling system in places like Lyon. Revol could no longer fraudulently discharge *acquits*. He and his counterparts in other provincial centres had to discontinue their services; and for several years the STN, like all Swiss publishers, found it virtually impossible to get illegal books into France.

While the French market was closing to him, Brissot continued to churn out copy at a prodigious rate from London. By 7 February he had finished the third issue of the monthly *Correspondance universelle* and was within three months of completing volumes 7-10 of the *Bibliothèque philosophique*. He still hoped to get permission for the *Correspondance* to circulate in France so that he could open a subscription and sell it through the mail, but the French authorities would not allow him even to publish its prospectus. He had inserted the text of the prospectus in volume 5 of the *Bibliothèque philosophique*; and when Desauges put that volume on sale, the authorities confiscated it. That blow threatened to stop the distribution of the *Bibliothèque* as well as the *Correspondance*. Yet Brissot, ever the optimist, instructed the STN to gather the issues of the *Correspondance* into two annual volumes in order to sell it clandestinely as a book: "Il y aura même un avantage à cela, en ce que j'en écrirai plus librement" [[letter 122](#)]. Life was not easy in England, but the press was free. The STN should encourage Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who was then preparing a new edition of his *Tableau de Paris* in Neuchâtel, to join Brissot in London: "Il y trouvera des amis qui le connaissent et un asile ouvert à la liberté que rien ne peut violer. Au moins nous n'avons pas ici de colonel qui appuie à ce qu'on ferme les presses et à ce qu'on muselle les auteurs" [[letter 126](#)].

Much as he appreciated the liberty to publish in England, however, Brissot fretted about his inability to penetrate the markets on the Continent. He counted on sales outside France to compensate for the barriers to sales within the kingdom, but he failed to extract any income from Virchaux in Hamburg and de Lunel in Venice. Although the STN promoted his works in its catalogues and correspondence, it, too, did not sell many of them to bookdealers in northern and central Europe. Its warehouse held 700 copies of his 368-page tract, *De la vérité ou méditation sur les moyens de parvenir à la vérité dans toutes les connaissances humaines*. Most of the other copies in the edition, which included 1544 in all, went to rival booksellers, Desauges in Paris and Poinçot in Versailles – and at different prices, which seemed certain to cause recriminations. Pricing in general seems to have been a problem for Brissot. Ostervald warned him that he charged too much for his books. But the disappointing sales may have had more to do with their content than their marketing. Brissot dashed them off: they were neither original nor very well written. The criticism that he directed against Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* – written in May 1781, before he got to know Mercier – applied even more to his own work: "Le cadre est assez bien choisi mais le style en est généralement mauvais. C'est un ouvrage croqué" [[letter 58](#)].

The poor sales and increasing inaccessibility of the French market wore through the silver lining of Brissot's outlook during the spring of 1781. He worked furiously to complete the *Bibliothèque philosophique* so that it could be sold as a complete set, even though the police had confiscated the shipment of volume 5. Having found no alternative to the services of Desauges, he had engaged Desauges to market almost the entire edition of 1200 copies and then fell into the usual squabbling over money. Desauges refused to make any payments – even though Brissot claimed he had sold half the stock of volumes 1-4, which had made it safely to Paris – on the grounds that the sales had not covered his expenses for the shipping and handling. That left Brissot with a 7500 l. printing bill half way through the editorial work. He also owed the STN 1000 l. for the first three issues of the *Correspondance universelle*, which it had printed for the French market, while he had to come up with 4800 l. for the printings of the same issues that he had organised in London and Hamburg. Not only had the STN failed to get its copies into France, but it had sold only five subscriptions in Switzerland. "Il ne faut donc point compter sur la Suisse pour le débit", Brissot commented, "5 souscriptions, cela est misérable. Je vois bien que si nous n'avons pas la France, il faut y renoncer" [[letter 126](#)]. Meanwhile, in order to pay his new debt to the STN, he had written three notes for a total of 1000 l. on Desauges and promised that somehow he would send more soon, drawing on "M. Larrivée, négociant, mon correspondant et mon ami" [[letter 126](#)].

This raised the prospect of more trouble of the kind that had followed the publication of the *Théorie des lois criminelles*. Ostervald replied that he could not accept any such arrangements. He wanted solid bills of exchange, scheduled to mature at carefully fixed dates and to cover all Brissot's debts as they had been detailed in account statements, which the STN had sent repeatedly – in February, April, and June 1783. From then on, the letters between Brissot and the STN contained little more than haggling over his growing indebtedness. He placed most of the blame on Desauges, who had an inexhaustible stock of excuses to justify his practice of selling books without paying for them. But after the government's order of 10 June 1783 effectively closed

France's borders to Swiss imports, the STN could not get Brissot's works to any bookseller in the kingdom. He had hoped to recoup his losses on the *Correspondance universelle* by marketing it as a book rather than as a periodical, but how to penetrate the market? He tried selling it to the STN, which flatly refused. He attempted to have it printed in Lyon, but those arrangements fell through. He hoped to compensate for the loss of France by sales in northern Europe, but when he wrote notes on Virchaux, his Hamburg printer, Virchaux refused to honour them and then careered off into bankruptcy. The whole infrastructure of the book trade made the *Correspondance* look impossible, even though it was to promote everything "qui intéresse le bonheur de l'homme et de la société", as its full title promised. In May 1784 Brissot finally gave up and told the STN to have its remaining copies pulped.

Meanwhile, his other works drew him ever deeper into debt. "Je n'ai pas touché un sou, un seul sou, ni de la *Bibliothèque*, ni de la *Vérité*, ni de la *Correspondance*", he complained to Ostervald in July 1783, "et cependant mon séjour ici me reviendra à peu près de 4 ou 500 louis [9600 l.-10,000 l.] par an" [[letter 129](#)]. In August he sent the STN 1000 l. in four more notes on Desauges accompanied by quibbling about its latest bills. He still clung to the hope of lucrative sales from the *Bibliothèque*, once it had been completed and the police had released volume 5. But the STN hesitated to expend its resources in printing the last volumes until it had received payment for the first. And even if it printed them, it could not guarantee their safe arrival in Paris, unless Brissot wanted to ship them through the legal route with an *acquit à caution*. By the end of September, with only one more volume, the tenth, of the *Bibliothèque* still to write, Brissot thought this procedure feasible, since the text contained nothing likely to bring down the wrath of the government. He also took heart at the prospects for the Lycée, though it, too, required a huge outlay of cash, because he hoped to open its clubhouse soon and to use it as a base for a book business of his own, one that would spread current French literature everywhere in Britain.

Desauges refused to pay the four notes for 1,000 l. that became due in September. Instead, he sent an account statement that purported to show that Brissot was the one who had fallen into debt and demanded 1,300 l. "Pourquoi y a-t-il des coquins? Pourquoi suis-je entre les mains de cet arabe Desauges?" [[letter 135](#)] Brissot exclaimed in recounting his tribulations to Ostervald. Now, at last, he decided to make a clean break with his Paris distributor. He instructed Larrivée to clear all his books out of Desauges's shop and to force him to pay up, "car enfin il ne faut pas que je sois aussi impudemment volé. S'il ne veut pas traiter à l'amiable, j'ai une voie certaine pour lui faire rendre gorge" [[letter 134](#)]. Meanwhile, to help the STN get over its anger at having the payment of his debt deferred once more, he sent two small notes on Virchaux, his printer and distributor in Hamburg, and redirected three of the notes on Desauges, totaling 750 l., to Larrivée, who, he promised, would honour them. But Virchaux, who was about to go bankrupt, refused the first two notes in November; and Larrivée, who was supposed to cover all Brissot's obligations in Paris, refused the other three a few weeks later. Brissot tried to excuse Larrivée by explaining that he had already paid off 20,000 l. from Brissot's account that year. But the accumulation of financial reverses was beginning to take its toll: "Vous pouvez juger par ces deux affaires des désagréments que les pauvres auteurs éprouvent", he wrote to Ostervald. "En vérité, je commence bien à me fatiguer du métier" [[letter 136](#)].

The toll taken in Neuchâtel was far heavier, because the STN had accumulated a heavy deficit from other authors who, like Brissot, did not pay their printing bills; other middlemen, like Revol, who cheated on their expenses; and other booksellers, like Virchaux, who went bankrupt, or, like Desauges, refused to honour promissory notes. The new restrictions on access to the French market completed the damage to the company's balance sheet, and at the end of 1783 it suspended its payments. Instead of declaring bankruptcy, it reorganised its financial affairs under the direction of a new set of associates. They immediately set out to collect every possible penny from every outstanding debt.

Brissot received three letters from the new associates in the first half of January 1784. Above all, they wanted payment for the vast outlay of labour and paper that went into the *Bibliothèque philosophique* – 1500 l., as they first estimated it, then 3000 l., and finally 6000 l. to cover the costs of the nine volumes they had completed. They would not print the last volume until he had reimbursed them for their advances. Brissot replied with an

argument he had used earlier: he did not have the money at hand; but if they hastened to complete the production of the book, he could pay them by selling it. This time, however, he addressed that well-worn argument to a group of tough-minded businessmen, not to the paternalistic, sympathetic Ostervald. He therefore adopted another tone: he was the wounded party, not they. By long, hard labour, he had produced books that had brought in money for everyone except himself – everyone, including the STN. It had run off extra copies of *Théorie des lois criminelles*, *De la vérité*, and *Bibliothèque philosophique* in order to sell them on the sly. They had better produce detailed evidence about every sale of every book, or he would sue. In fact, he would not send them the table of contents to the *Bibliothèque* until they had rectified the flagrant errors – all to his prejudice – in the general account that they had sent him and that he could refute in minute detail.

La Société sera étonnée de ce langage, mais qu'elle se mette à ma place. Je n'ai pas touché un sous de ma *Bibliothèque*. Je suis en procès avec Desauges, je suis volé en Allemagne, à Londres. Je crois que comme auteur j'ai déjà eu plus de désagréments que vous. Car enfin c'est ma propriété qu'on me vole de tous les côtés. Il est temps que cela finisse et je dois aussi prendre mes précautions. [[letter 140](#)]

Brissot was talking like Desauges. Having completed his apprenticeship in the publishing industry, he could now prevaricate, haggle, and threaten like a professional. He was also fighting for his professional life, because at this time a separate crisis seemed likely to destroy his Lycée.

As explained above, the Lycée was to be a philosophic clubhouse, where men of letters could gather to discuss worthy causes, including their own writing. The *Correspondance universelle* and a *Journal du Lycée de Londres* would extend those discussions to a broad public, in fact to every corner of the world that could be reached by the printed word. Thanks to the liberty of the press in London, the Lycée would not be hampered like the Musée of La Blancherie in Paris. It would become the epicentre of the Enlightenment, the very heart of the Republic of Letters. Brissot had expounded this prospect so eloquently in Paris that he persuaded a fellow member of Mentelle's circle, Desforges d'Hurecourt, to invest in it. Desforges promised to come up with a large sum: 15,000 l. He produced 10,000 l. to finance the preparations for the Lycée – that is, in fact, most of Brissot's expenses during his first year in London – and then agreed to pay the printing bill for the *Bibliothèque philosophique*, which Brissot presented as a related enterprise. In December 1783, Brissot had assured Ostervald that the difficulties over the *Bibliothèque*, Desauges's unpaid notes and all, had at last been resolved, because the backer of the Lycée had agreed to back the book. On 9 January 1784, he wrote that this generous entrepreneur, Desforges d'Hurecourt, would soon send 3000 l. to cover the STN's advances for its last volumes. But on 20 April he reported that Desforges had withdrawn his support for both the Lycée and the *Bibliothèque*.

What had gone wrong? Aside from some polemical pamphlets written during the Revolution, the only source of information is Brissot's memoirs. In them, he explained that English men of letters had failed to rally around his clubhouse. They had their own meeting places and did not need a London version of the Parisian Musée. In fact, the clubhouse did not exist. Brissot had rented and furnished a residence at 26 Newman Street for 1400 l. a year. But he had filled it with his relatives, and in any case it did not have room to accommodate large gatherings of writers and philosophers. He entered into negotiations to rent an assembly room in April 1784; but before he could conclude them, the entire Lycée and all the speculations attached to it were threatened by the greatest disaster that Brissot had ever faced: a catastrophic quarrel with Desforges.

Having paid 10,000 l. of the 15,000 l. he had promised to supply, Desforges arrived in London at the beginning of 1784, in order to inspect the Lycée. Instead of a clubhouse full of philosophers, however, he found an extended family of Brissots and Duponts living, it appeared, at his expense. Brissot later claimed that Desforges became possessed of this idea, not because of any inadequacies in the preparations for the Lycée but because he had fallen under the evil influence of the French expatriates gathered around the *Courrier de l'Europe*, Pelleport included. They had fallen out with Brissot and wanted to suppress the rival French journals that he was producing. Whatever the cause, Desforges not only refused to produce the additional 5000 l. that Brissot needed to rent the assembly room, but he demanded the return of the 10,000 l. that Brissot had already spent. By May 1784, the Lycée seemed doomed to go under while its founders became embroiled in a stormy lawsuit.

The storm could not have broken at a worse time, because on 29 April Félicité gave birth. A few days later while she was recovering in bed, a bailiff arrived with an arrest warrant. Brissot had failed to pay the printing bill for the *Journal du Lycée*, and he disappeared into debtor's prison. Friends bailed him out. But the only escape from bankruptcy was in France. Without daring to explain the full extent of the catastrophe to Félicité, Brissot made a dash for the Channel, begged some funds from his mother-in-law in Boulogne, and rushed off to solicit more money from Clavière in Paris. He sent three short letters to the STN after his arrival in Paris. They included the last copy for the *Bibliothèque philosophique*, which the STN had agreed to continue printing, and acknowledgment of the receipt of another account statement, which it had sent to him through Clavière, and which set his deficit at 12,301 l. (16) Brissot had remained in contact with Clavière ever since they had cemented their friendship in Neuchâtel after the abortive Genevan revolution of 1782. He probably counted on Clavière's support in order to put his life together again during the crisis of 1784. But before they could come up with a plan to rescue the Lycée and save Brissot from bankruptcy, a final disaster struck. At one o'clock on the morning of 12 July, after dining with Clavière, Brissot was arrested by *lettre de cachet* and led off to the Bastille.

5. Last letters, 1784 – 1787

In his memoirs and pamphlets written during the Revolution, Brissot claimed that the police threw him into a nasty cell, cut him off from the outside world, refused to let him communicate in any way with his wife, and treated him with utmost barbarity – all in order to punish him for spreading dangerous truths. (17) In fact, as the Bastille records demonstrate, he was permitted to correspond with friends, to take walks in the prison courtyard, and to see his wife, who hurried to Paris as soon as she learned of his imprisonment. He remained incarcerated for only four months. and after his release he sent a thank-you letter to Martin and Lenoir for their generous treatment of him. That he should have invoked the mythological view of the Bastille as a torture house and dungeon seems understandable, considering the circumstances after 1789. Revolutionary politicians who had done time in the Bastille could hardly resist the temptation to make the most of their experience when they sought public support. But why had Brissot been imprisoned? (18)

The real reason appears in one of the Bastille's registers: "pour libelles". (19) As in the case of the *lettre de cachet* sent for his arrest in 1777, Brissot was not accused of spreading seditious ideas but rather of libel – this time against the most powerful figures at court, including the queen herself. For years the French foreign ministry had been following the slanderous pamphleteering and blackmailing operations of the French expatriates in London. With help from undercover agents – notably Charles Théveneau de Morande, the notorious *libelliste* turned police spy – they had identified the central figure in this booming cottage industry: Brissot's friend Pelleport.

Brissot's friendship with Pelleport was a critical factor in his career as a writer, although he later sought to minimise it. Pelleport put him in touch with the STN in 1779 and helped him to get established in London in 1783. Pelleport's name surfaced at several points in Brissot's correspondence with Ostervald, notably towards the end of 1783. On 7 October Brissot wrote that Ostervald would receive a full report on his situation from a friend who was travelling to Neuchâtel and could bring back confidential information about his accounts. "Je n'ai pas besoin et je ne puis pas vous nommer la personne. Elle se déclinera elle-même", he concluded mysteriously [[letter 134](#)]. When this friend failed to send back word that he was safe, Brissot sent Ostervald a signal of alarm: The person in question was Pelleport, and "Nous sommes ici dans une grande inquiétude sur son compte" [[letter 136](#)]. Why such worry about a traveller on a perfectly ordinary journey through safe territory between England and Switzerland? Brissot must have known that Pelleport was deeply involved in the London libelling and that the French police were out to get him. When Pelleport ventured across the Channel on another trip ten months later, they did get him. They locked him up in the Bastille on 11 July 1784, a day before they arrested Brissot. (20)

What happened while the two men were behind bars? Most of the documentation has disappeared from the archives of the Bastille, so one can only speculate. The timing of the arrests suggests that Pelleport implicated

Brissot; and the timing of their release – Brissot stayed in prison for four months, Pelleport for four years – raises the possibility that Brissot, feeling betrayed or simply trying to talk his way out of captivity, revealed everything he knew about Pelleport and the other *libellistes*. He certainly knew a great deal. His association with the pamphleteers and journalists connected with the *Courrier de l'Europe* went back to 1778. If the police followed their normal procedures – intensive interrogations followed by confrontations between prisoners likely to denounce each other – they could have extracted crucial information about the supply side of a smut-peddling industry that the government was determined to repress. (21) But there is no reliable evidence about what took place in the Bastille during Brissot's confinement. Perhaps, as he later argued, the police simply recognised his innocence and released him, prodded by a letter on his behalf by Félicité's former employer Mme de Genlis. In that case he would have good cause to resent the denunciation that led to his arrest, whether it came from Pelleport, Morande, or someone else in the London colony. He was in desperate circumstances, teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, and the perfidy of some informer had pushed him into disaster.

In his despair and fury, Brissot may have wanted to pull someone with him; for it seems likely that he, too, turned informer. Such, at least, is the testimony of Lenoir, the lieutenant-general of police, who later revealed that after his release from prison Brissot enlisted as a spy: "Brissot resta à Paris; il y vint offrir ses services à la police; je les refusai mais il eut pendant près d'un an des relations d'espionnage avec l'un des secrétaires de ce département, qui me présentait ses rapports, et ses rapports lui étaient payés. Peu avant ma retraite [August, 1785], Brissot resta d'être employé comme espion à la police." (22) The secretary in question was probably Martin. As the STN archives make clear, Brissot had developed cordial relations with Martin before his *embastillement* and continued to meet with him afterwards. (23) During the Revolution, Brissot's enemies frequently accused him of having spied for the police. Marat, who had been an intimate friend of his in the 1780s, put the accusation in a way that fit Brissot's circumstances in 1784:

Le voilà encore sur le pavé, sans ressources et pour surcroît de détresse, chargé d'une femme et d'un enfant. Il est notoire aujourd'hui que ne sachant de quel bois faire flèche, il se détermina à offrir ses services au sieur Lenoir lieutenant de police, qui en fit un observateur royal aux gages de 50 écus par mois. (24)

But Marat was capable of saying anything by 1792, when he flung this denunciation at Brissot. The other versions of it are full of inconsistencies and poisonous polemics. Even Lenoir's remarks must be received with scepticism, because he wrote them in a draft of his unpublished memoirs, long after the supposed spying took place, when he was a refugee from the Revolution. Finally, it should be said that "spying" could take the relatively innocent form of reporting on publications or public opinion. Driven frantic by the need for some source of income, Brissot may have hired himself to the police for 150 l. a month but without doing anything that he thought would qualify as espionage. In short, the documentation is too weak to support any firm conclusion, although it conforms to the picture of desperation that stands out in Brissot's correspondence.

The correspondence thins after Brissot's release from the Bastille on 10 September 1784, but it provides valuable information about his economic plight. The Lycée was ruined, the *Correspondance universelle* pulped, the *Bibliothèque philosophique* stalled, its fifth volume sequestered by the police. Desforges was suing Brissot in London for 10,000-13,000 l. Brissot owed 12,000 l. to the STN. And he had no means of supporting his wife and newborn son. He found shelter at first with Clavière in Paris and Mme Dupont in Boulogne. Then he began to put his life together again, a long and painful struggle that involved pamphleteering for Clavière, who needed to mobilise public opinion in order to support his speculations on the Bourse, and various projects as secretary to the marquis Du Crest, Mme Genlis's brother, who directed the affairs of the duc d'Orléans in the Palais-Royal. Loans from Clavière tided Brissot over during stints of unemployment. But while borrowing from Clavière, he had to find some way to pay back his debt to the STN.

Under new management and heavy financial pressure, the STN considered seizing Brissot's assets to force payment of his debt while he was in the Bastille. "Comme M. Brissot de Warville nous doit considérablement", it wrote to its Paris banker, "ne pourrait-on pas savoir s'il n'a point quelques livres ou autres effets à lui appartenants [...] et les faire saisir pour notre plus grande sûreté?" (25) In the first letter that it wrote to Brissot

after his release, it expressed sympathy but came down hard on its need to collect its bills. He replied that he could not pay anything in the immediate future and that he counted on it to help him raise some money by printing volume 10 of the *Bibliothèque philosophique*. That led to an impasse, because the STN refused to begin work on the volume before he had acknowledged his total debt – a matter of 12,135,90 livres detailed in an account statement that it had sent to Clavière in June – and had sent notes to cover it. Brissot appealed for sympathy in a long and eloquent letter written from Boulogne on 22 October [[letter 148](#)]:

Je veux finir; je veux dire un adieu solennel aux spéculations typographiques et renoncer à une carrière où je me suis engagé trop imprudemment. Je connaissais trop peu le monde et surtout le monde auquel j'avais affaire. J'ai été trompé, joué partout. Il n'est pas heureusement trop tard et je veux m'en retirer [...]. Vous aviez une idée véritable de ma position quand vous m'avez cru trop faible pour pousser cette entreprise [the Lycée de Londres]. J'ai cru que le commencement soutiendrait et alimenterait la fin. Mais on veut jouer de tout à la fois et j'ai été écrasé.

Brissot explained that he would have been "entièrement anéanti", if a friend – clearly Clavière – had not come to his rescue with 10,000 l. Even so, his imprisonment had ruined him. He had to abandon the Lycée at a loss of more than 20,000 l., and his only means of liquidating his debt to the STN was to cede it all the remaining copies of his books that it had in stock: 100 *Théorie des lois criminelles*, 529 *De la vérité* and 600 sets of the *Bibliothèque philosophique*. He could also supply a dozen subscriptions to a new atlas that Mentelle was publishing and a *Précis de l'histoire d'Angleterre* that Félicité had translated from the English. As a "faveur" to him, the authorities were now willing to tolerate the sale of the *Bibliothèque* in France. They had also promised to release the confiscated copies of volume 5, provided he would have two cancels inserted. In order to expedite this arrangement, the STN should complete the printing of the last volume and send two copies of volumes 6-10 to Lenoir for inspection.

While trying to make the most of these assets, Brissot asked the STN to reduce the debit side of his account. He chipped away, item by item, at the account statement, contesting so many charges that in the end he shaved off 671 l. As a supplementary argument, he repeated his earlier claim that the STN had printed extra copies of his works in order to sell them for its own profit behind his back. But for the most part he appealed to the higher instincts of the Neuchâtelois: he was a friend, who had been overwhelmed by circumstances, and he depended on their generosity to survive. Moreover, as he also pointed out, they had no choice: he had no assets, not even a fixed address, and generous treatment was the only way they could hope to salvage anything from his debt.

Faced with this dilemma, the STN turned to Clavière. After abandoning an attempt to found a Rousseauistic community of refugee Genevan watchmakers in Waterford, Ireland, he had settled in Paris and had thrown himself into the wild speculations then raging on the Paris Bourse. The STN knew that he had saved Brissot from ruin, and that he was Brissot's main hope for making a new start in life. But what were Brissot's prospects? Where would he live and what were his resources? Clavière replied that Brissot had his back to the wall: he had no assets aside from the books he had offered to the STN, and he could not reduce the prices he had set on them. He planned to remain in Paris, where he had some hope that the government would give him "quelque emploi lucratif". But at present, his only source of cash was Clavière, and Clavière's only hope of repayment lay in "ce que sa plume pourra lui produire" [[letter 151](#)]. In fact, Brissot devoted his pen to a series of pamphlets that promoted Clavière's speculations, which were bets on a future bear market, by attacking those of his rivals, bull speculators who had the support of the government. But that activity belonged to the next phase of his career, the one that led to full-time pamphleteering, journalism, and revolutionary politics.

In November 1784 the STN had no idea of the future that awaited Brissot. Pressed by its own needs, it agreed in principle to his proposals but made three demands: he must lower the prices he set on the books he offered as payment for his debt; he must advance the capital for producing volume 10 of the *Bibliothèque philosophique*, and he must clear the way for the marketing of the *Bibliothèque* by an arrangement with the police. These issues dominated its correspondence with Brissot for the next two years. Unfortunately, most of Brissot's letters from this period have disappeared: there are only two from 1785, none from 1786, and one from 1787. But the STN's

copies of its letters to him – which often mention the letters he sent to it – provide enough information for us to piece together the last phase of their relations.

Pricing was the most important issue. The STN did not want to buy back Brissot's books for anything more than one sou (12 deniers) per printed sheet, its standard price and the rate it set for other authors who defaulted on their printing bills. Brissot would not take less than 15 deniers and tried to hold out for much more. He cited the costs of smuggling and transport, which had increased the total expense on his side by a third. The STN replied that he was demanding almost twice as much as it had cost them to produce the *Bibliothèque* and that he had inflicted further losses on them by tying up their capital in books for which it had received nothing. In order to resolve this and other equally entangled affairs, the STN dispatched a "commis de confiance", Jacob François Bornand, with full power of attorney to negotiate on its behalf in Paris [[letter 153](#)]. Bornand and Brissot argued over the account for several weeks. In the end, Brissot seems to have got the upper hand, because they finally set the value of the *Bibliothèque* at 14 deniers a sheet. In his report to the home office, Bornand explained that Brissot had made a strong case for 16 deniers, far more than the 10 deniers the STN had originally charged; and when it came to the bottom line, there was no other way to get compensation for its debt: "C'est une triste ressource que les auteurs pour l'argent." (26) On 23 March 1785, he and Brissot signed a general settlement. Although that document is missing from Brissot's dossier, its terms can be deduced from the STN's account books, which show that the STN credited him with 11,891 livres 18 sous 3 deniers for 600 sets of the *Bibliothèque*, 329 copies of *De la Vérité*, 42 subscriptions for the *Tableau de l'Inde*, 402 copies of the *Précis de l'histoire de l'Angleterre*, and 12 copies of a book entitled *Choix de lectures*.

In the book trade of the eighteenth century, however, business relations rarely ended neatly, in the form of an "affaire bouclée", with accounts squared and participants satisfied. The STN's settlement with Brissot was in danger of unravelling for two more years, owing to suspicions and sub-plots, which continued to develop around the triangular trade of the STN, Brissot, and Desauges. To recount the story in its full baroque detail would fill a volume; but a brief account is worth relating, because it reveals a great deal about the complexities that beset the trade.

After selling 600 copies of the *Bibliothèque* to the STN, Brissot sold the remainder of the edition, another 500 copies, to Desauges. No one, however, had a complete set, because various segments of the edition were snagged at different points in the production and distribution systems. The STN had a complete run of volumes 6-9 in its warehouse; Desauges kept most of volumes 1-4 in his stock; volume 5 had been sent by the police as confiscated goods to the Chambre syndicale of the Parisian booksellers' guild; and volume 10 was not yet printed. The STN hesitated to do the printing, because it did not want to sink more capital into production before receiving any payment. Yet it knew that the sets would be worthless without their final volume. So in the end it completed the printing but delayed shipping the volumes to Desauges, pending receipt of some money from Brissot. Brissot, of course, had none and could not extract any from Desauges until volumes 6-10 arrived from Neuchâtel. Desauges in turn refused to ship volumes 1-4 to the STN, because he did not want to complete its sets until it had completed his. Everyone distrusted everyone else, and no one wanted to part with value in kind until he had received its equivalent or, best of all, cash.

While the bulk of the edition remained locked in this logjam, Brissot struggled to pry volume 5 free from the grip of the police. "J'en ai la parole du ministre de la librairie", he had assured the STN soon after leaving the Bastille [[letter 148](#)]. But the Neuchâtelois had learned to be sceptical about liberal sentiments within the French administration: "Vous en avez la promesse depuis longtemps, mais nous savons que ces paroles données par les ministres, leurs secrétaires, ou les censeurs souffrent des difficultés et des longueurs jusqu'au moment où elles sont réalisées" [[letter 153](#)]. Those doubts proved to be well founded. Brissot kept lobbying the authorities, and in June 1785 Bornand announced triumphantly that the Garde des Sceaux had ordered the confiscated volumes to be shipped back to Neuchâtel. But they never appeared. Lamentations went out from the STN to Bornand, from Bornand to Brissot, and from Brissot to his contacts in the repressive apparatus of the state. They resulted only in more reassuring rhetoric followed by more delays. At last, in November, Bornand discovered that by "une fatalité singulière [...], le tome 5 était resté dans un coin de la Chambre syndicale". (27) At the end of

March 1786, the copies of the fifth volume finally arrived back where they had started, in Neuchâtel two and a half years earlier.

Meanwhile Brissot touched off another round of difficulties by refusing to pay the note for 393 l. that the STN had written on him for the final settlement of his account. Although this sum seemed trivial in comparison with the thousands of livres that had already been struck off his debit column, the STN insisted on its payment. It delegated Bornand to summon him before a commercial court of Juges consuls in Paris in November 1785. According to Bornand's account of their confrontation, Brissot defended himself with "les plus mauvaises raisons du monde" and then, faced with the certainty of an arrest warrant, capitulated. (28) But at this point Bornand himself became caught up in the imbroglio. He seems to have been an honest forthright Swiss, who had little talent for disentangling intrigues and no taste for the Parisian style of doing business. "Les courses longues et le plus souvent inutiles, jointes aux renvois continuels que l'on fait ici sur les plus petits et les plus légers prétextes, rendent les affaires dégoûtantes et le séjour de cette ville le plus ennuyeux, quant à moi, que j'aie jamais éprouvé. On y est dans la crotte jusqu'au-dessus des grilles. La neige et la pluie se succèdent alternativement [...]. Il fait un froid insupportable", he complained in one of many unhappy letters to the STN. (29) The Brissot dossiers were one of the heaviest burdens that he bore, as he trudged through this alien territory. Although the evidence is not clear, it seems that Brissot, when backed to the wall, finally accepted the STN's note. Bornand then tried to expedite its collection by endorsing it over to a friend, who turned out to be a "filou", as the STN put it [[letter 160](#)], and disappeared with the money. By then Bornand had bungled so many other affairs that the STN dismissed him, and he, too, dropped out of sight amidst the Parisian population of underemployed *commis* and *chevaliers d'industrie*.

The Brissot-Bornand fiasco did not divert the STN from the pursuit of its main objective: to extract the 600 copies of volumes 1-4 of the *Bibliothèque philosophique* from Desauges's storerooms, which seemed to be more unyielding than either the Bastille or the Chambre syndicale. The printing of volume 10 and the release of volume 5 did not produce any flexibility from Desauges. So in December 1785 the STN adopted a more conciliatory policy and shipped off a first installment, 200 of the 500 copies of volumes 6-10 that he had purchased from Brissot and that it had been holding back in its own warehouse. Unfortunately, however, the shipment got snagged in the supply line that Desauges had arranged between his agents, Garnier frères in Geneva and G. N. Barret in Lyon. Barret found it impossible to forward them on to Paris, and the STN considered it unthinkable to send any further shipments, unless Desauges would agree to have them sent under an *acquit à caution* for inspection in the Parisian Chambre syndicale. He and Brissot replied that the risks of a clandestine shipment were minimal and that the STN ought to be able to get the books to Paris by another route – overland via Besançon or by ship through Ostend. Brissot had sent assurances that the police would permit the sale of the *Bibliothèque* in Paris. And Bornand had reported that at one of his meetings with Martin, the lieutenant-general's secretary in charge of the book trade, Brissot had received a promise that the police would allow 200 copies to enter the city. (30) The situation did indeed look favourable at the beginning of 1786. But on 3 February Desauges was locked up in the Bastille for having published a pamphlet about the Diamond Necklace Affair. This "catastrophe" made the STN resolve to suspend all dealings with him until he was released and capable of continuing his business [[letter 157](#)]. He left the Bastille on 29 May. A month later he demanded that the STN send 200 copies of volume 5, now safely back in Neuchâtel, to be joined to the crates of volumes 6-10 in Lyon and forwarded to him in Paris. The STN refused, trusting neither his good faith nor his solvency. But after Brissot sent more assurances that the affair could be settled without further delay, it sent the supplementary shipment in July. In August it declared itself so impatient to receive its share of the first four volumes that it would release the rest of his volumes 5-10. It sent 50 more of them in September, but still had not received anything from Desauges by December, when it once more asked Brissot to help it to get hold of its books. In his last letter to the STN, dated 8 March 1787, Brissot said he would not intervene further. Despairing of any other way to complete its sets, the STN threatened to reprint volumes 1-4. But finally, in September 1788, Desauges released his volumes, and they made peace.

The STN had one last bone to pick with Brissot in its final letters. Thanks to his recommendation, it had shipped a large amount of literature, most of it illegal, to a literary adventurer and confidence man in Troyes named

Bruzard de Mauvelain. Mauvelain had made a great deal of his friendship with Brissot in order to persuade the STN to send him the books. Then, after running up a debt of 2407 l., he had disappeared. The Neuchâtelois eventually traced him to Paris, where he was undergoing treatment for an advanced case of venereal disease and declared himself insolvent. Was there nothing Brissot could do to help them recover this debt? He replied that he, too, had reason to complain about Mauvelain but had lost all contact with him. On that unhappy note, Brissot's correspondence with the STN came to an end.

How did his account finally close? After negotiating his way through the Desauges affair and signing off on the 393 l. note, he acknowledged a rump debt of 281 l. To acquit it, he proposed publishing a supplementary, eleventh volume to the *Bibliothèque philosophique*. The STN replied with a polite No: "Les désagréments infinis que nous avons éprouvés au sujet de votre *Bibliothèque* nous empêchent de songer à l'impression de votre Supplément" [[letter 163](#)]. It asked for a proper promissory note of 218 l. Brissot sent it, adding a request that it provide him with a formal attestation that he had liquidated all his debts. The STN supplied the certification on 3 December 1786. That marked the end of Brissot's career as a *philosophe*.

What was the nature of that career? There is no denying Brissot's dedication to the causes of Enlightenment: religious toleration, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, liberty and equality in general. He extended the Voltairean programme for reforms far beyond Voltaire's own demands for social justice – to the abolition of judicial torture as well as the death penalty and to the outlawing of slavery as well as the slave trade. After witnessing the aborted Genevan revolution of 1782 – a radical movement inspired directly by Rousseau's political ideas – Brissot became a Rousseauistic democrat. And after following the progress of the Americans through a revolution and into a republic, he championed a variety of republicanism associated with America – the utopian America imagined by French enthusiasts, one composed of Quakers and farmers and noble savages. Brissot's faith was genuine and generous, if not original or profound. His ideas can be traced through his books and into the stock of progressive *idées reçues* that typified his time.

The books themselves can also be traced, from their production to their diffusion in the clandestine channels of the publishing industry. By following them, thanks to the incomparable richness of Brissot's correspondence with the STN, one can observe his career from a different perspective. It begins with a burst of enthusiasm. He will publish treatises on everything, including truth itself. By the sheer force of the printed word, he will expose error and demolish prejudice, establishing himself along the way as a master man of letters – that is, as a *philosophe*, the literary version of a prosecuting attorney, one who summons priests and princes before the tribunal of public opinion and indicts them for crimes against humanity. By 1780 this view of the writer and the power of print had already hardened into a standard theme. It exists everywhere in the works of Brissot's contemporaries – Louis-Sébastien Mercier, for example, and Fabre d'Eglantine and Jean-Paul Marat. In Brissot's case, it proved to be sadly incompatible with the hard facts of literary life, another theme that runs through his letters to the STN.

The correspondence shows Brissot taking every possible step to advance in his career. Far from acting like the uncompromising idealist that he portrayed in his memoirs, he cultivates contacts, competes for prize essay contests, wins places in some provincial academies, arranges to get his books reviewed and his name mentioned in the press, ingratiates himself with the book police, seeks the protection of enlightened monarchs – all to no avail. Here and there his works strike some response, but it is largely negative. Christophe-Frédéric Freudenreich, the secretary of the Société économique de Berne, where Brissot did everything in his power to get his *Théorie des lois criminelles* crowned with a prize, received a copy of Brissot's plans for the Lycée de Londres and reacted as follows in a letter to Ostervald:

Je vous avouerai tout naturellement que le Prospectus de sa Correspondance philosophique et universelle qu'il m'a envoyé ne m'a pas prévenu en faveur de la solidité de son jugement. A son âge se créer juge compétent, et cela dans le sens le plus étendu, dans toutes les parties de la philosophie, de la politique et de la législation, s'ériger en nouvel Archimède qui veut réunir dans un seul foyer assez de rayons pour anéantir dans l'Europe entière les préjugés des peuples, l'empire des usages, les abus qu'ont enfantés le pouvoir et l'intérêt; inviter tous

les observateurs répandus sur la surface du globe à former une république dont, de fait, dans son Prospectus il se crée Dictateur, [c'est] annoncer un degré de confiance en ses propres forces, dont un jeune littérateur français est seul capable. (31)

Others reacted more generously. Brissot's friends, Blot and Larrivée, described him as an innocent idealist in a world of roguery; and the STN's Paris agent, Quandet de Lachenal, who was not biased in his favour, considered Brissot naïve more than anything else: "Ce Monsieur fort habile d'ailleurs, mais trop crédule, est encore novice en matière de commerce." (32) Naiveté and inexperience show through many of Brissot's letters, especially the early ones, when he hoped to take the Republic of Letters by storm. Disillusionment and disingenuousness set the tone by the end of 1783, when he was careering into bankruptcy. Money became the main theme in 1784, the turning point in his career, when the Bastille ruined him. From then on, poverty crowded out philosophy as his principal concern, even though he continued to fight for noble causes, above all the abolition of the slave trade. He lived in squalor, surrounded by a growing family and burdened by more debt than he could ever repay to the man who had saved him, Etienne Clavière. This is how Brissot appeared in the mid-1780s, according to his close friend Jérôme Pétion:

Il était impossible d'être plus simple dans sa parure, d'avoir des appartements moins recherchés, d'avoir une table plus frugale et de faire enfin moins de dépenses. Sa femme était également la simplicité même, une excellente mère de famille, uniquement occupée de ses enfants. Souvent Brissot n'avait pas six francs dans sa poche, il était obligé de faire à chaque instant de petits emprunts à ses amis, et cet état de médiocrité a toujours existé pour lui. (33)

Did Brissot remain uncontaminated by poverty? His letters and other documents indicate that he lived down and out in London as well as in Paris and that he kept bad company in both cities: Pelleport, Desauges, Mauvelain, Morande, and other men of the same kidney – book smugglers, black mailers, *libellistes*, and police spies. Did Brissot act as a spy himself? The question is uncomfortable, because the historian's vocation is to understand, not to prosecute or pass sentence on the dead. Nonetheless, it will not go away, for there is enough evidence – primarily the testimony of Lenoir – to force a confrontation of the issue, and the issue bears on the whole pattern of Brissot's experience before the Revolution.

We cannot reject the accusation of spying simply because it contradicts the high-minded ideals of Brissot's books. Contradictions may generate a revolutionary disposition, and Brissot may have turned decisively against the regime because it enlisted him to do its dirty work. Perhaps he construed this work as something relatively clean, reportage rather than spying. Perhaps his reports concerned the activities of Pelleport and the others whose denunciations had led to his imprisonment. But all such surmises must be couched in words like "perhaps." This is the murkiest period in Brissot's life. In it, he took up pamphleteering and political intrigue linked to speculations on the Bourse and *frondeur* plots from within the house of Orléans. If he had retained his idealism, he had lost his naiveté; and he was ready to leap into the Revolution from a peculiar vantage point: Grub Street, territory that bred revolutionaries – not inevitably, because it could produce the opposite effect, but viscerally, because its contradictions ate into their innards.

6. Note on the text

The following letters have been transcribed from Brissot's dossiers in the papers of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel in the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, ms. 1128 and from the STN's replies to him, which it recorded in its Copies de lettres, mss. 1105-1112. Unfortunately, some Copies de lettres – notably the Registre K for the period from December 1781 to August 1784 – are missing. Internal references also indicate that a few of Brissot's letters have disappeared from the archives. Nonetheless, the manuscripts probably provide the richest account available anywhere of exchanges between an eighteenth-century author and his printer. The Copies de lettres include some abbreviations, which have been written out in full. The STN sometimes found its own Copies de lettres difficult to interpret [[letter 15](#)], and Ostervald complained about the

quality of Brissot's copy [[letter 46](#)]. But the manuscripts are fairly easy to decipher. A few illegible words, mostly proper nouns, have been set off by square brackets. Spelling and punctuation have been modernised.

This material, along with a draft biography of Brissot, has been sitting in my files since 1968. I decided not to publish it at that point, because I had not completed research on Brissot's role in the Revolution. But then I began to pursue related themes, which seemed more urgent and which led to other fields of inquiry, notably in the new discipline now known as *histoire du livre* or history of the book. At present, however, the new possibilities of publishing created by the Internet have convinced me that I should make these letters accessible to other scholars, even though I cannot take out the time to write notes about every person and every publication that they mention. The introductory essay should make it possible to follow all the themes of the correspondence and all the main characters that appear in it. Excerpts from other letters in the archives of the STN, which are printed at the end, provide supplementary information and show how Brissot was seen by those who crossed his path during these crucial, formative years. If I complete the work in which I am now absorbed, I hope to return to Brissot. Meanwhile, others are invited to continue where I left off and to extend it in whatever direction may seem most promising to them.