

Victor Cousin (1792-1867)

Son of a watchmaker, of modest urban background, Victor Cousin was destined to great prominence in the vibrant world of post Napoleonic France, with its ups and downs of power play, and tireless struggles between liberals and royalists. The times through which Cousin himself was growing up were also tintured with a new aura of internationalism. It was a matter of importance that Cousin himself was able to make frequent trips to Germany and to incorporate in his own thinking much from the systematic world views of thinkers like Schelling, Jacobi and Kant. It is relevant to add that the attraction of Germany was greatly multiplied in the viewpoint of the thoughtful by Mme de Stael, in her prominent efforts to draw attention to the fresh winds blowing from the East. Stael's *De l'Allemagne* was a precursor of a world body like the European Union.

Much growing up was required before Cousin grew into his patrimony. He was an astounding student--especially of Greek, in which he was to prove his lifelong skills, and in which he continued into advanced age, turning out scholarly editions of Plato and Proclus, as well as of Descartes. He was noted for his eloquence in general, meaning sensitivity to literary values, and on the whole he made himself the individual to watch among lyceens, as the lycee itself proved to be organically tied into the French university system--and the University increasingly coacted with the determining postures of religion and politics within the state. At every stage of his own ascent up the University ladder, toward the coveted Professorship which he would attain before the age of thirty, Cousin mastered the requisite waystages so sternly marked out by the French system Napoleon had drafted with such hands on pride.

It is of importance to recognize the special connection in modern France between academic and early modern social power. Already in early modern France--in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with their elite fashionable salons-- one saw in action the close connection among power, elegance, intelligence and information--a brew which in modern form the most sophisticated electronic news channels attempt to serve. The postgraduate studies made by Cousin, primarily into elements of ancient literary studies and Greek philosophy, and later into the literary sociology of Royalist high society, were anticipatory of the mindset of the doyen of national literary studies who was emerging finally after not a few setbacks---including six months in a German prison-- paying for a collusion between the French and German governments

As Cousin would have had it, and with the concurrence of the world of learning, the substance of his legacy was the voluminous body of philosophic work he left behind. This work was the fruit, largely, of his innumerable studies into ancient Greek metaphysics, but also into the heritage of John Locke and his theory of ideas. (We have had recourse to note the formative power of that tradition in the discussion of Condillac.) An added factor in Cousin's philosophic repertoire was the rich incorporation of The Scottish School of idea analysis--especially the work of Thomas Reid, to whom Cousin was indebted for his most effective philosophic synthesis, his so called Eclecticism, in which he assembled the broad position of his major work of idealist theory, *Du Vrai Du Beau et du Bien*.