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PARISIAN SACRED SPACE IN L.-S. MERCIER'S *TABLEAU DE PARIS*

Michael Mulryan

Written in the decade preceding the French Revolution, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781–88), a twelve-volume encyclopedic account of the daily lives of Parisians, provides the twenty-first century reader with a glimpse of the evolving notion of the sacred in late eighteenth-century France. The most famed harbinger of the French zeitgeist of his time, Mercier furnishes a wealth of information on how Parisians lived and perceived the world around them. His method for examining the social practices of Parisians—making keen observations on people's behavior in urban spaces to address greater social and political problems—foreshadows the modern field of

sociology, as many scholars have noted.¹ For Mercier, the “sacred” was of particular concern, as it reflected values that had the potential to unite people. Witness to a significant shift in religious beliefs among certain social categories in Paris, he documents how this change affected their use of sacred sites.

Mercier’s ambivalence toward the “sacred” is symptomatic of the evolving beliefs within his society—which, nearing the French Revolution, was in transition—and of Parisian attitudes in particular. For the most part, Mercier views the “sacred” within a utilitarian framework, believing it to serve the education of the people and the reduction of social inequality. He tolerates and at times even praises state-sponsored institutions, such as the theater or the church, when they serve these broader social purposes. When describing rites the church and state have manipulated for purposes of social control, however, he is indignant. Mercier laments that such practices lead neither to permanent nor positive social change because they have been orchestrated by corrupt, absolutist parties which merely take advantage of the people’s credulity and superstition. His paternalist attitude toward the people, commonplace among *philosophes* and the educated at the time,² is evident when he characterizes what he considers to be irrational religious behavior as superstitious. More importantly, this attitude demonstrates that the common frame of reference for defining the “sacred” was changing, since fewer and fewer Parisians were true Christian believers. Mercier’s writings unveil the collective angst that Parisians suffered when facing this change.

Reflecting on the links between faith and urban space in an increasingly secularized society, Mercier naturally finds particular interest in churches, pilgrimage sites, and other spiritual nexuses. In these spaces he meticulously observes Parisians’ sometimes overzealous and sometimes

¹ See the following works, for example: Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power, and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jeffrey Kaplow, *The Names of Kings: The Parisian Laboring Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Basic Book Publishers, 1972); Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Marie Evans in association with Gwynne Lewis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

² For an excellent study on the topic, see Harry C. Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

secular habits. These reveal a potential crisis within the city: confronted with changing attitudes and social division, sacred spaces were losing force. Examining his descriptions of popular fanatical devotion as manifested in the behaviors of pilgrims to Mount Valérien (outside of Paris), of practitioners in Notre Dame and other parish churches, and even of theatergoers reveals the author's attitudes concerning sacred space. For him, the increasing secularization of urban space³ and the shift in values it reflected gave way to a new understanding and perception of sacred space: here, all that pertains to matters of faith is *visible* in the city and its sacred sites.

Of particular concern to Mercier was that, due to their divergent faiths, Parisians could no longer unite, or be united, within a single Christian sacred space. On the other hand, he was convinced that, because they believed in its power, Parisians of all social backgrounds could gather amicably in the theater.⁴⁴ A proto-sociologist, Mercier viewed the theater not only as a setting against which one could understand French society, but also as a quasi-religious space of great potential. A prolific playwright and regular spectator of both low and highbrow theater in Paris, he provides a wealth of information about theatergoers and their reactions to drama. Unlike Rousseau, he did not believe that theater was by its very nature corrupt. As he clearly states in *Du Théâtre ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (*Theater or a New Essay on the Dramatic Art*) (1773), "Entertainment is in and of itself good, and only bad when misused: Abuses are not inseparable from the theater: on the contrary, they can be prevented and destroyed."⁵⁵ When authentic, the theatrical

³ The research of many scholars has shown that Paris was becoming an increasingly secularized city in the second half of the eighteenth century. See, for example, Alain Cabantous, *Entre fêles et clochers: profane et sacré dans l'Europe moderne, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 2002); Pierre Chaunu, *La Mort à Paris* (Paris: Fayard, 1978); Pierre Chaunu, Madelaine Foisil, and Françoise de Noirfontaine, *Le Basculement religieux de Paris au XVIIIe siècle: Essai d'histoire politique et religieuse* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); and David Garrioch, "La Sécularisation précoce de Paris au dix-huitième siècle," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 12 (2005): 35–65.

⁴ Olwen Hufton estimates that only ten to twenty percent of eighteenth-century Parisians did not have the means to attend at least some type of theater ("Towards an Understanding of the Poor of Eighteenth Century France," *French Government and Society 1500–1850* (Mélanges Cobban) [London: Athlone Press, 1973]), 144–65. Cited in Martine de Rougemont, *La Vie théâtrale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1988), 226. By and large, the theater was an exceptional gathering point for a diverse range of social ranks in Paris, one that rivaled the church. See Rougemont, *La Vie*, 219–20, 232.

⁵ Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Mon Bonnet de nuit suivi de Du Théâtre*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet

experience does not merely entertain, but rather elicits profound spiritual responses:

Among us the theater hall is the only meeting place which gathers men together and where their voice can lift itself up as one. It is where the intimate sentiment that penetrates the soul, and to use an expression of one of Pythagorus's students, informs him of his divinity. The dramatic art becomes that much more important, noble, and interesting because of this, and from this point of view theater can be labeled le chef d'oeuvre of society.⁶

That the theater does not always reach its potential as a sacred space is due to abuses perpetrated by the government, mainly in the form of socioeconomic stratification and the destruction of artistic illusion within the theater hall itself.⁷ In the final volume of *Tableau de Paris*, for example, Mercier complains that the *Comédie Française's*⁸ parterre closes off—fences in, actually—the members of the third estate, who, moreover, are surrounded by armed guards to ensure their separation from other spectators. This vantage point, he notes, destroys all sense of artistic illusion: “the idea of being locked up and surrounded by rifles, destroys in certain souls the impact of the theater.”⁹ Restrictions imposed by the government thus deprive these theatergoers of the spiritual experience that art might afford them. For Mercier, such misuse of the theater is a serious transgression. Though he sees great potential in the theater, Mercier thus recognizes it has not reached its merited “comble” (“height”).¹⁰

(Paris: Mercure de France, 1999), 1146. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Mercier's texts are my own.

⁶ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1144.

⁷ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1143.

⁸ The *Comédie Française* was the official national theater located in Paris and belonged to a group of three royal, privileged theaters: the *Comédie Française* had the monopoly on spoken French drama; the *Opéra*, on works entirely sung; and the *Comédie Italienne*, on *com-media dell'arte* and comic opera. See Barbara G. Mittman, *Spectators on the Paris Stage in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Theater and Dramatic Studies 25 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 17.

⁹ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet, 2 vols. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 2: 1469. This edition will be used for all references to *Tableau de Paris*.

¹⁰ *Du Théâtre*, 1143.

As with the theater, Mercier also remarks on the failure—due either to government intervention or to the people's lack of faith—of other religious or quasi-religious spaces to fulfill their function within urban space. Mercier was atypical of his time in that he was not antireligious and even actively believed in the beneficial powers of Christianity. Frequently reverent in tone, he examines Christianity and religion in general through the lens of a political pragmatist. In the chapter of *Tableau de Paris* entitled "Jesus-Christ," for example, he exclaims: "what moral philosophy will be more capable than that of Jesus to correct kings' erratic behavior, or to facilitate the obedience of the people?"¹¹ As long as religion serves benevolent ends within society, Mercier believes, it should be promoted; when it affects the country in negative ways, however, it must be reformed.

On this note, Mercier's discussion of St. Geneviève church, a monument of great symbolic importance for the city of Paris, is particularly interesting. Supposedly founded by Clovis, the first Catholic king of France (ca. 466–511), this medieval Augustinian church was built to house the remains of Geneviève, the city's patron saint who famously inspired Parisian resistance to Attila the Hun's invasion in 451 AD, thereby saving the city.¹² Known for her ascetic life and profound piety, Geneviève had a great following among the Parisian populace during Mercier's time. As Steven Kaplan notes, Geneviève was above all associated with alimentation: a few years after Attila's western European campaign, she prevented a large-scale famine by amassing grain in villages surrounding the city and then redistributing it to the ill-fed in Paris. It comes as no surprise, then, that she was often portrayed with loaves of bread in the creases of her skirt.¹³ Depicted as an orphaned member of the peasantry and as a harbinger of sustenance, St. Geneviève was sought by people in times of desperation.¹⁴ She was not just the capital's patron saint; she was *the people's* saint.

Understanding of Parisians' admiration of St. Geneviève, Mercier nonetheless expresses dismay at the state's willingness to spend millions in

¹¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:899.

¹² Allan Braham, *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 32. Dom Jacques Dubois and Laure Beauont-Maillet, *Sainte Geneviève de Paris: La Vie, le culte, l'art* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982), 34–36.

¹³ Steven L. Kaplan, "Religion, Subsistence, and Social Control: The Uses of Saint Genevieve," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 13.2 (1979–80): 144, 147.

¹⁴ Kaplan, "Religion, Subsistence," 144.

her name. In the 1760s, a second church was constructed by the architect Jacques Germain Soufflot atop Mount Geneviève in Paris to house her remains in what is now called the Parisian Pantheon.¹⁵ This structure was meant to rival architecturally and spiritually St. Paul's in London and St. Peter's in Rome.¹⁶ While Mercier admits that it is a "magnificent church," he laments its cost, pointing out that the money allocated to its construction could have been used "for the relief of the destitute."¹⁷ Noting that the Bible cautions against erecting extravagant temples, he implies that such expense is irrational and perhaps even irreligious.¹⁸

In Mercier's account, the throngs of visitors who were drawn to her shrine exhibited excessive devotion toward the saint: during Communion, many often turned their backs on the altar, the focus of the mass, in order to face the reliquary. Mercier does not mock those who turn to Geneviève's reliquary, but rather admires their passionate faith.¹⁹ Out of a desire to have the same uplifting spiritual experience as they, he says to himself, "I will go before the saint's reliquary; I will get down on my knees in the midst of the pious, and I will respect their faith and their trust."²⁰ Mercier does not share others' faith in the saint's powers, but he respects and to a degree yearns to experience the intense happiness and hope of those who ardently pray. As a Christian *philosophe*, Mercier disapproves of superstitious faith, but, with a certain malaise, he acknowledges the power of superstition to console people, writing: "Reason and philosophy cannot replace these profound and happy illusions."²¹ Religious spaces thus elicit a sort of tension in Mercier, who senses in them the enabling of impure, cultic habits, but also of undeniable psychological and social functions.

Mercier also worries about the use of such spaces in political contexts. In a humorous anecdote, he recounts an interesting drama that he witnessed: a woman, desperate for three of her shirts to be rubbed against the reliquary, hands them to an Irishman in charge of such tasks, who summarily puts the shirts on a pole so they can come in direct contact

¹⁵ Braham, *The Architecture*, 32–36.

¹⁶ Braham, *The Architecture*, 32.

¹⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:444.

¹⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:444.

¹⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:442.

²⁰ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:443.

²¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:443.

with the saint. Noticing that one of the shirts did not directly touch the reliquary, the woman beseeches the Irishman to repeat his action. After succeeding in her quest, she exclaims, "They did indeed touch the reliquary, and you can be sure of that."²² When performed by laypeople, such behavior rather amuses Mercier. When done by supposedly enlightened politicians, however, he feels differently, remarking:

But municipal magistrates, the Parliament, and other sovereign courts ask Saint Geneviève for rain during droughts and to cure Kings when they are ill! When the kings lay dying, they unveil the reliquary bit by bit, as if they were allowing more or less efficient virtue to come out depending on the gravity of the danger they have to face. When the danger is extreme, then the reliquary is completely exposed.²³

Droughts made food shortages imminent and were thus a matter of great importance, to be sure, but here Mercier implies that the reliquary is used to keep the people at bay during hard times, that well-placed officials take advantage of the people's credulity to maintain social order. Such a practice has a social function but is also deceptive.

Steven Kaplan has shown that when in times of desperation the Parisian police used the saint's reliquary as a "control mechanism," their application of "disaster psychology" often had unpredictable consequences.²⁴ The people's assumption that a prodigious grain harvest depended on God's favor was counterbalanced by a "stubborn belief in the abundance of French agriculture."²⁵ When there was a low supply of grain, in other words, the people first assumed that either suppliers were hoarding it or the government was somehow at fault. Appealing to the saint was an "extraordinary" measure and reflected a state of national emergency because it meant that the grain shortage was attributable to the wrath of God.²⁶ As Kaplan explains, resorting to the use of the reliquary "was tantamount to an exoneration of the government, for it was an acknowledgement by

²² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:444.

²³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:442.

²⁴ Kaplan, "Religion, Subsistence," 144, 149.

²⁵ Kaplan, "Religion, Subsistence," 150.

²⁶ Kaplan, "Religion, Subsistence," 148.

the people that *they* were responsible, as a consequence of their sins.”²⁷ Though the police appealed to the saint to calm the masses and transform their hysteria into “resignation” or “hope,” their resorting to her might, instead of preventing, actually cause disorder: the people knew full well that the Saint was only invoked when the government had lost control.²⁸ The police thus took a gamble each time they agreed to reveal a bit of the reliquary or, in the most drastic step possible, to use it in a public procession to quell public fear. Though Mercier documents a general historical trend, in his day the saint was rarely used as a form of social control.²⁹ Kaplan attributes this decline to the waning religious beliefs of Parisians, and to the realization by authorities that it was too risky “to mobilize public opinion on the grain issue, even in the name of a politically neutral savior.”³⁰ It is clear, however, that Mercier was suspicious of the authorities’ willingness to employ such a ploy.

Mercier records a similar strategy in the Sainte-Chapelle,³¹ where he felt sacred space was cheapened during Holy Week by a vulgar mockery of Christ’s crucifixion in the form of a theatrical ritual performed by epileptics for the churchgoing public. There, he writes, allegedly possessed Parisians have uncontrollable spasms before a supposed piece of the Holy Cross precisely at midnight on Holy Friday, when it is shown to the public.³²

²⁷ Kaplan, “Religion, Subsistence,” 149.

²⁸ Kaplan, “Religion, Subsistence,” 148–49.

²⁹ Only once in the spring of 1785 did the archbishop request that the reliquary be unveiled in response to immense popular demand. It was indeed a period of severe drought and shortage but not very different from subsistence-related problems that Parisians had faced several times from 1765 to 1775. Here the only difference was the people’s reaction and the authorities’ fear of not appeasing them—and hence of not keeping popular unrest at bay. Kaplan, “Religion, Subsistence,” 153, 166.

³⁰ Kaplan, “Religion, Subsistence,” 166.

³¹ The royal chapel was built in 1242 during Louis IX’s reign. Located on the Île de la Cité, in the heart of the old city, it is one of the sole vestiges of the medieval royal palace. Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris* (New York: Random House, 2002), 9, 45.

³² Parisians associated epileptic seizures with miracles due to events surrounding the Jansenist controversy of the early eighteenth century. The gravesite of François de Paris, a pious Jansenist devoted to the poor, in St. Médard Cemetery, for example, became an important site of religious devotion for Jansenists and Jansenist sympathizers in the 1720s. When people were suddenly cured of lifelong diseases accompanied by convulsions before his gravestone, the church became alarmed and closed the site out of fear that more “miracles” would happen. The Jansenist controversy was very much a part of many Parisians’ living memory; in 1754,

All the supposed epileptics run up to the relic *en masse* and have a thousand convulsions while passing in front of it. Epileptics are limited to four at a time: they grimace, howl, and in this way earn the money that has been distributed to them. This ridiculous show is tolerated in order to maintain the populace's expectation of a miraculous cure of illnesses thought to be incurable or to maintain what religious belief they have left. Several of the alleged possessed...have the privilege of letting out a stream of public curses; they are supposedly entirely inspired by the devil.³³

Poor epileptics, just trying to earn a bit of change, essentially put on this "ridiculous show" for other members of the laboring poor.³⁴ Although they wait their turn to approach the relic like the rest of the faithful, they hardly kneel down in reverent prayer. Their attempt at acting, moreover, is no more than a poorly executed ruse to Mercier, who describes the spectacle of yet another possessed Parisian before the cross as an "unbelievable farce."³⁵ Absurd perhaps, but this new actor is somewhat more convincing than the average epileptic:

There I heard, in 1777, the boldest most incredible blasphemer. Try to imagine all of Jesus-Christ's adversaries and his divine mother, forming but one voice. Well, they never came close to reaching his audacious, insulting, and derisory sacrilege. It was for me and for the entire congregation a rather new and strange show to hear a man publicly defy, and in a thunderous voice for that matter, the god of the church, insult his cult, provoke his anger, and vomit the most atrocious insults; all the while these energetic blasphemies were attributed to the devil. The populace made the sign of the cross, and said prostrated, with their foreheads on the ground: *It is the devil himself who is speaking.*³⁶

Louis XV, for example, passed the "Declaration of Silence," forbidding discussion of the issue, thereby preventing further religious upheaval within the country. In 1762, the pro-Jansenist Parlement finally managed officially to disband the Jesuits. See Garrioch, *Making of Revolutionary Paris*, 142-46. At the time Mercier wrote, the Jansenist controversy was still an important part of the psychological zeitgeist of the time.

³³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:439.

³⁴ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:439.

³⁵ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:440.

³⁶ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:440.

Mercier confesses that he does not fully understand what he witnessed that fateful day in 1777: "An insane or fanatical person, or simply a bribed actor, I never understood the role of this character."³⁷ Despite admitting his ignorance concerning the reality behind the spectacle, he nonetheless uses the metaphor of the actor in his description. The following year, he claims, even the upper crust of society came to see this actor's "second performance," but were disappointed: "Everyone was waiting for the *grand acteur*, but he was a no show. The police had shut his mouth, and consequently the devil shut his. There were only second-rate epileptics, who were not even worth being seen or heard."³⁸ On one of the holiest days of the liturgical calendar, one of the holiest sites in all of France is no more than a stage for lowbrow street theater.

Wondering how and why such theatrics could take place in a secular urban center and what this says about the actual progress of Enlightenment thought in Paris, Mercier logically asks, "Would one believe, and I am repeating this, that all this is happening in Paris in the eighteenth century?"³⁹ Religious piety, or blasphemy for that matter, should be sincere and incomparable to the art of acting, yet Mercier's point is that in this social and historic context they are nonetheless similar. The actors involved simultaneously trivialize both the theater and religion through their poor acting and irreverence. "Le beau monde" comes for a good show while the poor are actually convinced of the madman's possession.⁴⁰ In his chapter on the Sainte Chapelle and the convulsionaries, Mercier highlights the people's penchant for believing what they see and the authorities' deliberate manipulation of this weakness.

By documenting the power of illusion at many holy sites in the city and its periphery, Mercier reveals the visceral quality of religious devotion among the people. In one chapter, for example, he describes a pilgrimage, popular among the lower classes and bourgeoisie alike, that took place every holy week atop Mount Valérien, where two hermits reconstructed the scene of the crucifixion at Golgotha. Some pilgrims, Mercier notes, even mistook Valérien for Calvary, since they had no idea where Jerusalem was

³⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:440.

³⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:441.

³⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:441.

⁴⁰ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:440-41.

located.⁴¹ Others were duped because the setting seemed authentic: besides figures of Christ and the two thieves at his side, life-size sculptures stood in the seven chapels surrounding the scene, depicting the Stations of the Cross. If the people were struck with solemnity by the size of the sculptures, they were also affected, Mercier explains, by "the sculptor [who] gave the Jews and executioners off-putting faces that make the multitude sob."⁴² Just as in the Sainte-Chapelle, here the visual re-creation of a common spiritual reference makes for a very powerful illusion to the people.

Mercier's commentary on the religious beliefs of commoners belongs to a wider eighteenth-century discourse in which the people are either idealized or ridiculed. In his cultural history of the eighteenth century, Antoine De Baecque states that the *philosophes* most often labeled the poor "childish people," who are characterized by "weakness, credulity, foolishness, fear, and instability," but also by "innocence, virtue, goodness, and a desire to learn."⁴³ Even when Mercier infantilizes and animalizes the people, he still evinces a profound faith in their genuine goodness.⁴⁴ His main concern is that French society move forward, but he views progress as impossible while the population remains intellectually stagnant. More than anything, he fears their ignorance, seeing it as the cause of their bestial behavior. For him, the most "untamable" and unpredictable members of the Parisian population are the poorest and the least educated. Yet Mercier attributes the general failings of such people not to any inherent inferiority but to the constraints imposed upon them by those who have been afforded political power and access to a decent education.⁴⁵ In *Tableau de Paris*, he uses the term *plebeian* to differentiate the English commoner—whom he describes as educated, rational, and in possession of the right to express displeasure with the government—from the French commoner: "The Plebian does not exist in Paris: He is a member of the people, the populace, or the Bourgeoisie! He has titles, houses, privileges or venalities,

⁴¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:89–90.

⁴² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:90.

⁴³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:81. My translation.

⁴⁴ For example, Mercier argues that honoring the poor for being virtuous is merely a way of rewarding their natural behavior, in contrast with the rich. The poor "do good because they have heart, without expecting looks of admiration or rewards," whereas among the rich there are only "cold hearts, ungrateful or insolent sons, who disavow their father, abandon their mother, etc." (*Tableau de Paris*, 2: 470).

⁴⁵ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:583.

but he has no political existence; he is neither in the habit of nor has the power, without constraint, to expose his hatred or his dissatisfaction."⁴⁶ The French third estate could only be transformed into "plebeians," however, when all Parisians had a political voice. Before such a change could take place, the poorer members of the estate had psychologically and intellectually to acquire the mindset of politically engaged citizens. The infantile commoner could only "grow up" by becoming educated.

To Mercier, the principal institution responsible for their education was the church. Since the only true believers who went to mass regularly in the capital belonged to the ranks of the laboring poor, Mercier claims, the altar was a convenient conduit through which the government and the church alike could shape the masses.⁴⁷ As a common source of education for both the rich and poor alike, and as a holy site, the church had the potential for uniting French subjects for a common cause. Mercier maintains that the church fulfilled this purpose for many centuries, but also recognizes that it does so no longer.

A place where Parisians from all social classes could gather to worship and ultimately gain entrance to the kingdom of God, Notre Dame Cathedral, in the heart of Paris, was for Mercier the great symbol of unity on this point. It was the spiritual nucleus of late eighteenth-century Paris, and could be traversed by the lowliest servant as well as the most illustrious kings and queens.⁴⁸ In this space, whose saints were said to be of modest backgrounds, the people received blessings from the clergy next to the wealthy.⁴⁹ For Mercier, it is a space apart. The view afforded from atop its tower provided a unique vantage point concerning the ephemeral nature of earthly life. Here, Mercier writes, "I dominate the great city, now I can only catch but a glimpse of this capital as a disordered heap of ruins. Oh, from this elevated point of view this vast Paris has a unique physiognomy! It exhales smoke and it seems to say to me, *all is smoke*."⁵⁰ The outer appearance of the city may change rapidly, but Notre-Dame remains. Enumerating the architectural qualities that give the church its permanent, ancient, and outsize character, Mercier notes that the "gothic

⁴⁶ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:583.

⁴⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:582.

⁴⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:63..

⁴⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:63.

⁵⁰ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:63.

imprint" and "the bold genius" can be seen throughout the church in "the blackened portal, the enormous church bells, the winding staircases, the antique church windows, [and in] the eroded sculptures."⁵¹ All these objects take him back through the centuries of Paris's past. They are a living testimony of days gone by.

A powerful symbol of the past, Notre-Dame is also a space that elicits its onlookers' spiritual reflection and thus causes them to think about their present behavior and the hereafter. The church's structure deeply moves Mercier, who writes that "There, everything is big."⁵² Mercier cannot help but continually tour the cathedral in constant awe before the "the vast and soulful objects which surround him."⁵³ It awakens his devotion and presumably that of others' through its beauty. There the worshiper feels as if he were suspended between heaven and earth; there the grandeur of the church's interior raises the spirit. The sights and sounds that permeate its interior even cause him to become more pious: "My raised-up soul prays to God with greater heart in the church of Notre-Dame than in any other place of worship."⁵⁴ Mercier is particularly moved while visiting the "Chapel of the Damned," where the story of a former canon of Notre-Dame still resonates: during the burial of a preacher, the deceased raised his head up from his coffin and said, "*Je suis damné!*" ("I am damned!").⁵⁵ Retelling this story, Mercier uses the first-person singular, giving the reader a more immediate, personal experience. In his version, the canon lifts himself out of the coffin three times, and says, "I have been judged by the just judgment of God."⁵⁶

One might argue that Mercier's sense of the sacred here is just as idolatrous as that of St. Geneviève's admirers, since it is only by interacting with the physical space of Notre-Dame that he feels able to communicate with God. But other, less authentic or neglected architectural elements of the church do not move him in the same way. The filthy exterior of the church diminishes its greatness, as do the ineffective attempts to restore it. While some of the most impressive external elements of a gothic

⁵¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:62.

⁵² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:61.

⁵³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:62.

⁵⁴ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:62.

⁵⁵ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:61.

⁵⁶ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:61.

cathedral are its windows and sculptures, especially those found in the tympanums above the portals, Mercier admits that the gothic sculptures in these locations are "so black and hideous that one might mistake them for objects of reprobation rather than for the chosen in paradise with their crowns of glory."⁵⁷ Spiritual space here has been inverted: the sacrosanct look damned, the elect resemble demons, and amputees (including angels without their wings) adorn one of the most revered places of worship in the French kingdom.⁵⁸ Not only are its sculptures sullied, but the Church's interior has been painted white, preventing the onlooker from viewing Notre-Dame as it truly exists. Mercier abhors the practice of repainting historical structures in colors other than the original, because doing so effaces collective memory and also destroys their aesthetic. He adamantly adds that, "No, we will never pray in a brand new temple with as much fervor as in an ancient one."⁵⁹

Like its sculptures, Notre-Dame is a monument to a religion on its way out. Mercier maintains that because Parisians have divergent beliefs, their city no longer has a true spiritual center. He notes that baptisms—required of all children within twenty-four hours of their birth, who would then receive certificates which would "determine the existence, the social rank, and the fortune of an individual"⁶⁰—were felt by many non-believing Parisians to be merely burdensome chores. Though a baptismal certificate was one's primary form of identification, it did not necessarily bear much religious significance. Such was their diminished significance, Mercier records, that well-to-do Parisians would often pay vagrants to serve as godparents during the baptisms of their children.⁶¹ Thus he estimates, out of one hundred godfathers ninety-eight could no longer recite the Apostle's Creed. In other words, for many the ceremony surrounding baptism, a rite of initiation and purification, and arguably the most important sacrament for a Christian, was a farce, polluting the sacred space in which it took place.

Two other diminished sacraments were communion and confession. When Mercier refers to the infamous sacrilege committed by François

⁵⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:1308.

⁵⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:1308.

⁵⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:1424.

⁶⁰ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:51.

⁶¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:50.

Sarrazin, a devoted protestant in the seventeenth century who was burned alive for attacking the Eucharist in a Parisian church while denouncing the dogma of transubstantiation,⁶² he does so to note that in the late eighteenth century no such sacrilege would be committed for simple lack of interest: "No one has even troubled the smallest squirt of holy water, and even during the public processions of the jubilee, the church, always outwardly respected, has not been the victim of a single attack."⁶³ Only wigmakers make jokes about mass, Mercier quips; no one else even talks about it.⁶⁴ He even hypothesizes that religious freedom is so great in Paris that one could live in the same parish for thirty years without stepping foot in the local church or recognizing the face of the parish priest.⁶⁵ The wealthy rarely go to mass, and when they do it is only on Sunday, "in order not to scandalize their lackeys; and the lackeys know full well that their masters only go on their behalf."⁶⁶ Yet the poor, who do go to mass "have to remain standing in churches or pay for a chair. . . . The poor will be asked . . . for six sols to be seated while hearing a sermon. Temples are therefore deserted. . . . What, yet more money to hear religious services!"⁶⁷ From these observations, one can see the church is no longer a spiritual rallying point or center.

Moreover, Mercier complains, the Parisians who gather around the altar no longer represent the entire social spectrum. The church has lost its status as a point of union for the French, not only because of the spread of Enlightenment thought but also because of the theater, which served as an alternative site of education for the populous.⁶⁸ While Mercier regrets this, he also recognizes that the theater is a legitimate space for the creation of social consensus: in spite of the theater's imperfections, the need for certain reforms could more easily be met there than by changing the religious views of the people. No more than a third of Parisians could read on the eve of the Revolution, but the vast majority of them attended the

⁶² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:566.

⁶³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:567.

⁶⁴ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:567.

⁶⁵ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:579. In the chapter immediately following the one entitled "Religious freedom," Mercier states outright: "But *political freedom*, which would be much more valuable, is nonexistent in Paris" (1:582).

⁶⁶ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:566.

⁶⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1:882.

⁶⁸ Rougemont, *La Vie*, 219–20.

theater, where they could hear texts performed. For Mercier, without the theater, a country of reasonable, levelheaded “plebeians” would be inconceivable. Where once it was in the church, now it was in the theater that their education could begin.

In *On Theatre or a New Essay on the Dramatic Art* (1773), Mercier writes that one of the primary goals of the theater should be to educate the people and to make them morally upright citizens. The theater is not simply a school for Mercier, but rather a quasi-religious space: in his view, it conveys “impressions” that can lead to a profound moral and psychological transformation in the individual.⁶⁹ The “truth” that spectators of a tragedy learn is simple: “by hurting others” they are “hurting themselves.”⁷⁰ The chain reaction that is unleashed among the spectators when they are moved is like a “sacred fire.”⁷¹ Where religious zeal formerly took hold over the souls of people, now reason inculcated in theatrical spaces moves individuals.⁷² To do so, the “cantor of humanity,” (that is, the dramatist), must create a tableau of the human condition that moves the audience and serves as a springboard for action.⁷³ Mercier defines the purpose and end of such a theatrical technique in the introduction to his essay on theater:

Performance is a lie. It is a matter of bringing it close to the greatest truth. A Performance is a tableau: this tableau must be made useful, that is to say it must be made accessible to the greatest number of people possible, so that the image it transmits serves to unite men through the victorious sentiments of compassion and mercy. It is not enough that the soul be occupied, or moved; it must be led to do what's right, the moral goal, without being hidden or too obvious, must come to seize the spectator's heart and establish its empire over it.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1150.

⁷⁰ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1152.

⁷¹ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1152.

⁷² Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1144.

⁷³ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1148. See also Pierre Franz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998) for a history of the aesthetic of the theatrical tableau in the eighteenth century.

⁷⁴ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1141.

And in another passage, Mercier further elaborates on the impact that a well-written drama has on the audience:

As soon as the senses and the imagination are affected, we become, luckily for us, passive beings. . . . The art of the poet consists in paying attention to that essential property of human nature, in handling it skillfully, in turning the spectator into a kind of instrument that he will play at will; once he has made himself master of the heart, mind and reason will obey too.⁷⁵

For the *philosophes*, the poet was "the living embodiment of the general interest."⁷⁶ Thus, a playwright was one who had the audience's interest at heart. If he were not a good poet, the audience would simply not be moved by the author's work.

The problem for French theater was that, imprisoned by the rules of Classicism and its Greco-Roman models, it failed to move its audiences, and therefore to transmit virtues to them. The vast majority of Parisians simply could not relate to Greek and Roman heroes.⁷⁷ Mercier suggests that playwrights make manual laborers protagonists in dramas, and that workers from the provinces take center stage, so that the populace might be taught scruples.⁷⁸ He did this himself in several plays, of which the most noteworthy are *The Indigent* (1772) and *The Vinegar Maker's Wheelbarrow* (1775).⁷⁹

Writing effective plays which include the lowly as protagonists, however, was just an initial step for Mercier, since the conditions had to be just right for the French theater to change society for the better. If artistic illusion and equal access to a play are not upheld, for example, the dramatic and pedagogical impact would be lost.⁸⁰ In this respect, eighteenth-century French theater was fraught with difficulties brought on by the

⁷⁵ Quoted in Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 32. Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1353–54.

⁷⁶ See Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment*, 32.

⁷⁷ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1129–39.

⁷⁸ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1241.

⁷⁹ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *La Brouette du vinaigrier, drame en trois actes* (London: 1775). Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'Indigent, drame en quatre actes, en prose* (Paris: Chez Lejay, 1772).

⁸⁰ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1241.

authorities, who insisted on depriving the people of the right to see French masterpieces and even to frequent the same theaters as the wealthy. Since the *Comédie Française* had a monopoly on French masterpieces from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the laboring poor could not afford its ticket prices and could only see the bawdy shows put on at the fairs or the street theaters.⁸¹ Mercier argues that since street theaters can only put on one-act plays, and that since any respectable play must have at least three acts, street theater could not be expected to educate the public.⁸² The theaters where more highbrow plays were performed, moreover, were highly stratified. In them, the bourgeoisie, under armed surveillance, were packed into pits with very little space to move, while the members of high society looked down upon them from above. Even worse, wealthy women who rented private boxes could purchase tickets for the entire season and come and go as they pleased—and so their seats often remained empty.⁸³ On the other hand, the *gentilhommes de la chambre*, the four noblemen who ran the privileged theaters, attempted to keep the prices of the most expensive tickets at fair theaters (against whom they were in a losing competition) low enough to scare off the members of high society who enjoyed such entertainment.⁸⁴ To allow too many social liberties would mean a loss of revenue for the four *gentilhommes* and also represent a break with tradition.⁸⁵ In other words, the authorities were deliberately trying to prevent the theater from becoming a place where various social ranks could mix freely. In spite of their efforts, however, the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich still frequented lowbrow theaters together.⁸⁶ For Mercier, the socioeconomic stratification of the theaters prevented dramatic art from having its full educative impact on the population. Nonetheless, Mercier views the theater as a potentially unifying space, where the people might liberate themselves from the oppression of an authoritarian state.

In Mercier, then, one sees that sacred spaces could be degraded by credulous superstition, agnostic indifference, and social stratification.

⁸¹ John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 165, 208.

⁸² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:286.

⁸³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:487–88.

⁸⁴ Lough, *Paris Theatre*, 208.

⁸⁵ Lough, *Paris Theatre*, 208.

⁸⁶ Rougemont, *La Vie*, 268.

Mercier implies that the lack of a common faith among Parisians and the lack of a public space in which Parisians from different social strata could assemble were causes of social division. In Notre-Dame he describes the perfect holy space by pointing to its historical, poetic, and social value, and also by taking into account its practical religious function. A regular visitor to the church, he indicates that he would not trade a beautiful benediction ceremony in Notre-Dame, where the setting is gorgeous and the characters colorful, for "the most beautiful dramatic performance."⁸⁷ Yet he also contends that, if transformed, the theater might become a new sacred space in which Parisians could experience common values. As he states in his essay on theater, "Among us the theater hall is the only meeting place which gathers men together and where their voice can lift itself up as one."⁸⁸ His efforts to promote a new genre of drama in which all social ranks—including the working poor—would be represented reflect his belief that social consensus could be reached in a secular yet celebratory setting. The theater could only reach its social potential with substantial reforms, which would only be effectuated with a permanent change in political regime, a change Mercier ardently desired.⁸⁹ His constant critique of despotism and his admirable role in the French Revolution not only testify to his longstanding dedication to national solidarity among the French but also to his unflinching faith in the human spirit.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2:63.

⁸⁸ Mercier, *Mon Bonnet*, 1143–44.

⁸⁹ For Mercier's most biting critique of French Absolutism, see *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: RLve s'il en ffi jamais* (1771), eds. Christophe Cave and Christine Marcandier-Colard (Paris: La Découverte, 1999).

⁹⁰ Mercier was a notable political activist during the revolutionary period; he was an elected representative of the Convention and also of the Council of Five Hundred. An account of Mercier's public opposition to Robespierre's policies can be found in Jean-Claude Bonnet's introduction to his edition of Mercier's revolutionary urban chronicle *Le Nouveau Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), xxxii. For a discussion of Mercier's courage before Napoleon's government, see Hermann Hofer, "Introduction: Situation de Mercier," in *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Précurseur et sa fortune. Avec des documents inédits. Recueil d'études sur l'influence de Mercier*, ed. Hermann Hofer (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977), 13–36.