

Significance and stylization of cities in the literary works of louis-sébastien m...

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Wandering through Paris, Mercier must surely have questioned how to write a city with no apparent visual or conceptual unity; his works could be described as any number of science-fiction, travel writing, or even satire. It is imaginable that he employed facets of multiple genres, whilst also devising new ones in putting pen to paper. Acting on the Enlightenment tenet of progress, one would be forgiven for suspecting Mercier of a utopianist slant. However early observations concerning the vices of commercial society infer a contrary, dystopian belief in advancement, raising questions to whether Mercier even believed in ' progress' in the very real, commercial society of the eighteenth century.

In both London and Paris, one encounters “ luxury, opulence and the like vices”. Mercier is suggesting that social disruptions were, at least in part, created and caused by commercialism and capitalism. Such would suggest the Parallel is a jeremiad, wherein the author pessimistically laments the state of society and its morals. Such sentiments were not unfounded. Pre-Revolutionary Paris was the heart of European style. Finance Minister to Louis XIV, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, concluded in 1665 that “ Fashion is to France what the gold mines of Peru are to Spain.” In the 1780s meanwhile, the Baroness d'Oberkirch – who wrote on Louis XVI's court society – hinted that to demolish Paris' luxury industry would be to weaken France's international supremacy, alluding to its considerable soft power. Soft power describes how a nation asserts itself by attracting and co-opting people, like modern America's Hollywood film industry or the technological innovations emerging from Silicon Valley. Yet France's soft power proved troubling, and engendered a populace consumed by “ utter indigence and complete

excess.” Mercier juxtaposes the wasteful expenditure of the Parisian elite – “ what a fortune Monmartel has wasted on Brunoy, like so many others have” – against their ‘ indifference’ towards the poor and infirm. The Monmartels certainly embodied the fashion of aristocratic profligacy; their Château at Brunoy, situated 21km south-east of Paris, featured pools, fountains, and waterfalls, and entertained such dignitaries as the Marquise de Pompadour and Louis XV. This underpinned the expectation that the rich should reallocate their spending, such that would engender an egalitarian distribution of wealth, or thus succumb to the vices of commercialization.

This perspective smacks of Rousseau’s Social Contract, which damningly declared that “ luxury either comes of riches or makes them necessary; it corrupts at once rich and poor...” Mercier admired Rousseau’s work and he wrote the preface to the Complete Works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1788, labelling his Discourse on Inequality – which described the unequal and immoral accumulation of capital and private property – a “ force of formidable logic.” This admiration can be seen to have manifested itself in Mercier’s works, as remedies to Rousseau’s concerns. In Rousseau’s Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, he argued that the arts and sciences were responsible for moral degeneration, and thus Mercier wrote Du Theatre, styling his plays with a moral focus. In his Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau dismissed modern societies for their solicitation of inequality, and thus Mercier wrote the Parallel as a groundwork for more egalitarian, moral institutions. Mercier’s ties to Rousseau are strengthened still by the statement that “ the cities are essentially cages which can quickly be shut.”

This harks back to Rousseau's powerful opening analogy in the Social Contract, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." And yet for all his reflection on the Swiss' works, Mercier never succumbs to Rousseau's stalwart claim that humans are naturally amoral, instead adopting the somewhat Hobbesian appeal that "men rise or fall depending on whether they decide to study or give in to their passions": if one succumbs to his natural urges, his behaviour will gravitate towards self-interested, immoral conduct. This underscores the view that vices do not derive from opulence or even luxury, but rather from the failure of institutions to guide such sentiments into public-spirited ones. Therein lies the purpose behind Mercier's Paris of 2440; it projects the institutions necessary to eliminate the vices of an advanced society, and in doing so exposes those in Paris 1780 which are impeding this progression.

Once established as a proponent of progress, Mercier's work can be interpreted within the tradition of utopianist writing, the inverse of a jeremiad. L'An 2440 is situated in a tangible, human future, embracing the concept that history was a process of infinite improvement. This distanced Mercier from the fiction of former utopian writers such as Thomas More, who coined the term in his namesake work published in 1516. More's utopian society was framed on a fictional island and, like Mercier, used it to critically reflect his own, remarking that "if you suffer your people to be ill-educated ... and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them." However, in projecting the ideal

society in the future, Mercier's discourse was distinct; it enunciated " a logic of causalities that presupposed that certain actions (namely those of a political nature) might afford the changes that were necessary in order to make the imagined society come true." Historian Fátima Vieira advanced that this gave viability to utopias, with the understanding that man had a " role to fulfil." Inherent in this convergence of utopianism with reality was an adjustment at the spatial level, at which Mercier's utopia (and conceivably his Parallel) operated: it figured that to present utopian ideals as practicable offered a contradiction to the imaginary society of prior utopianist works. Thus, one was encouraged to view utopia as analogous with the social possibilities of one's country, or for Mercier also his neighbours.

Mercier's representation of London does certainly offer a tangible model for Paris; he goes at length to suggest that, like Paris 2440, London is a city to aspire towards, such that it could be described as an alternative manifestation of the French capital. In the opening pages he stresses their similarities, remarking that " the two capitals ... bear so strong a resemblance to each other", and have very similar climates. On raw foundations, London and Paris are identical. When Mercier alludes to the influence of French immigrants on London's prosperity, he continues with the self-righteous remark that such " would surely make London Paris? ... The only real French were now in England." And so we are presented with two very similar cities, both inhabited by Frenchmen, and yet one is - by all accounts - thriving, and the other in disrepair. By way of ' writing the city', this offered a more accessible means of highlighting Paris' backwardness.

As structured works, the contrast between L'An 2440 and the Parallel is also appropriate to Mercier's portrayal of the disordered city. L'An 2440 is organized with a contents page, and the topics discussed follow a clear arrangement. The Parallel, by contrast, is structured so as to infer obscurity and a stubborn resistance to change; like Paris, it is a jumbled assemblage of thoughts, with Mercier writing inconsistently on matters including education and religion. His writing, like his observations, reflects the convolutedness of the city: its dark inaccessible alleys and oddities on every corner. This concerns eighteenth century psychoanalysis, attentive to the state of vertigo that one is subject to when "no steady objects are ... within the sphere of ... distinct vision." Such were the comments of English physiologist Erasmus Darwin, who historians Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman paraphrased in a tract on 'paying attention' during the period. In a panorama (i. e. Mercier's panorama of Paris), "all the orienting objects are far outside the normal field of vision", making it difficult to conceive oneself in his environment. We constantly try to steady ourselves in relation to our surroundings, the "continued buzz" from the "wind in our rooms ... the distant conversations, [and] mechanical business" that "shadow us everywhere" causes a sense of vertigo. "Here was a mind at work without ... self-organization, unable to attend and thus unable to put itself out of the chaos of things." Read in aesthetic terms, Mercier's shift from the discernible and "perfectly light" Paris of 2440 (sans smells, sounds, or irritating sights) to the obscure, "narrow and twisting" Paris of 1780, imagines that affliction of vertigo: positioning oneself relative to Paris' polluted air or water (noting the forthcoming cholera epidemic that would claim eighteen and a half thousand

lives) which shadow the observer but are difficult to position oneself against, or the labyrinthine streets which again we are engaged with, though concurrently somewhat distant from. Overcoming obscurity was the challenge.

Furthermore, one gets the impression that this factor of the unknown is what gives the practice of urban observation such lustre. That is to say that the appeal of Mercier's works rests in the thrill of not knowing exactly what he could encounter, his writings respectively stylised so as to acknowledge that the city is not, nor should ever be, an entirely scripted sphere. Mercier would write that " I have run around so much while drawing my ' Tableau de Paris' that I may be said to have drawn it with my legs"; such extensive observations, you must expect, reflect on the degree of pleasure or enchantment to be derived from the experience. Mercier lauds the diversified characters on display in London's Kensington Gardens, whilst in Paris the " dolled-up little misses carrying their little dogs as they promenade" are, although contemptible, endemic to the novelty of the genre. Pursuant to his experiences, Mercier's *Parallel* accordingly adopts that ' expect the unexpected' pretext. The readership engage in the setting, aware of the possibility of seeing something incongruous to its surroundings: to apply too much order would be to sacrifice its charm. Such follows from the likes of *The Spectator* where, in a similar format, Mr Spectator describes his daily experiences walking about London. One such encounter is featured in an issue dated to the 6th March, 1711, where Mr Spectator " saw an ordinary fellow carrying a cage full of little birds upon his shoulder" which, as

it transpires, were destined for use in the opera. The arbitrary power and knowledge that Mr Spectator exudes is comically undermined by his puzzling experiences. This casual and relatable style was typical of coffeehouse discussions, concurrent with the emergence of a public sphere. As a literary genre, it posited the idea that one could entertain trivial yet relatable matters in a fraternal spirit, whilst addressing those more pressing to society.

Mercier's works can subsequently be explained as both figurative and literal projects of enlightenment, shedding light on the previously indecipherable city, and in co-ordination with a period where people and their voices became more discernible. Sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas alluded to a bourgeois public sphere, "the sphere of private people come together as a public", as individuals consciously reoriented their concerns to encompass the collective, such that could be debated with others. The foundations for this was the Republic of Letters: the communication between Enlightenment thinkers via the medium of handwritten letters. The naturally personal and conversationalist tone that emerged from this spread to the public sphere, with the French salons and coffeehouses bringing people together in an atmosphere conducive to civility and intellectual exchanges. During the impermanent run of the London publication, *The Guardian*, Richard Steele's eidolon, Marmaduke Myrtle, fostered a strong inter-personal relationship with his readership, stating in plain terms that "the two theatres, and all the polite coffee-houses, I shall constantly frequent, but principally the coffee-house under my lodge, Button's, and the play house in

Covent-Garden." An awareness of and familiarity with the editor's haunts engendered the feel of a large social club. This tone also engaged Enlightenment texts, per Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. Similarly set in the context of a coffeehouse conversation, Diderot makes such personal retorts as "the best order of things, as I see it, is the one that includes me; to hell with the most perfect of worlds, if I'm not part of it." Mercier, having frequented the *Café Procope*, was himself well-acquainted with the sociability and exchanges of emerging public spaces and, to a degree, he emulates that in the *Parallel*. He rants at the "silly girls" of the *Comédie-Française* whilst elsewhere comically recalling the "repetitive chatter" of parrots, suffice to drive the neighbours crazy." In alluding to such triviality, Mercier appears content to engage in the fashionable coffee-house style of the period.

It would be remiss to conclude a chapter on genre without engaging in travel writing, particularly owing to the significance of London in Mercier's work. The long eighteenth century witnessed a flourishing in the taste for travel. In Britain, Grand Tours through Europe would become a rite of passage for young aristocrats pending adulthood, whilst philosophers would undertake journeys to broaden their perspective. Indeed, Mercier held those who have as "well-informed", and empowered to see beyond the impartiality of one's own nation. This ascribes to his work a certain intellectualism that gave license to his lessons on morality and factionism. At the end of the *Parallel*, Mercier's findings lead him to cry, "Oh, poor humans, French or English! Compete among yourselves, well and good, but without destroying and

detesting each other, without despising each so relentlessly, to nobody's good but the governments." He distances himself from partiality by referring to the French in third person, projecting his status as an enlightened thinker and his views, as valuable and worthy of attention.

On the other hand Mercier's travel writing also adopts an informative tone, much the same as the Lonely Planet guide today lists practical information and sights worth seeing. He directs his readers to the Vauxhall Gardens in London, situating it "on the other side of the Thames" with its numerous attractions: an artificial cascade, a pavilion with a gallery and "musicians and singers [who] perform ariettes and selected pieces at regular intervals." It is an unapologetic recommendation, and quite welcoming in a piece which is otherwise consumed with the despair of an - ironically - patriotic citizen who is remiss to see his capital in such a state. Indeed, it is this intimacy that harks back to the 'Spectator' tradition of personalization; Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, published in 1768, exudes such upon his journey through France and Italy. Yorick, his fictional alter ego, alludes to Sterne's intent by opining to "pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba, and cry, 'Tis all barren. - and so it is; and so is all the world to him who will not cultivate the fruit it offers." However, Sterne's cultivation efforts are sometimes too graphic and, during a stay in Lyon, he describes an 'altercation' with a lady and her chambermaid, towards whom he stretched out his hand and caught hold of her "...". Sterne leaves the sentence open to interpretation, but the implication is somewhat disturbing, and results in an uncomfortable experience for the reader. *The Parallel*, at times, offers that

same level of discomfort, with his chapter ' On English Paper and French Paper' revealing an inner-most resentment of paper manufacturers such that could be likened to wishing their " annihilation and destruction." Similar to Sterne, these comments seem somewhat unnecessary, and certainly purvey a degree of intimacy that is sufficient to unsettle a reader.

One could ascribe such emotional appeal to Mercier's admiration of Rousseau, who was open about his passions and felt that sharing them was both ' natural' and virtuous. Perhaps, too, as a literary device, the shock factor of his openness highlighted the comparatively draconian censorship of Paris, and such is another means of expressing the turmoil of the city. Seen within the light of each genre, Mercier's Parallel is somewhat unique. It is an essentially utopianist work, but ennobled by the conversationalist tone of coffeehouse discussions and the diverse unpredictability of the scene.