

two men fashion for themselves: Gregorio's fantasies focus on a past stay in Moscow; Julio imagines mythical dialogues with Castro, Karl Marx, and Herbert Marcuse. Appropriately, perhaps, for a novel about lost illusions, there is no real conclusion. As Padilla, who finished the novel before coming to the United States in 1980, explains in the afterword: "Everything written in a suffocating political atmosphere is inconclusive and fragmentary."

**PRODUCTS OF THE
PERFECTED
CIVILIZATION:
Selected Writings
of Chamfort**

translated by W. S. Merwin
North Point, 1984
284 pp. \$12.50

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, generally parsimonious with praise, found nothing but good to say of the 18th-century French aphorist Sébastien-Roch Nicolas Chamfort: Without his "tragic spirit" and "sting," wrote Nietzsche, the French Revolution "would be considered a far more stupid event, and would not exert its present seductive fascination." Of uncertain parentage, Chamfort (1740?-94) was brought, at about the age of five, from the province of Auvergne to Paris and enrolled in a Catholic school for the poor. Trained for the clergy, the young man announced to the principal of his college that his distaste for "bickering, hypocrisy, honors, and money" made him unfit for the priesthood. His wit and his pen quickly won him a place as a journalist, a maker of light comedies, and a luminary in Parisian salons. He was a supporter of the 1789 Revolution, but his deep pessimism about human nature prepared him for its bloody failure. Poet Merwin preserves the Gallic economy and bite of Chamfort's posthumously collected maxims; he also offers a representative sampling of topics, from fashion ("The changing of fashion is the tax that the industry of the poor levies upon the vanity of the rich"), to social inequality ("Society is made up of two great classes: those who have more dinner than appetite, and those who have more appetite than dinners"), to psychology ("All of the passions lead to exaggeration. That is why they are passions"). Merwin's biographical introduction serves as a nice apéritif.