

H-France Review Vol. 15 (June 2015), No. 90

Geneviève Boucher, *Écrire le temps: Les Tableaux urbains de Louis-Sébastien Mercier*. Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2014. 268 pp. Bibliography and index. \$34.95 Can. (cl). ISBN 2-7606-3444-2.

Review by Michael Mulryan, Christopher Newport University.

Although the polygraph Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740-1814) has attracted a great deal of attention in the past two decades, especially after the critical editions of many of his works were published by Mercure de France, monographs on the *post-philosophe* have been fairly rare. Geneviève Boucher's study on the chronicler's representation of time throughout his oeuvre, with special attention given to his *Tableau de Paris* (1781-88) and *Le Nouveau Paris* (1798), is a particularly welcome contribution to studies of Mercier in this regard. Her work fills in a large gap, because no other book-length manuscript that focuses exclusively on this all-important facet of the author sufficiently addresses Mercier's vision of the sublime.[1] Early on, in the 60s and 70s, definitive works on Mercier's pre-romanticism were published, with Majewski's brilliant and comprehensive study of the author's entire oeuvre being perhaps the most important one.[2] Scholars have also dedicated book-length studies to Mercier's status as an engaged intellectual and most notably, how he linked his aesthetic to this task.[3] Yolande Coste-Rooryck provides a convincing case, for example, in her monograph on Mercier's militant realism. She claims that he was one of the forefathers of the artistic movement, for whom "Le réalisme [était] un acte d'engagement [...]" (p. 41), which promoted the collective good at the expense of private interests.[4] What Boucher does differently is that she systematically and comprehensively analyzes Mercier's aesthetic as a chronicler and its evolution from the early 1780s until the end of the French Revolution without getting bogged down in other facets of his amazingly diverse body of work.

PART ONE: *Faire revivre le passé*

In her first chapter, "L'épaisseur temporelle" Boucher examines Mercier's methods for reconstructing the city's hidden past and describing its present state via an examination of its temporal layers. She uses the apt metaphor of a palimpsest to describe how the polygraph views the city: he reawakens hidden historical elements that are absent from the "official" history of the capital through an awareness of how these layers are superimposed. A walk through the city with Mercier is also a walk through time. Mercier frequently resorts to a use of "spectrality" to show how the ghosts of the past haunt the present: whether it be in the form of overcrowded cemeteries that spread infection through the city, seemingly dead Parisians who were detained in the Bastille for decades to be resurrected upon their release, or the chasms beneath the city, the quarries, which were once used to build the city but could spell its very end.

In her second chapter, "La Gestion du passé," Boucher convincingly shows how Mercier captures the collective conscience of Parisians concerning the way they both cope with and internalize the past in both the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary cityscapes. Although revolutionaries rejected the immediate past and patrimony of the ancien régime, they adopted Greco-Roman rhetoric and the Gauls as their ancestors in the hopes of forming a new national identity. In both his urban chronicles, Mercier reveals when the past and the city have true parallels, but also when Parisians misrepresent or

“invalidate” the past, whether it be through vandalism and iconoclasm in general, or the exhibition of artifacts in a museum.

PART TWO: *Imaginer l'avenir*

In chapter three, “Destruction et dégénérescence,” Boucher captures one of the least commented upon aspects of Mercier’s urban aesthetic (apart from Majewski, whose commentary on Mercier’s description of ruins and spectrality, in general, is less comprehensive): how destruction and construction are constantly juxtaposed through his descriptions of both the physical and imagined vestiges of the past with the city’s confines. Mercier’s descriptions of actual ruins and an imagined version of the city in ruins exemplify his aesthetic of the sublime. It is an opportunity for him to contemplate, with the reader, the terrifying force of nature and the relentless character of time, both of which are outside of their control. This serves as a constant reminder not only of the individual’s mortality but also of the mortality of civilizations in general. The book and, by extension, his urban chronicles take on a similar status within his oeuvre since they perfectly represent this dual nature of the city. They have the potential to preserve the past but are just as vulnerable to destruction as the city itself. This inexorable link between degeneration and construction is perhaps best represented by Mercier’s chapters on Paris’s quarries: once used to construct the city, they are now underground voids into which the city could, piece by piece, collapse at any moment. Representing the destruction and reconstruction of the past is also inextricably linked to how Mercier represents the future. Pondering how the present civilization will disappear entails envisaging a new one.

In her fourth chapter, “La Régénération,” Boucher demonstrates to what degree “regeneration” is a central concept to utopian discourse in revolutionary writings. Mercier reiterates the multiple manifestations regeneration takes on in such rhetoric but goes further by exposing its contradictions and by fully analyzing the complexity and import of such transformations. Regeneration takes on several different forms, including a rebirth and thus reconstitution of society through either divine grace or human agency, as a complete break from the past, and as a return to a mythical golden age. Boucher elegantly shows how Mercier’s mixed use of both the Gregorian and Revolutionary calendars in his urban chronicle *Le Nouveau Paris* exemplifies one of his positions on the possible regeneration of the French nation: the feudal past and the revolutionary present coexist in the minds of the French, rendering an attempted annihilation of the nation’s history in favor of a new revolutionary vision useless. The French can only hope to transform the past from one generation to the next, the successive one being less corrupted by the ideas of the ancien régime than the last. Nonetheless, as she cogently demonstrates, regeneration as divine intervention and as the work of man are often juxtaposed in the same chapter. Here Boucher’s contribution is substantial, since she is one of the only scholars to fully examine Mercier’s rightful criticisms of utopian discourse during the Revolution and how they reflect the social awareness and acumen of the polygraph.

PART THREE: *Écrire le présent*

In chapter five, “Saisir le monde contemporain,” Boucher examines how Mercier attempts to achieve the impossible by accurately depicting the ever-fleeting present moment as he sees it in the Parisian cityscape. She correctly posits that Mercier, contrary to popular belief, is not the founder of modern urban discourse but rather the most important urban chronicler for Paris in the eighteenth century, a model for many generations of future authors. Literary description, in general, and urban descriptions, in particular, were very popular literary modes in the eighteenth century. Boucher beautifully summarizes scholarship on Mercier’s methods for depicting the present and how his approach differs in his two most famous urban chronicles: his *Tableau* portrays a relatively stable urban center, whereas his *Nouveau Paris* unveils a world of chaos and violence undergoing constant change. Although the chapters of both his chronicles can be read in any order due to the lack of rigid sequential structure, his descriptive methods are determined by historical context. His *Tableau* does form a unified whole,

whereas his *Nouveau Paris* recreates the disorder and confusion of the Revolution, the future of which is uncertain, leaving the work more open-ended. In his revolutionary chronicle, he describes the city from the perspective of a victim of historical events for whom the Revolution is a lived trauma. Ever obsessed with the nature of time in relation to literary representation, Mercier's literary corpus is not finalized until his death, since he constantly reedited many of his works to better reflect the evolution of his thought. As an author fixated on what the future would bring, as the future present, he never viewed his oeuvre as fixed.

Although the final chapter, "Écrire l'histoire de la Révolution," is a bit slow in the beginning, Boucher's contribution to Mercier studies, and scholarship on *Le Nouveau Paris* in particular here, is truly impressive. She is the first scholar, in my opinion, to accurately articulate Mercier's temporal aesthetic. She explains it the most clearly in the following comment: "Mercier offre une vision sublime de l'histoire présente" (p. 241). For Boucher, *Le Nouveau Paris* reflects a transition in eighteenth-century literature, whereby nature is no longer the "privileged terrain" of aesthetic expression, but rather history and time and the incessant movement they represent. Like many other Mercier scholars, some of the most notable being Laurence Mall and Joanna Stalnaker, Boucher rightfully notes that although *Le Nouveau Paris* has some literary similarities with *Tableau de Paris*, it is above all a history of the Revolution and the trauma it represented for its victims, such as Mercier himself. He seeks to comprehend how it descended into terror under the Jacobins and also to show that this in no way actually represented the Revolution. Mercier knew all too well that he could not accurately represent the Revolution without temporal distance and an actual bird's eye view--everything went by so quickly and so much happened simultaneously that this was an impossible feat for someone who survived it--yet a victim could hope to give some small impression of what it meant for the French living through it with their own misunderstandings of the present. Mercier aestheticizes trauma, bloodshed, and massacres using an original description of the ever-changing present to do so, a moving representation anchored in a text destined to last unlike the moments he describes.

In addition to being a welcome contribution to Mercier studies for Enlightenment specialists, *Écrire le temps : Les Tableaux urbains de Louis-Sébastien Mercier* is also written in highly accessible and lucid French prose and could be assigned as supplementary reading for any undergraduate or graduate seminar on the history of urban discourse, or, more generally, on eighteenth-century literature, culture, or history. Nineteenth-century specialists will also find a rich resource in this monograph that explicates much of what their chroniclers and poets of urbanity owe to this eighteenth-century muse.

NOTES

[1] See also the section on Mercier's urban aesthetic in Joanna Stalnaker's groundbreaking study of description during the Enlightenment, which is also foundational in Mercier studies. Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of Encyclopedia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[2] Henry F. Majewski, *The Preromantic Imagination of L. S. Mercier* (New York: Humanities Press, 1971). See also H. Temple Patterson, *Poetic Genesis: Sébastien Mercier into Victor Hugo* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1960).

[3] In his superb monograph on Mercier, Enrico Rufi provides many excellent insights on Mercier's contributions as an engaged intellectual and how he viewed the duties of a writer at the time, and how his theatrical aesthetic differed from that of Diderot. Enrico Rufi, *Le Rêve laïc de Louis-Sébastien Mercier : Entre littérature et politique* (Oxford: SVEC, 1995).

[4] Yolande Coste-Rooryck, *Le Pari fou de Louis-Sébastien Mercier dans le « Tableau de Paris » (1781-1789) Et « Le Nouveau Paris (1799) : Un Réalisme militant* (Paris : Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2009).

Michael Mulryan
Christopher Newport University
michael.mulryan@cnu.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172