

Cooperson's Paper, Mercier's Numbers

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This session will have a somewhat unusual format, as I will be responding both to a live author, Michael Cooperson, and to a dead author, Louis Sébastien Mercier. In a certain sense, this is perfectly appropriate: we need only to imagine that Mercier, author of the futuristic narrative *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fut jamais* [The Year Two Thousand Four Hundred and Forty: Dream If There Ever Was One], woke up not in the future of 2440, as he claims in his narrative, but some four hundred years earlier, in 2016, to discuss his take on the eighteenth-century future with us.

Mercier borrows his epigraph from Leibniz: “Le Temps présent est gros de l'avenir...” [The present time is fat (or pregnant) with the future.] This epigraph reflects what Michael Cooperson takes to be Mercier's political project in the novel: “2440 makes the case that utopia is *not* a dream or fantasy: it is, or could be, the natural consequence of making certain choices *now*” (9). But in responding to Cooperson's paper, I will question the extent to which 2440—which was published in 1771 a little under two decades before the French Revolution—is a politically engaged text. Instead, I will suggest that Mercier found his future as a politically engaged writer in the interstices of 2440, when he went on to publish his twin descriptions of Paris: the *Tableau de Paris* in twelve volumes, published between 1781 and 1788, and the *Nouveau Paris* in six volumes, published in 1799.

Mercier first raises the issue of how difficult it is to imagine a politically transformed future in his dedicatory epistle to the year 2440. Addressing the year directly, he writes: “Mais, Auguste & Respectable Année, j'ai eu beau, en te contemplant, élever, enflammer mes idées, elles ne seront peut-être à tes yeux que des idées de servitude. Pardonne! le génie de mon Siecle me presse & m'environne : la stupeur regne : le calme de ma Patrie ressemble à celui des Tombeaux” (3) [But, alas! August and Venerable Year, perhaps to little purpose, when contemplating thee, have I animated, exalted my ideas; they may appear in thy eyes the mere conceptions of servitude. Forgive me; the genius of my age surrounds and oppresses me. Stupidity now reigns; the tranquility of my country resembles that of the grave (v)].¹ How is it possible, or is it even possible, Mercier asks, to imagine political freedom from a position of political servitude?

Mercier might seem politically audacious for asking that question. But to my mind, when compared to his subsequent descriptions of Paris, 2440 appears politically disengaged. The Englishman who criticizes the stark inequalities reigning in Paris at the beginning of the work opts to leave Paris until “tous ces projets auront été mis à exécution” (11-12) [all those projects are accomplished] (13). As Cooperson notes, Mercier himself leaves the interval between 1768, when his work was written, and the year 2440 largely untouched, as if he had little interest in how to get from point A to point B. At the same time, we can begin to see Mercier's future as a politically engaged writer emerge in the interstices of 2440, especially in the footnotes: the textual present of 2440 is pregnant with the future of the *Tableau de Paris* and the *Nouveau Paris*. In such footnotes—like the one about the lack of seats in the pit of the French theater—Mercier describes the social inequities of current Parisian customs and institutions in a way that calls for their reform. This is precisely the technique he would go on to perfect in the *Tableau de Paris*: in this latter text, change in the future starts with concrete, politically engaged descriptions of the present.

¹ References to the French text will be to the original edition, Louis Sébastien Mercier, *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fut jamais* (Londres, 1771). References to the English translation will be to *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, translated by W. Hooper (London, 1772).

My next point relates to the questions of empiricism and the imagination and specifically concerns dating. In his paper, Cooperson documents the persistent motif of time-travelers observing sign-posting of the future dates to which they have traveled, whether it be Paris in 2440 or Istanbul in 2008. He observes that on the one hand, Mercier's date of 2440 may have been chosen precisely because it was arbitrary, but on the other hand, its numerical specificity is important because it "places [the year] in a definite and determinant relationship with Mercier's own present of 1768" (9). I agree with this point and would further call attention to the 1772 English translation's reconfiguration of Mercier's dating. Oddly, the title of the work has been changed to *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*. The translator claims in his "Advertisement" that this was the only modification made to the text. But in reality, the initial change in the title creates a domino effect as other numbers relating to time and dating have to be changed as well: the chapter "J'ai sept cents ans" [I am seven hundred years old] becomes "I am 760 years old," and the narrator's exclamation that he has slept 672 years must be changed to 732 years. All of these changes call attention to the potential significance of dating and numbering in Mercier's work, and in any work about the future: why did Mercier give such a specific number to the year of his imagined future (2440), but a nice round number for the age of his narrator (700)? Why did the translator invert that relationship, such that the year of the imagined future is more of a round number (2500) while the age of the narrator (760) is less so?

These questions are significant because they play into the broader eighteenth-century tendency to use incredibly precise numbers to imagine not just the distant future but also the deep past. As Jesse Molesworth notes in his paper on eighteenth-century theories and histories of the earth, the French naturalist Buffon speculated in his *Histoire naturelle* that the earth was 74,832 years old, on the basis of empirical experiments measuring the cooling rates of heated metal balls. The precision of this number is all the more striking when one considers that Buffon speculated in his unpublished manuscripts that the earth might actually be anywhere from three million to ten million years old. Why would one go to such lengths to offer a precise number, down to the ones' place, when one is also speculating that the actual number might be off by several million or more? It seems likely that Buffon used such great numerical precision to signal the empirical basis of his calculations for his readers. In that case, one might ask what the implications of the Buffon example would be for the numerical specificity of Mercier's imagined future. Is it possible to research the future in an empirical way and, if so, what would that mean?

My next point bears on the passage of time and Mercier's sense of historicity. In comparison to the *Tableau de Paris* and the *Nouveau Paris*, we don't get much of a sense in Mercier's futuristic utopia of what is *lost* with the passage of time. There is one striking reference to the lost cries of Paris, but it is again, significantly, relegated to a footnote: "Les cris de Paris forment un langage particulier dont il faut avoir la grammaire" (15) [The cries of Paris form a particular language of which one must have the grammar].² In other words, the future of 2440 is one in which the particular language of the *cris de Paris*, and its grammar, have been lost, but the narrator doesn't linger on such losses (and the 1772 English translation further downplays the loss by suppressing the footnote in question). Again, the historical interval between 1768 and 2440 has been erased, and a lot has been erased along with it. In the *Tableau de Paris* and especially in the *Nouveau Paris*, in contrast, there is a much greater sense of the passage of time and of what is lost—languages, customs, cuts of dress—with its passage. This is not to say that these works are nostalgic; on the contrary, they continually press for change with utmost urgency. But part of the beauty of these works lies in their complex sense of historicity, the way that Mercier presses for change while also attending to the inevitable loss of the past.

² My translation. This footnote is suppressed in the 1772 English translation.

Finally, I would like to raise the issue of the juxtaposition of travel through space and time-travel in Mercier's works. Cooperson's paper allows us to imagine Mercier's post-chaise in the guise of Doc Brown's modified DeLorean in *Back to the Future* or the Jetsons' futuristic flying cars. He also observes a close link between carriages and social inequality in Mercier's works. The legs of the walking describer—whether in the *Tableau de Paris* or *2440*—are more egalitarian than the post-chaise, and so as Cooperson astutely remarks, we know we're not in a utopia if there are vehicles there. But this claim is complicated by Mercier's appreciation for the special vantage point afforded by the post-chaise for describing the world and thus for effecting change. In the chapter "Chaise de poste" in the *Tableau de Paris*, he writes: "Voyons le monde, s'il est possible, avant d'en sortir; la plus heureuse des inventions est *la chaise de poste*. Je n'ai jamais pu envier aux riches que ce seul avantage" [Let us see the world, if it is possible, before leaving it; the happiest of inventions is the post-chaise. I could never envy anything of the rich but this sole advantage.]³

Mercier's predilection for the post-chaise is also apparent in the unpublished and possibly unfinished essay "Visite" that Cooperson found in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. In this text, Mercier receives a letter—by post-chaise—from the year 2440. Cooperson interprets the text as an early example of the kind of time travel that would have such a rich literary future. After acknowledging that it remains unclear whether this post-chaise constitutes "the first time machine *ever*," Cooperson concludes: "What *is* clear is that Mercier didn't—and arguably couldn't—understand what he'd done in this scene: late eighteenth century France wasn't ready for that yet" (22). Without discounting Cooperson's intriguing suggestion that Mercier may have invented the time machine, I would observe that his teleological frame for interpreting this text—in terms of the many time machines that would follow it—leads him to overlook several of the more curious things Mercier does in the text. In particular, he seems to be figuring time travel as receiving a letter not from the *people* of the future, but from the year itself. In the same way, he opens *2440* with a dedicatory epistle, not to the people of 2440, but to that "August and Venerable Year." In other words, it is the year itself that is called upon to judge Mercier's ability to imagine what political freedom might look like in the future.

As we have seen, Mercier raises for his readers the question of how difficult it might be to imagine political freedom in the future from a position of political servitude. But for us today, in reading his works, there is also the difficulty of imagining the past, not the deep past of the earth that Buffon imagined, but the past of languages, customs, and cuts of dressed erased in the interval between 1768 and 2016. So I would conclude by asking Cooperson (and Mercier if he could wake up in our present) what it might have meant for Mercier to write to a year and not to a person. What did it mean for him to choose a not-so-round number for the year of his imagined future, while choosing a nice round 700 years for the age of the time-traveler? These are some of the stranger features of Mercier's imagined future, and they are ones that can be too easily overlooked because they belong more to an unfamiliar past than to the rich future of literary time travel.

³ Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2 vols., ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994) 2:1451. My translation.