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Riikka Forsström, *Possible Worlds: The Idea of Happiness in the Utopian Vision of Louis-Sébastien Mercier*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002. 326 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 27.00 € (pb). ISBN 951-746-355-3.

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Riikka Forsström's *Possible Worlds*, a study of the vision of utopia presented by Louis-Sébastien Mercier in his novel, *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fût jamais*, pursues several parallel and interlocking agendas. The central focus, as the title suggests, is the idea of happiness in Mercier's utopian vision. But Forsström also attempts to analyze Mercier's utopia in the context of utopian literature more generally; as well, he is concerned with establishing Mercier's relationship to Enlightenment philosophy and, less thoroughly, to the politics of the French Revolution. The book succeeds, in some measure, on all of these scores, though resoundingly on none of them.

L'An 2440 (as it is abbreviated throughout the book), despite being immediately banned upon its initial publication in 1771, went on to become a best-seller in eighteenth-century France. An expanded edition appeared in 1786, and yet another in the late 1790s, but it is on the first edition that Forsström focuses her analysis. She situates Mercier firmly within the literary underground of the late ancien régime, arguing implicitly that he merits more serious attention than either his contemporaries or subsequent literary critics have accorded him.^[1] Forsström characterizes the late eighteenth century as a "Golden Age" of utopias, which is a bit of a surprise since, as she also observes, there was no entry for "utopia" in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert.

Mercier's distinctive contribution to utopian literature was to place his ideal society in the future—in the Paris of the twenty-fifth century—rather than situating it, as was customary for writers of this genre, in a remote geographic setting such as an island or distant mountaintop. In doing so, he embraced the Enlightenment faith in progress. Mercier's utopia was not a distant land—the route to which no one knew—but a familiar city transformed by time, an achievable utopia, at least in theory. Forsström thus suggests that Mercier's novel foreshadowed the utopian political agenda of the French Revolution.

What was the utopia of *L'An 2440* like? Mercier was fascinated by the city as a social space, as demonstrated by the twelve-volume *Tableau de Paris*, published between 1782 and 1788, in which he chronicled the life of the city in great detail. Forsström summarizes the contrast between the "real" Paris of the eighteenth century and the "ideal" Paris of the future in the following terms: "As a chronicle of horror Mercier depicts in his *Tableau de Paris* the capital of France, on the eve of the French Revolution, as an abode of blood and terror, above which the angel of the Apocalypse seems to be floating. As the opposite to this, Paris in 2440 appears as a city of utmost purity, chastity, cleanliness and virginity in both its physical and moral aspects" (p. 294). Mercier's utopia was, above all, an orderly society, and the Paris in which it was situated bears striking resemblance to the city that Baron Haussmann would create in the mid-nineteenth century with its broad and beautiful avenues. Many of the main themes of Enlightenment philosophy found expression in Mercier's vision: "Rousseau's

doctrine of social contract has been implemented.... Moderation has replaced abundance and extravagance. The treatment of criminals is no longer based on torture of the body" (p. 208). The influence of Beccaria is alluded to in this last sentence, and Forsström makes frequent reference to Mercier's debt to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Indeed, "in the royal library of 2440, the entire oeuvre of Rousseau has been preserved, while much of Voltaire's writings had been destroyed" (p. 41).

It is not surprising that Voltaire is reviled in the Paris of 2440, given the place of honor accorded to Leibniz and his philosophy of optimism: "*L'An 2440* can in its entirety be approached as a fictional representation of the focal Leibnizian thesis that the supreme truth in the universe is happiness" (p. 82). To whom was that happiness owed? In large part to the benevolent God to whom Leibniz attributed the fact that this was the best of all possible worlds. But Mercier turned as well to Rousseau for his definition of human happiness. In particular, Mercier argued that man would find true happiness in work. Mercier's ideal society was not a place of idleness or leisure. Everyone worked--there was no place for monks, or aristocrats, or a criminal class. The fact that everyone contributed made the working day shorter for all. And it was Rousseau whom Mercier credited for having seen the link between work and liberty.

Liberty was not abundant, however, in the Paris of 2440. Although Forsström describes it as a "transparent and open society," it was also a society in which the boundary between public and private life scarcely existed. Individual freedom was sacrificed in Mercier's utopia for collective well-being. Here Forsström sees Mercier as drawing on a shared eighteenth-century ideal of virtue, but in this I think she elides Rousseau and Montesquieu, whose definitions of virtue were actually quite different. Montesquieu stressed civil liberties much more, in contrast to Rousseau's emphasis on civic duty. In the Paris of 2440, "individual will and free choice are totally broken. This makes of Mercier's utopian society a kind of 'necropolis,' a city of the living dead" (p. 137). It was also a society of unfettered patriarchy in which women played only a domestic role.

Happiness, for Mercier, is not born out of individual freedom, but rather out of individual work. From our vantage point at the beginning of the twenty-first century, few of us would argue that we are halfway toward Mercier's utopia. For Mercier the path toward a better society lay in the triumph of reason over passion, the sacrifice of individual desires for the common good. Today, as we indulge our passion for consumerism, we applaud ourselves for defending human freedom. Technology paves our path to a better society, but it was largely absent in Mercier's vision, although the telephone-like devices in *L'An 2440* might be said to presage the ubiquity of cell phones in the world we inhabit. Interestingly, for a utopia defined by its temporal rather than geographic distance, there were no clocks or watches in the Paris of 2440.

Forsström's discussion of Mercier's novel is provocative and wide-ranging, although in the end it offers perhaps more breadth than depth. In addition to the Enlightenment thinkers already mentioned, the author finds the roots of Mercier's ideas in the writings of Locke, Bacon, d'Holbach, Mably, and Diderot. That tendency towards eclecticism in seeking the origins of Mercier's thought is also apparent in Forsström's assessment of its impact: "The French eighteenth-century utopias functioned as precursors of all important ideologies which have molded the formation of modern societies" (p. 307). This would seem to tell us everything and nothing. The reader is also left a bit uncertain about Mercier's relation to the Revolution. Forsström notes that Mercier was elected to the National Convention, in which he served on the education committee, a natural choice for one devoted to the writings of Rousseau. But Mercier allied himself to the Girondins, who certainly would have been rather skeptical of the sort of utopia described in the pages of *L'An 2440*. Mercier grew disillusioned about the Revolution with the advent of the Terror, which Forsström curiously associates with Babeuf. But we learn relatively little about the impact of the revolutionary upheaval on the revisions Mercier made to his final edition of the novel. This is a study, then, that is more compelling in its discussion of the text than in its contextualization of Mercier's novel in either the society of the late ancien regime or in the currents of

the French Revolution. NOTES [1] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1982). Given Forsström's reliance on Darnton's work to situate Mercier in eighteenth-century French intellectual society, it is interesting to note that Mercier lived in Neuchâtel from 1782 to 1785.

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