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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Revisiting Mercier's *L'An 2440*.

Riikka Forsström. *Possible Worlds: The Idea of Happiness in the Utopian Vision of Louis-Sébastien Mercier*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002. <<http://www.finlit.fi/english/eng-publ.htm>>. 329 pp. €27 pbk.

Louis-Sébastien Mercier's 1771 uchronia *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fut jamais* (The year 2440: a dream if there ever was one, first published in English—perplexingly—as *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* in 1772) was an important milestone in the evolution of science fiction. According to Paul Alkon in his *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia Press, 1987), Mercier's *L'An 2440* was the first utopia to be set in future time, initiating “a new paradigm for utopian literature not only by setting action in a specific future chronologically connected to our past and present but even more crucially by characterizing that future as one belonging to progress” (127). It was one of the eighteenth century's most successful books, with over 60,000 copies in print in several languages, and the first utopian novel published in North America (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned copies). It was also one of the century's most controversial: first published anonymously in Amsterdam, *L'An 2440* was promptly banned in both France and Spain as dangerous, subversive propaganda.

Considering its importance in the history of speculative fiction—as well as an artifact of pre-Revolutionary French political thought—it is surprising that there exist almost no contemporary studies of *L'An 2440*. Apart from Alkon's excellent volume, most others seem to date from the 1970s: Henry

Majewski's *The Preromantic Imagination of Louis-Sébastien Mercier* (1971), Raymond Trousson's now-classic *Voyages aux nulle part* (1975), and passing references in Frank and Fritzie Manuel's *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (1979) and I.F. Clarke's *The Pattern of Expectation 1644-2001* (1979), for example.

Forsström's *Possible Worlds* attempts to fill this lacuna in utopian criticism, and it does so in admirable fashion. Completed as a thesis at the University of Turku, Finland (ostensibly in 2001), the scholarship evident in *Possible Worlds* is both comprehensive and up-to-date. It begins with an Introduction that clearly defines its objectives as well as the methods and sources used. The author states that the main goal of the book is to explore the utopian novel as a representation of happiness through the vision conveyed by Mercier's *L'An 2440*.... What is Mercier's image of an ideal society, and what are the components which he views as contributing to the increase of human happiness or tending to diminish it? How does Mercier explain the process of transformation from the society of the eighteenth century to the ideal state of 2440? (12)

The ensuing ten chapters—all heavily footnoted—present a broad and multi-faceted analysis of *L'An 2440*. Among other topics, they include a biographical portrait of Mercier himself and an overview of his work's place in the history of utopian writing, a discussion of the urban landscape of this ideal Paris of the future, its political and social structure (in comparison/contrast to those of Mercier's own time), the role played by "natural religion" and material prosperity in the happiness of its citizens, and the work's surprisingly patriarchal attitudes about the rights of women.

I found this latter chapter to be especially fascinating because Mercier's portrayal of women in *L'An 2440* seems to contradict his otherwise very progressive and emancipatory views about human rights. In Mercier's utopia, marriages are based on love, dowries have been abolished, and divorce is now legal. Women's prime (indeed, exclusive) role in this society, however, is to be good wives and mothers. Totally subordinate to their husbands, these idealized women are not only maternal, faithful, obedient, and loving but also paragons of virtue and the guardians of public morality.

“Liberated” from the need to work outside the home, Mercier’s women are “free” to devote themselves exclusively to the task for which God and Nature created them: to bear children, to care for their husbands, and to incarnate “family values.”

These extremely conservative (and pre-bourgeois) notions of the proper role of women in society are partly the result of Mercier’s essentialist belief that women in eighteenth-century France had wandered too far from their “natural” selves, creating a dangerous “disharmony” in the balance of power between men and women.

In his imaginary world of the twenty-fifth century, this “disharmony” of sexual power, which Mercier found so alarming in his contemporary society, has been reversed... In his imagined utopian community, patriarchal power knows no limits. The demand for equality of spouses was in Mercier’s opinion a grave error. As he saw it, there are biological reasons, which can be drawn directly from “nature,” supporting this argument ... [that] woman cannot under any circumstances be a rival with man; subordination is thus a “law of nature”

[Mercier’s ideas] illustrate the general dependence of eighteenth-century writers on natural-law theorists of the preceding century, such as Bodin or Grotius, who had argued that the husband should be the sovereign within the domestic commonwealth. (140-41)

Mercier’s opinion seems to be that women can be truly happy only if their place in society is fully congruent with their “biology” —i.e., as wives and mothers. In this aspect at least, Mercier’s very forward-looking *L’An 2440* is an ideological throwback. Despite its very progressive ideas about many of society’s institutions (including marriage), its reactionary vision of women’s rights must rank it as among the most anti-feminist utopias ever written.

On the other hand, when viewed historically, Mercier’s *L’An 2440* arguably represents a kind of “missing link” between the utopian tradition and early extrapolative science fiction, or—in Alkon’s words—between “gratuitous”

and “investigative” modes of fictional speculation (125). Mercier’s uchronia was not just an exercise in idyllic wish-fulfillment; it was a concrete blueprint for social change based on the ideals of the eighteenth-century philosophes. As such, it exemplified the idea of “progress” at a time when this new notion—that the future could and would be radically different from (and better than) the past—was just beginning to become widespread in the Western popular imagination. As Forsström’s *Possible Worlds* points out in its conclusion, Mercier’s *L’An 2440* is an important work in this historical context because it straddles two very different worlds—in its fictional narrative (past/future), in its utopian discourse (static/dynamic), and in its historical status as a political and cultural artifact (pre-Revolution/post-Revolution).

In sum, despite the occasional infelicities of its style—it is unclear if this edition was a translation into English of an original Finnish text—and the inevitable typographical errors here and there, Riikka Forsström’s *Possible Worlds: The Idea of Happiness in the Utopian Vision of Louis-Sébastien Mercier* constitutes a valuable addition to sf scholarship. It is the best study available on Mercier’s *L’An 2440*, and I highly recommend it for anyone interested in the utopian roots of modern sf.—**ABE**