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David McCallam, *Chamfort and the French Revolution. A Study in Form and Ideology*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002. xv + 180 pp. Bibliography and index. £39.00 U.K.; \$67.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7294-0801-9.

Review by Richard Whatmore, University of Sussex.

Sébastien-Roch Nicolas Chamfort's plays, poetry, and essays brought him to literary prominence between 1764 and 1788. During this period, he frequented *philosophe* salons, saw his work favourably received by the court, and gained pensions and patronage from, among others, the prince de Condé, Louis de Vaudreuil, and Mme Elizabeth. In 1789 Chamfort was rare among the 'Forty Immortals' of the *Académie française* in uncritically embracing the revolutionary cause. A founder of the 'Société de 1789', he became a journalist and writer, contributing, for example, to the *Feuille villageoise*, one of the leading publications seeking a reformation of manners. Since the early 1780s, Chamfort had been a friend and associate of Gabriel-Honoré Riqueti de Mirabeau. Just prior to Mirabeau's death in April 1791 he was working on a speech for the great orator, the subject of which was the future of the various philosophic academies. After the fall of the monarchy he was appointed, with Jean-Louis Carra, director of the *Bibliothèque nationale*. During this period he was a friend to Roland's ministry established in August 1792, and was involved in propagandist writing encouraging Austrian deserters to join the Revolution. Subsequently, he suffered house arrest and repeated interrogation during the Terror. In early 1794, in the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt, Chamfort, with his literary executor Pierre-Louis Ginguené, planned the foundation of an anti-Jacobin republican journal, *La Décade philosophique, politique et littéraire*. Dying soon after, it was left to Ginguené to publish Chamfort's *œuvres*, including, in 1795, the famous *Maximes et pensées, caractères et anecdotes*.

Such a life has never lacked attention, scholarly or otherwise.[1] McCallam's contribution to the Chamfort industry claims originality for methodological and substantive interpretative reasons. McCallam criticises exponents of the 'historical-biographical' approach for using Chamfort 'as a sort of ideological cipher for their own rewriting of revolutionary politics' (p. 3). He is equally critical of 'literary-critical' approaches that marginalise Chamfort's politics (p. 5). McCallam's reassessment is based on four of Chamfort's works. Firstly, the 'Discours de réception à l'Académie française' (1781). Secondly, *Des académies* (1791), which originated as the speech for Mirabeau noted above. Thirdly, the *Tableaux historiques de la Révolution française* (1791-2), a commentary on twenty-six of Jean-Louis Prieur's popular prints of revolutionary journées, in Chamfort's case ranging from the Tennis Court Oath of 20 June to the delegation of artists' wives to the *Assemblée Nationale* on 7 September 1789. Fourthly, the *Maximes et pensées* themselves. McCallam makes two claims of particular interest. The first is that the literary form of Chamfort's texts governs their meaning to a significant, and hitherto unappreciated, extent. The second is that analysis of the form in conjunction with scrutiny of the texts themselves yields insights into Chamfort's political ideology, and accordingly into the nature of revolutionary politics. The consequences of McCallam's first claim are best summarised in his own words:

...the politics of [the] 'Discours de réception' expresses itself against the constraints of the form of language [Chamfort] is obliged to adopt; an expression of a political position which *Des académies* only confirms and makes explicit. The politics of Chamfort's *Tableaux historiques*, in contrast, rely excessively on the text's tableau form in their attempt to impose stability and certainty onto the volatile ideological flux of the Revolution through 1791 and 1792. The form of the text is used to superimpose, in its

structural dispositions, an illusory resolution onto the irresolvable political antagonisms that it articulates. It is only in his *Maximes et pensées* that the form of the text (specifically the discursive autonomy of the maxim form) corresponds adequately with the politics of the text (specifically the moral and political independence of Chamfort's "honnête homme"). It is only here that the form of the text provides what I shall call an ideological correlative to the politics it conveys; and thus it is only in his posthumous *sententiae* that Chamfort approaches that artistic reconciliation of 'style' and 'thought' postulated by La Bruyère (p. 8).

Equally, regarding McCallam's second claim:

...[Chamfort's] rejection of the ancien régime is best understood in the light of his critique of the forms of language used by the *Académie française* (reception speeches, dictionary, eulogies); these forms of language are all regulated by the *Académie's* concept of "le bon usage", which Chamfort consequently denounces in *Des académies* as a means of policing language in order to police the society that uses that language... Similarly, Chamfort's *Tableaux historiques* present a political reinterpretation of the events of the early Revolution which is largely determined by its assumption of the tableau form. That he is constrained to follow the artist Prieur in his use of the tableau form is one of the reasons why these texts fail to provide a coherent or consistent political vision of the Revolution, either as it was in 1789 or as Chamfort conceives of it in 1791 and 1792: they foreground an insurgent *peuple* that Chamfort, while acknowledging its thorough destruction of the ancien régime's principle of honour, is unable successfully to accord with a political principle of virtue. It is only in his *Maximes et pensées*, written with a greater freedom of form and thought over a longer period of time, that he is able to resolve this dilemma (p. 169).

McCallam has many interesting things to say about the use of language in Chamfort's chosen texts. The first chapter, concerning Chamfort's relation with the *Académie française*, shows by close reading how subtle Chamfort could be in his criticism of the prevailing rhetorical convention of the 'Discours', illustrated by double-edged praise for Richelieu and Louis XIV. McCallam states that such veiled attacks prefigured the argument of *Des académies*; such an argument would be more convincing if McCallam had shown that contemporaries read Chamfort's 'Discours' from such a perspective. The 'Discours' ought, retrospectively, to have surprised readers, given Chamfort's regular attendance and diligent secretaryship of the *Académie*. With respect to the later text, *Des académies*, McCallam interestingly tracks Chamfort's opposition to the linguistic practices defended by the *Académie*, defined as 'le bon usage' or 'le bon goût' by D'Alembert in his *Eloges lus dans les séances publiques* (1779). In later chapters McCallam makes important points about Chamfort's distinctive approach to the tableau form (seeking to make his readers spectators and actors) by contrast with Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781-8). He shows that Chamfort's *Tableaux* initially sought to defend the constitution of 1791 but ended with the statement that monarchy and liberty were antonyms. Several intriguing themes of the *Tableaux* are given prominence, ranging from the argument that the nearer the revolutionary populace found themselves to nudity the more likely they were to expound the general good, to the claim that the popular moral instinct was a better guide to revolutionary practice than reason. In addition to providing an overview of the tableau form in eighteenth-century France, McCallam supplies an insightful potted history of maxim genre. Regarding the content of Chamfort's *Maximes*, he underscores the importance of physiological analogy, and Chamfort's singular use of dialogue.

It is evident from such pointers that there is much in McCallam's book that will interest historians of language and literary form. In addressing such themes, McCallam shows a sensitivity to Chamfort's prose while illuminating its nature by reference to the broader literary context that influenced and informed Chamfort's work. Problems arise when Chamfort's politics are considered. It is worth noting at the outset that McCallam's approach to political thought tends to focus on certain canonical thinkers (mainly Montesquieu, sometimes Voltaire, never Rousseau), and the relationship of Chamfort's argument to theirs (particularly Montesquieu's view of honour as the principle of monarchy and virtue as the principle of republics). For some reason he neglects the political writings of such friends and (according to McCallam) political allies of Chamfort's as Sieyès, Brissot, Condorcet, and, more peculiarly still, those of Mirabeau. The result is that when dealing with Chamfort's politics a rather bizarre general

context is established: that of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit*, and the notion of 'neo-feudalism' that is deemed to have emerged from it.

McCallam's argument is that Chamfort's politics were libertarian, individualist, and anti-corporate. In the early 1790s, Chamfort espoused a popular political ideology that shifted from a defence of constitutional monarchy to Girondin republicanism. Using such terms to describe the politics of a defender of the French Revolution does not do much to illuminate them. It is difficult to find to anyone in the early 1790s who did not associate the Revolution with popular liberty (does McCallam mean national sovereignty?), who did not verbally favour the individual liberties enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and who continued to defend most of the corporate bodies of the ancien régime. In short, McCallam's description of Chamfort's politics lacks sufficient precision to be meaningful. By contrast with his study of literary form, McCallam does not convince the reader that he has a feel for the distinctive politics of late eighteenth-century France, or a sense of the broader context that would make his study of Chamfort's politics more precise and explicable. Other than the odd reference to specific texts by Lynn Hunt and Keith-Michael Baker, McCallam seems not to have studied the many recent writings, emanating from French, North American, and British universities, which have added to our knowledge of late eighteenth-century political thinking.

Perhaps the origin of the difficulty lies in McCallam's treatment of Montesquieu. Against recent historical convention, at times in his book McCallam seeks to judge the actors whose writings he studies. It is important for him to prove that the *Académie* was a corporation, that Chamfort could not have coped with the vicissitudes of revolutionary political argument because they were (according to McCallam) ceaselessly changing, and that Montesquieu 'disingenuously conflates monarchic government with a noblesse d'origine' (in McCallam's opinion probably because he was a peer of the realm). 'Wittingly or not', McCallam says, Montesquieu was an advocate of some kind of aristocracy, and thus the source of the neo-feudalism which Voltaire, and Chamfort following him, condemned. There was, of course, little that is unwitting in Montesquieu's political writing. Montesquieu was trying to develop a reform programme for the French monarchy that would enable it to defeat the British in war at the same time as ensuring the domestic avoidance of the kind of military despotism he associated with the reign of Louis XIV. Montesquieu's notion of honour had little to do with feudalism and a lot to do with generating the kind of national patriotism that would be crucial in the event of international war. This was self-evident to Montesquieu's readers in the 1750s and the 1760s, when they debated whether the French nobility, in the wake of the Seven Years War, ought to follow the example of their British counterparts and develop the commerce of the kingdom. The question is whether Chamfort really was responding to Montesquieu in McCallam's direct manner?

McCallam's most interesting chapter on Chamfort's politics deals with the *Maximes et pensées*. It charts Chamfort's use of the old moralist notion of the 'honnête homme' to describe a person with the 'caractère' to become an independent source of authority, mastering fortune, rejecting irrational custom, and recognising that self-interest was synonymous with being virtuous and altruistic. The life of justice, of *honnêteté*, could only be lived by fostering *caractère*. While sometimes accepting the necessary use of violence in domestic politics, the man of *caractère* was ever sceptical of public opinion and mob rule. He believed in gradual reform and public education, as the twin forces that could redirect the popular passions, and ensure their concordance with the general and public good. Students of political writing in the 1780s would recognise Chamfort's development of leading themes and arguments that characterised not only the circle of the recently deceased Turgot, particularly Dupont de Nemours and Condorcet, but also that of Mirabeau, Brissot, Clavière, and other figures seeking to redirect French policy, and who sometimes collaborated with the eclectic ministries of Calonne and Necker. Most of these men argued that some form of public and patriotic education was the key to French revival. Republican experiments, following the North American or small European republican models, were deemed foolish in a France dominated by a powerful court and a nobility and church with genuine political authority and a corresponding influence over national culture. Gradual constitutional reform was favoured, although a

purging of the court and the first and second estates was advised in order to put an end to the corruption so frequently described abroad as the essence of French character. Such men were evidently moralists. From certain perspectives they were christians and republicans. They developed their reform programme in the aftermath of the failure of attempts to commercialise the nobility, to strengthen the monarchy following Maupeou, and to reform both monarchical and popular culture along physiocratic lines in the manner of Turgot. It is especially significant for the form of Chamfort's texts as they appeared in 1795 that Ginguené, along with associates such as Jean-Baptiste Say, believed that France needed to re-examine the controversies of the 1780s to entrench the liberties of 1789, creating a stable state in the aftermath of the Terror. This was the goal of *La Décade philosophique*. It is from such a perspective that Ginguené's editing of Chamfort deserves attention.

Montesquieu's voice remained powerful in the 1780s, but it was mediated by two decades of innovation, initiated after the military defeats of the 1760s, and sought to restore French glory against the nearly bankrupt empire of Britain. Questions about public credit, commercial strategy, public virtue, and private passion—questions about the church, the state, and the location of sovereignty—were all key elements of political debate. In many respects, the answers suggested during this decade governed the antagonistic reformist strategies of the early 1790s. Chamfort, as any perusal of his *oeuvres* shows, believed he had answers to the question 'whither France?' McCallam, in neglecting the context of his political thinking, fails to give Chamfort a political identity recognisable to his contemporaries. Despite the excellence of certain sections of the book, the argument that the literary form determines the political content cannot convince, largely because Chamfort's politics as described by McCallam remain so general and so elusive.

NOTES

[1] J. Renwick, 'Chamfort devant la postérité', *Studies of Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 247 (1986): 37-176.

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