I Introduction

A Preliminary View of the Research Problem

In all epochs and cultures, despite their differences, men have always been united by one common denominator: they have wanted to be happy. Happiness has been called the *summum bonum*, i.e., the ultimate goal of all human thoughts and actions.[1] This important argument was already advanced by Aristotle, who postulates in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that happiness is "the end of human things", and belongs to the class of activities which are "desirable in themselves".[2]

It is no exaggeration to argue that the desire for happiness forms such a constituent element in man that if he ceases to hope for this, he has lost his very essence as a sentient creature. Yet, in a world torn apart by miseries from devastating natural disasters to social, political and economic inequalities, happiness often turns out to be a mere illusion. It is like a mirage which escapes man in the wilderness at the moment when he imagines he has reached it.

In the course of the centuries the desire to find happiness has assumed many different forms. Since the existing conditions rarely provide the optimal ground for the realization of happiness, men have turned to creating in their imagination images of some ideal condition either in this life or beyond the grave. As Karl Mannheim has pointed out, the fantasizing faculty has throughout the ages formed an constitutive element in human life: "Myths, fairy tales, other-worldly promises of religion, humanistic fantasies, travel romances, have been continually changing expressions of that which was lacking in actual life."[3]

Utopian visions represent one branch of wishful thinking. Most scholars of utopianism share the view that utopia means a portrayal of a good, and radically different ideal society, and is the expression of the desire for a better way of being which would diminish human misery.[4] Following Mannheim's argumentation, "a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs", and it is expressly this incongruence which drives mankind to dream of a condition beyond the existent social order, which would transcend the actual situation.[5] As Ernst Bloch, one of the most prominent specialists of utopian thinking, has put it, "the criticism of imperfection presupposes the conception of, and a longing for, a possible perfection".[6]

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1   Telfer 1980, 1.
2   Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* 1897, 332.
3   Mannheim 1972, 184.
4   Polak 1961, 437; Ruyer 1988, 53; Levitas 1990, 4, 8; Baczko 1997, 172.
5   Mannheim 1972, 173.
6   Bloch 1989, 16.

The French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814) was one of those dreamers blessed with the talent of giving birth to fantastic worlds of dreams, where man could live happily, free from oppression and distress. He has left his mark in the history of utopian literature above all as the creator of the first utopian novel situated into a remote future: *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante. Rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1770 or 1771; expanded edition, in three volumes, 1786) opens a vision of Paris in the imaginary year 2440, when the world is supposed to have changed into a place of general happiness, prosperity and well-being.[7] The publication of Mercier's utopia meant a decisive turn in the tradition of modern utopias, for before Mercier the creators of utopian societies had usually situated their descriptions of ideal states in some far and exotic place, most often on an island. The dominant mode of modern utopias was set by Thomas More in his famous treatise *Utopia* (1516).[8]

In his *L'An 2440* Mercier sets out an ideal of happiness or the "good life" on earth which is contrasted with the conditions prevailing in the author's contemporary society. Starting from the realization of the imperfections in the present state of society, the novel breaks the limits imposed by the existing social order in order to embrace a brave new world freed from sorrow and pain. The dramatic tension of Mercier's utopia is based on a strictly polarized juxtaposition between the categories of "spleen" and "ideal", or "is" and "ought". It is expressly the dualism between those two contradictory modes of existence, i.e., the way things are and how they should be if everything were well, which forms an important starting point for my study.

The aim of my examination is to explore the utopian novel as a representation of happiness through the vision conveyed by Mercier's *L'An 2440*. Despite the complexity of the issue, the major problems can be stated simply as follows: 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? Does he envisage a real possibility that the gulf separating the miseries of the contemporary world from utopian perfection could ever be annihilated? If the answer is affirmative, how could this be accomplished in practise?

When one aims at providing an overall analysis of the theme of happiness in the writings of a single author, one could scarcely find a more appropriate object of study than Mercier, since the theme of happiness is a focal theme to which he incessantly returns in his diverse writings, including those not classifiable as utopias. In a brief, charming essay of only a little over 100 pages, entitled *Le Bonheur des gens de lettres* (1763), as the title of the work suggests, Mercier approaches the idea of happiness from the viewpoint of a man of letters.

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7   Cioranescu 1972, 193–196; Trousson 1975, 175; Clarke 1979, 26; Alkon 1987, 4, 43; Alkon 1994, 21; Ruyer 1988, 205; Delumeau 1995, 307, 310; Jean 1997, 68. For the sake of convenience, in this study the title of Mercier's utopia is abbreviated in the form *L'An 2440*.
8   See for example Minois 1996, 293.

Mercier's other writings which are of major concern here are *L'Homme sauvage* (1767), *Songes philosophiques* (1768, republished as an extended edition in 1788 under the title *Songes et visions philosophiques*), *Mon Bonnet de nuit* (1784–1786), *Tableau de Paris* (1781–1788) and *Notions claires sur les gouvernemens* (1787).

These works encompass the most important part of Mercier's literary production. Even in the measure of eighteenth-century France, notorious for its lengthy novels and philosophical treatises, often filling several volumes, he stands out as a prolific journalist and "polygraph"[9] whose creative imagination knew no limits. Mercier's literary production – over a hundred volumes in its entirety – consists of novels, dramas, poetry, pamphlets, moral allegories, utopian fantasies and reports on contemporary items. Alexandre Cioranescu's bibliography of French literature gives some idea of the extent of Mercier's production.[10] Moreover, Mercier had a habit of constantly repairing and modifying his earlier writings, thus even further expanding the total volume of his production. For example, the collection *Mon bonnet de nuit* contains many of the same texts which had been published earlier in *Songes philosophiques*.[11]

The period that concerns this study covers the three decades stretching from the early 1760s until the outbreak of the French Revolution. This is a natural choice, taking into consideration that Mercier's most important works were created during this pre-Revolutionary period. With a few rare exceptions (i.e. when the analysis is focused on changes in Mercier's opinions as a consequence of the Terror), post-1789 events are referred to only in passing.

For the purposes of any study in cultural history, the decades immediately preceding the French Revolution provide insights of immense richness. The period was characterized by a profound tension between tradition and innovation. In the eighteenth century France was still ruled by an absolute monarch, the sole source of legitimate power. The society was divided in orders, and the center of the courtly society was Versailles, the perfect symbol of the *ancien*

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9 Bollème 1978, 7–83, passim.
10 Cioranescu 1969, 1234–1239.
11 Mercier also left to posterity a vast number of unpublished texts, containing diverse matter such as unfinished projects and letters, which have since 1967 been preserved in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris. A selection of this immense material, including all the texts focused on Paris which had not been published before in any other context, is included in the re-edition of Mercier's *Le Nouveau Paris*. See "Paris dans le "fonds Mercier" de l'Arsenal", Ms. 15079 (1), ff. 7–8 – Ms. 15079 (2), ff. 302–305. Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris* 1994b, 1049–1361. One of Mercier's manuscripts has been transcribed under the title *Parallèle de Paris et de Londres* (Ms. 15079(3)). For a closer survey, see Gilles 1973, 311–334. With few exceptions, Mercier's unpublished writings fall beyond the scope of the present investigation, since the main focus here is on a comprehensive analysis of *L'An 2440* as an authentic document of its time. Considering that the novel itself contains an enormous amount of subject matter about eighteenth-century French society, this restriction was a necessity. It should not be inferred, however that the value of Mercier's unpublished writings should be ignored. A large selection of them has already been published, which testifies to their relevance and to the rising interest in Mercier and his work in recent years. Especially for studies focused on Mercier's post-Revolutionary years, they may provide many valuable insights.

régime[12]. Moreover, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) had consecrated the king as the protector of the powerful Catholic church, the ally of absolutist monarchy. King Louis XVI, who had mounted the throne in 1774, and Queen Marie-Antoinette, were however far from being an ideal royal couple, which led to the erosion of the power of the monarchy towards the end of the century. In addition to this, the century was marked by other elements of crisis: military defeats such as the Seven Years War (1756–63) and the crystallization of anti-aristocratic feeling. As a consequence, although French civilization had never been as "aristocratic" as in this epoch, the nobility were entering a situation of crisis, and the society of orders was falling apart under the pressure of economic improvement as money replaced "birth". The century ended with the violent abolition of hereditary privilege and the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 and with the execution of the King in 1793.[13]

The dramatic overthrow of the political *status quo* in a brief time span testifies that under the veil of society of orders the seeds of change were already sown; the tension between "is" and "ought" had escalated to the point of explosion. In the gradual formation of a more secular outlook in the course of the eighteenth century the new philosophical thinking was of decisive importance. The great philosophers, from Voltaire (1694–1778), Rousseau (1712–1778), Diderot (1713–84) to Montesquieu (1689–1755), considered it their sacred duty to liberate man from his self-imposed state of enslavement. The absolute monarchy, reinforced by the intolerant Catholic Church with its dogma of Original Sin, served as natural targets for the philosophers' attack.[14] The most visible landmark of this new philosophical attitude was *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–1772), an anthology of Enlightenment opinions on a wide range of topics.[15]

Despite their mutual disagreements, all the leading philosophers were united by the same intention to liberate men from fear and establish their sovereignty. As Adorno and Horkheimer write, "the program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy".[16] This was a secular movement which aimed at the demystification of knowledge and social organization.[17] The novelty of the eighteenth century derived, precisely, from the shift away from a religious frame of reference. This displacement of human ends, brought from heaven down to earth, secularized thinking, art, and everyday life. This was the first

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12 The name *ancien régime* was given later as a pejorative label by the French Revolutionaries to all that they had abolished, expressing their wish to create a complete break with the past, to cast it into the shadows of barbarism. Furet 1988, 21; Bluche 1993, 7– 8.
13 Furet 1988, 21–29, passim., 39, 42–43, 88–89, 130.
14 See for example Rudé 1985, 155; Furet 1988, 28.
15 See for example Duby & Mandrou 1958, 120– 122; Hampson 1981, 86; Rudé 1985, 154; Delon, Mauzi & Menant 1998, 268–279.
16 Adorno & Horkheimer 1979, 3.
17 Harvey 1990, 12–13.

epoch in the history of western civilization that dared to define its ideals without consulting the gods.[18]

To label the eighteenth century as an epoch characterized by unprecedented optimism has become a cliché. The standard account of the Enlightenment is founded on the argument that philosophers were no longer willing to accept older assumptions that the earth is a vale of tears and that all human effort should be directed toward the avoidance of sin; the new credo was that life could be good already on earth, if it was rationally managed.[19] The eighteenth century was permeated by a faith in the unity and immutability of Reason, thought of as identical for every thinking subject, nation, epoch and culture.[20]

This new, dignified image of man, liberated from the blight of Original Sin, represented the culmination of an extended and gradual process of secularization and modernization, the starting point of which can be traced at least as far back as to the beginning of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution.[21] In the consolidation of the ideology of the Enlightenment, the abandonment of persecution for witchcraft and the spread of the philosophy of Spinoza and Bayle (around 1680) related to the appearance of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687) and Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) signified important watersheds.[22] Despite the fact that the philosophical empire constituted an international phenomenon,[23] in this study the emphasis is on the French Enlightenment.

The increase of general optimism gave rise to a feeling that everything was possible, and it laid the ground for a new gospel of terrestrial happiness. Robert Mauzi, the scholar best acquainted with the theme of happiness in eighteenth-century French literature, argues in his study *L'idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle* (1961) that in that epoch happiness constituted one of the *idea-forces* which animated the whole century, extending in all directions. In his view this theme often assumed obsessive dimensions, and the purpose of every human action was the desire to be happy.[24]

The centrality of the theme of happiness can be seen both in the novels and in the philosophical treatises produced in pre-Revolutionary France, where the concepts "*bonheur*" and "*félicité*"[25] are incessantly repeated. A sudden prolif-

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18 Pomeau 1991, 54–55.
19 Mornet 1969, 42.
20 Cassirer 1966, 44. See also Koivisto, Mäki & Uusitupa 1995, xii–xiii; Delon, Mauzi & Menant 1998, 118.
21 Coates, White & Schapiro 1966, 177–178. See also Gagliardo 1968, 1.
22 Kennedy 1989, 55–56.
23 See for example Becker 1965, 33–34.
24 Mauzi 1994, 13, 80. For example the words of the materialist philosopher d'Holbach in his treatise *Systême de la nature* (1770) provide a good image of the "obsessional" attitude assumed by eighteenth-century French writers towards this theme: "Toutes nos institutions, nos réflections, nos connoissances n'ont pour objet que de nous procurer un bonheur vers lequel notre propre nature nous force de tendre sans cesse."[d'Holbach], *Systême de la nature I* 1771, 3.
25 The *Encyclopédie* tries to clarify the possible confusion between these two concepts by explaining that while "*bonheur*" is something that comes from outside, "*félicité*" is a state of the soul possessed by a content person. The latter is a state of mind in the same way as wisdom, tranquility or rest. *Encyclopédie XIII* 1778, 919.

eration of various utopian images, projects of reform and models of ideal cities constituted one of the most visible manifestations of this concern with happiness on the eve of the French Revolution. Mercier's *L'An 2440* provides one example of the utopian fascination in that epoch.

The preachers of happiness tended to stress that Nature had given mankind life to profit from: Man was now seen as enjoying a special "vocation" of happiness.[26] Henceforward, happiness was considered as man's natural state, a common possession uniting the entire humankind, and if he did not yet possess it, at least he had every right to hope for it. The writers of *Encyclopédie* express this new article of faith concisely: "Tous les hommes se réunissent dans de desir d'être heureux. La nature nous a fait à tous une loi de notre propre bonheur."[27]

As stated at the outset, however, a yearning for happiness in eighteenth-century intellectual debate was not as such a new motif. What was new compared with the previous epochs, dominated by predictions of a Day of Judgement and the end of the world, was a shift of emphasis from expectations of salvation in celestial beatitude to more earth-bound considerations, and man's terrestrial happiness preferred to some state beyond the grave.[28] It is manifestly this secular ideal of happiness which is at the focus of this study: apart from the chapters on Mercier's visions of death and spirituality, the emphasis is on the terrestrial aspects of happiness.

In eighteenth-century French philosophical discourse this new idea of terrestrial happiness assumed two principal forms. The first of these new philosophies of happiness was founded on the dignity of instinctual life. According to this individualist theory of happiness, which pulsated with Rabelaisian energy, the arch-enemy of happiness was the denial of earthly pleasures: from now on, happiness was redefined as a natural, instinctual pursuit of pleasure. This also implied that durable happiness was an impossibility. Secondly, there emerged a new form of collective happiness, which was based on the philosophy of progress and on the pursuit of a perfect social order.[29]

Together with the term "utopia", the idea of "progress" forms a focal concept in this investigation. As has been suggested by Robert Nisbet, one of the most

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26 Cioranescu 1995, 26.

27 *Encyclopédie V* 1778, 260.

28 Hazard 1961, 87–102; Charlton 1984, 3; Ehrard 1994, 543–544; D'Hont 1995, 270–271. See also Roche 1998, 596–599. In his *Le Bonheur* (1795) Claude Adrien Helvétius gives visible form to this new ideal of terrestrial happiness by attacking the moralists of his age on the grounds that "ils exilent le bonheur dans le ciel, et ne supposent pas qu´il habite la terre". Helvétius*, Oeuvres complètes XIII* 1967, 9.

29 Cioranescu 1995, 26. The division between individual and collective happiness corresponds in its main points to the distinction between the terms hedonistic happiness and *eudaemonia*. One criterion of differentiation between these two is that whereas hedonistic happiness is defined merely in terms of the kind of life the possessor wants for himself (subjective valuation), *eudaemonia* has only one ingredient, morality, which is argued to be "good in itself" (objectibe valuation). Whilst the former is defined in terms of pleasure in the sense of what man himself finds as pleasant, *eudaemonia* disregards the wishes of the individual, its emphasis being placed on what is "intrisically good in itself". Telfer 1980, 37, 39, 42–43, 52–53.

prominent specialists in this field, the idea of progress dominated the ideology of Western societies from the mid-eighteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth,[30] and it is often alleged that in that epoch a belief in terrestrial progress gained the status of a kind of substitute or secular religion.[31]

Nisbet defines the idea of progress as a theory according to which "mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future".[32] In other words, the idea of progress is "a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future", as J.B. Bury argued in his classical study on this theme. As this reveals, embedded in the modern notion of progress is the idea of a goal or a specific destination. For most people this destination is a condition of society which could offer the maximum amount of happiness for everyone already this side of the grave.[33]

The theory of collective happiness thus attempts to provide an answer for the problem of happiness on the level of the whole of humankind. Conversely, if one wishes to survey the experience of happiness on a personalized level, as an inner sentiment, it is necessary to focus attention on individual desires and on the role that passions perform for the experience of happiness. The dualism between individual and collective happiness constitutes one of the major themes of this study.

Mauzi suggests that although the symbolic dualism that divides man between the "temptation of vertigo" and the "dream of repose" is doubtlessly eternal, in the eighteenth century it was stressed even more vigorously than before. In his view the whole problem of happiness in that epoch can be reduced to the attempt to achieve a reconciliation between *movement* and *repose*, and he argues that there have been few epochs which have simultaneously dreamed with equal fervor of both "solid wisdom" and "unexpexted sensations" and "ecstasies".[34] The same dualism forms the starting point in Jean Deprun's study *La philosophie de l'inquiétude en France au XVIIIe siècle* (1979), where he distinguishes two alternative conceptualizations of happiness: either it was understood as repose or equilibrium, or, by contrast, following Locke and Leibniz, it was argued that "restlessness is essential for the felicity of men".[35] To solve the relation between these two states of existence forms one of the major challenges in this study: Does Mercier represent perpetual change as an optimal condition for happiness, or does he envisage absolute rest as the state better responding to the ideal of a "good life"?

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30   Nisbet 1980, 171; Viikari 1995, 359–360.
31   Polak 1971, 87–88; Cioranescu 1972, 192; Keohane 1982, 25; Delumeau 1995, 311. Cf. Bury 1920, 6–7, 20–22; Iggers 1982, 45–46.
32   Nisbet 1980, 4–5. See also Keohane 1982, 22–23.
33   Bury 1920, 2, 5.
34   Mauzi 1994, 127.
35   Deprun 1979, 9–10.

This two-dimensional attitude testifies to the fact that the eighteenth-century thinkers themselves were far from blind to the complexities of existence, but rather acutely aware of the shadows lurking amidst the bright light of reason. I am here suggesting that it would be oversimplified to label the eighteenth century one-sidedly as an optimistic age. Contrary to what has been sometimes argued, the thought of the Enlightenment did not ignore dissatisfaction and restlessness, the sense of void, an aspiration towards an "unknown good".[36] By the 1750's the belief in the omnipotence of reason was in fact already beginning to fade, and there were signs of a return to a more sentimental attitude to life. The rise of empiricism, which emerged to challenge Cartesian rationalism, emphasized the role of the passions and "sensibility".[37] The intermediary phase between the Classical age, dominated by reason, and the Romantic age, dominated by the heart, has sometimes been labeled "pre-Romanticism",[38] and Mercier has quite often been labeled a "pre-Romantic".[39] It is expressly in this double position of Mercier, on the watershed between tradition and innovation, where his originality lies.

As Mauzi has observed, however, a strict chronological division between the "philosophy of the Enlightenment" and "sensible souls" cannot be maintained; the argument that the first part of the century was "philosophical", whilst the second half was Romantic, is untenable. The truth is more complex: philosophical thinking did not attain its peak until the materialist systems of d'Holbach and Helvétius in the second half of the century, whereas the great novels of abbé Antoine Prévost, where all the "pre-Romantic" themes are already present, were published between 1730 and 1740.[40]

It is precisely in order to avoid too monolithic and homogeneous an image of the eighteenth century that in this study the use of the term "Enlightenment" is largely replaced by more neutral attributes such as "eighteenth-century France". This preference is also justified in view of the fact that the term "Enlightenment" is itself problematic, for it can be applied in multiple frames of reference. It can be used to describe a particular historical epoch (the "Age of Enlightenment"); secondly, it can refer to a particular group of eighteenth-century philosophical thinkers (the "*philosophes*"); thirdly, it can refer to a particular set of ideas, which are not bound to this particular time.[41] There have been "enlightened" individuals in all historical periods; the eighteenth century did not possess a monopoly in this respect.

Following these preliminary observations, a brief overview will now be offered of the topics to be explored in this study. Chapter II begins with a biographical

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36   Ibid., 11.
37   Mortier 1969, 115–117.
38   Gaillard 1975, 62–63.
39   Henry F. Majewski uses this attribute in the title of his work *The Preromantic Imagination of L.- S. Mercier* (1971).
40   Mauzi 1994, 12. See also Mortier 1969, 114–124; Fabre 1980, ix–xix; Asplund 1981, 135–137.
41   Nyman 1994, 11–12. See also Adorno & Horkheimer 1979, especially 43–80.

portrait of Mercier and a summary of his major works. Mercier's utopian thinking is then situated in the tradition of modern utopianism. A general overview is provided of the main lines of the earlier utopian tradition and of the utopian literature produced in eighteenth-century France, with special emphasis on the invention in the second half of the century of the modern future-oriented utopia. The chapter ends in a brief analysis of the significance of dreams in Mercier's visionary thinking.

The following section comprises Chapters III–VII, which explore the focal themes of Mercier's *L'An 2440* from various angles. These approaches share the same concern to shed light on the nature of Mercier's vision of an ideal society, where man could maximize the amount of his personal happiness without offending the sentiments of his fellow creatures or the general well-being of the community of which he or she forms a part. This focal issue is examined in the context of the relation between individual happiness and collective well-being, and of the quest for a functional reconciliation between these seemingly conflicting forms of existence.

Chapter III introduces the urban landscape of Mercier's Paris of 2440, providing an analysis of the image conveyed by *L'An 2440* of the ideal city as a public space and as a lived environment. The focus then shifts from everyday realities towards more solemn spheres in Chapter IV, which deals with the religious practises and the meaning of spirituality in the lives of Mercier's utopians.

Chapter V is an exploration of the political and social aspects of Mercier's utopian vision. The chapter starts with a presentation of the governmental organization in Mercier's imaginary future France. Central questions relate to what kind of political system could, in Mercier's view, provide the best nurturing ground for the general well-being, and what purposes the social contract is intended to fulfill. The chapter ends with a consideration of gender and the ways in which gender expectations determine the prospects of happiness in Mercier's utopia.

Chapter VI approaches Mercier's ideal of happiness from the viewpoint of material prosperity, raising the question of the desirability of luxury and consumption in general. The issue is explored whether men should work in order to earn their living, or would it be more profitable to spend one's days in total idleness, amidst abundance. What was Mercier's view of "noble savages"? Where they happier than "civilized" men?

Chapter VII explores the manifestations of evil in Mercier's ideal society. Is there evil in the "best of possible worlds", and if so, what guises does it assume? Is it possible to find a satisfactory explanation for the persistence of evil? In order to solve these questions, it is necessary to decipher the content of such fundamental concepts as sin, criminality, deviance, normality and abnormality as they are dealt with in *L'An 2440*. The goal is to provide a picture of the mechanisms through which Mercier aims at eliminating from his utopia the potential obstacles to happiness. At the same time, however, the entire idea of happiness is reversed, and the status of *L'An 2440* as a representation of a happier society is subjected to critical re-examination.

The second main part of the study (Chapters VIII and IX) deals with the significance of time and temporal change in Mercier's utopian vision. The main focus in Chapter VIII is on a survey of the mechanisms used by Mercier to explain the process of transformation from eighteenth-century France to the remote year 2440. Central questions are related to the issues of the linearity of time manifested in Mercier's utopia and who or what is suggested to be responsible for the shift towards an ameliorated world. What does it tell about the mental structures of late eighteenth-century French society itself that Mercier's vision of an ideal city is, for the first time in the history of modern utopianism, situated in a remote future instead of on some contemporary but exotic island or in a mythical past?

In order to avoid a one-sided image of Mercier as merely a cold rational thinker, with no awareness of the tragic aspects of life, Chapter IX opens a new vista on his visionary imagination by evaluating it in terms of optimism vs. pessimism. A more complex image of Mercier's personality and his production is offered in pp. 253–265, by also examining his more pessimistic visions of disasters and doomsday prophesies. Should these be interpreted merely as expressions of pessimism and despair, or do they perhaps also contain latent potentiality for a new and more dignified order of things? How are the cyclical and linear conceptions of time intertwined in Mercier's utopian thinking? Does a progressive vision of the future necessarily mean a rush forward, toward the totally new and unprecedented?

The final chapter (X) is on the theme of death and its function in relation to the idea of happiness in Mercier's utopian vision. The aim is to seek a solution to the following question: Does Mercier view death as the most serious threat to man's terrestrial happiness, or is there also something positive in his understanding of the experience of death? Is it possible to find peace of mind in the world, where man is doomed to live under the oppressive shadow of inevitable death?

Methods, Sources and Research Situation

Despite his extraordinarily prolific creativity, Mercier has typically been considered merely as a second-class writer, both by his contemporaries and among later scholars and historians of literature. It is characteristic that in Charles Monselet's work *Les Oubliés et les Dédaignés. Figures littéraires de la fin du 18 siècle* (1857) he is classified in the same category with other "forgotten" and "despised" French eighteenth-century writers who scarcely deserve a footnote in the histories of literature.

As the American scholar Robert Darnton has pointed out, this dismissive attitude has also, until fairly recently, set the dominant tone in the majority of studies of the French eighteenth-century Enlightenment; scholarly interest has almost exclusively been focused on the texts of the generally acknowledged philosophers. This exclusive concern with the cultural products of the elite culture (the approach chosen for example by Ernst Cassirer and Peter Gay) has

resulted in a very one-sided picture of the Enlightenment as a monolithic movement or distinct phase in western civilization. It therefore is high time to approach the Enlightenment from a new "bottom-up" perspective, i.e., to write history "from below", which means a shift of interest from the great writers to the marginal literary figures.[42]

The present inquiry is an attempt to reanimate one of those voices on the margins of the cultural elites – a voice which in its own age was so often silenced by ridicule, scorn and neglect. No voice can reverberate in a vacuum, however, detached and abstracted from the surrounding society. In order to obtain a complete image of Mercier's utopian ideal of happiness, the only possible method has been to survey it in the larger framework of its age. Therefore, it is necessary to have a knowledge of the social, political, economic and cultural conditions for which Mercier wanted to offer a critical counterpoint in his utopia. Due to the fact that in this study the image of the ideal state in the pages of Mercier's novel is explored as a vision of an "other" better and preferable compared with the existing, i.e., late eighteeth-century French society, the goal is to find out how his image of an ameliorated world is intertwined with the writer's contemporary society. What does Mercier's vision of the future tell about prevailing conditions in the second half of the eighteenth century itself, how does it reflect the fears and hopes of men then living? What was that social reality from which it drew its inspiration? To put it briefly: How does Mercier's utopia of the year 2440 function as a mirror image of the society where it was produced?

Contextualization and the quest for a holistic understanding are key issues in cultural history,[43] and the methodological stance adopted in this study converges approximately with what Darnton has termed the "social history of ideas", by which he refers to the importance of situating the Enlightenment firmly in its social context in order to avoid ending up in mere generalizations and abstractions.[44] Considering that the principal function of utopias is to serve as tools of social criticism, any relevant inquiry of utopian thinking would be inadequate if the ideas represented in a utopian work were treated as mere abstractions, stripped from the context of the actual milieu in which they were produced.

In this study Mercier's utopian vision is taken as serious documentary evidence of the society in which it was produced, which means rejection of all pejorative labels occasionally attached to utopian longing as "pure fantasizing". Utopian planning forms a constructive part of the history of ideas, and all the great ideologies, from liberalism to romanticism and Marxism, which have

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42 Darnton 1982, viii; Darnton 1990, 191–252. See also Outram 1995, 1–13, passim. This re-calls the assertion by Arlette Farge that the eighteenth century was full of (often punishable) words which did not make history, and the "topicality" of that century consists precisely of those words "spoken by people of no, or little, importance in the heated environment of the public sphere". Farge 1994, vii–ix

43 Virtanen 1987, 85, 90.

44 Darnton 1990, 193, 219.

shaped the history of Western civilization in past centuries, first took shape in an utopian format. On the other hand, the utopian images have been influenced by the prevailing conceptions of society. As F.L. Polak puts it: "If the history of this age (the Age of Enlightenment) cannot be understood without knowing the utopias, neither can the utopias be understood without historical insight into the age."[45]

Through Mercier's vision of the future there opens a fresh new perspective for the formation of ideological climate and the first phases of the modern secular outlook. This starting point orients the analysis towards "traditional" intellectual history, in the sense that the main emphasis is on the filiation of the different currents of "enlightened" philosophy through Mercier's utopian vision and on the ways they molded his conception of happiness. For this reason the "standard accounts" – which tend to interpret the Enlightenment as a monolithic movement – have also been taken into consideration as a relevant point of reference. Without an acknowledgement of the standard interpretation of the Enlightenment, it would have been highly problematic to evaluate Mercier's position on the divide between tradition and innovation, or to set his social criticism in correct proportions.

In his vision of the twenty-fifth century world, Mercier provides one example of a "future of the past", thus revealing the contrafactual nature of historical processes. This refers to the fact that as a mirror image of latent aspirations, or "mental exercise of lateral possibilities", as Raymond Ruyer has expressed it,[46] Mercier's image of the future functions not merely as a reflection of the actual conditions prevailing in late eighteenth-century France, but at the same time also provides a prognosis of the possible course of events. As such it reminds us that like us, those living in the past also conceptualized reality as prospective. The future becomes concrete in their expectations, hopes, fears, conceptions and aims, with far-reaching effects on their entire behavior. In mapping alternate futures, the historian is not restricted to those possibilities which have been realized, i.e., the factual history, but can also access those potential outcomes which remained, for one reason or another, unrealized. This is a process which demands a reversal of the traditional understanding of the past; when one aims at deciphering the contrafactuality of events, the historian has to situate himself on the contemporary level and identify those situations where there were possible developments. It then remains his task to answer what alternative options were available, which of them was realized, and for what reason.[47]

By opening a vision of Paris and the world in the future, Mercier opens up the following questions: *What if* reality were different from the present conditions? Under what circumstances would that be so, and how could the miraculous

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45 Polak 1961, 316–318.
46 Ruyer 1988, 9.
47 Männikkö 1993, 264. See also Männikkö 1983, 33.

"what if" be contrived in practise? It is by this means that the survey of Mercier´s utopia stimulates the reader´s curiosity, making one speculate on different possibilities in the future, those invisible " what if" worlds ruled by different norms and ideals than those governing the actual conditions.

The most common way of exploring utopias has been to approach them either as literary fiction or as a political vision. Moreover, an emphasis has usually been placed in the connection between utopias and progress, and their social role.[48] The aim of this study does not diverge from these prevailing tendencies. It is necessary to note, however, that because utopias draw their substance from mythical stock of images deeply embedded in the collective imagination of the human race, it would be misleading to reduce them merely to political declarations. This explains why in recent decades the focus of scholarly interest has increasingly shifted toward exploring utopias as an intrisically *human phenomenon*. Ruyer's above mentioned launching of what he terms "the mental exercise of lateral possibilities" in his study *L'utopie et les utopies* (1950) provides a good example of this orientation.

One of the most ardent propagators of this approach to utopian mentality has been Roger Mucchielli, who writes in his classical study *Le mythe de la cité idéale* (1961) that "ideal cities seem to us to be other than simple imaginary portraits reducible to socio-cultural, historical or psychological factors. Beyond these influences... they purport to express the pure relationship of man to humanity in the form of a social order which loses... the character of a political solution and reveals its meta-empirical character".[49] The utopians, suggests Mucchielli, visualize a regenerated world in which miseries have disappeared by virtue of a "new mentality".[50]

After these reflections on the methodological questions, it is time to have a look at the research situation and at the sources which have been used. For the

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48 Levitas 1990, 9–11.
49 Mucchielli 1960, 7–8.
50 Ibid., 112. The precise definition of what is meant by the concept of "mentality" is not, however, a totally uncomplicated matter, and for this reason the more recent historians in the tradition of French *Annales*, to name Jacques Le Goff or Roger Chartier, have largely replaced it by such terms as "representations" or "collective imagination". Burke 1997, 162–182, passim. See also Le Goff 1992, xviii. When one aims to penetrate at the core of the "collective imagination" or "collective psyche" of a specific historical epoch, one comes to deal with "idea-forces", which according to Chartier means enlargement of the scope of the traditional history of ideas. He speaks about an "imagined social reality", which he sees as constituting a system of representations in close relationship with the "objective reality", which it is born to reflect, suggesting that "when ideas are... situated in their social settings and considered as much in terms of their affective or emotional charge as of their intellectual content, they become, like myths or value complexes, one of the ´collective forces by which men live their times´". Chartier 1988, 19–52, especially 29, 45. Concepts such as "idea-forces", "representations" or "collective imagination" are all useful when one aims at unlocking the concealed messages contained in a utopian text. Utopias are storehouses of collective desires, hopes and fears, and thus constitute systems of representations which are as real as the reality which they have been created to reflect. Starting from the premise that utopias are always closely related to the existing society in which they were produced, the only appropriate thing is to say that they are disguised representations of that same reality which they purport to contest.

purposes of this study, the raw material has been supplied by primary sources and a wide range of research literature. The main source is the three-volume version of *L'An 2440*, published in 1786. Even within Mercier's lifetime there were several editions of the novel,[51] and the textual evolution from one version to the next will be taken into consideration as far as it helps to explain changes in Mercier's personal ideas. In addition, the analysis uses a selection of Mercier's above listed printed works which are of relevance as regards the theme of happiness.

The value of a work of fiction such as *L'An 2440* as a historical source for cultural historiography cannot be denied. Works of fiction are, however, always bound by artistic tradition, and for this reason their status as a reflection of their time, or their relation to "reality", is to some extent problematic.[52] This is especially true of a utopian work, the themes of which have a tendency to repeat without major alterations from century to century.[53] The historian thus encounters the challenge of deciphering the complex networks through which a utopian work, in this case *L'An 2440*, reflects the "historical" reality of its society, and to what extent it should rather be read as a representative of a specific fictional genre, based on the repetition of a conventional pattern.

The second group of primary sources includes a selection of texts, novels and philosophical treatises, produced by other eighteenth-century French writers and philosophers, which have been used in locating Mercier and his work in the general cultural framework and the intellectual debate of his century. Considering that the epoch is distinguished by an unprecedented number of lengthy treatises on subjects ranging from religion to morals, philosophy and politics, the selection chosen in this study has been necessarily restricted within certain limits. Special concern is devoted to the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau due to the fact that they were of prime importance for Mercier's development as a writer. Another writer who had probably served as Mercier´s source of inspiration was the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).

In eighteenth-century France approximately fifty works were produced with titles such as *Essai sur le bonheur* or *Traité du bonheur*. Those works, especially devoted to the treatment of the theme of happiness, have not, however, offered many innovative perspectives because of their monotonous character, with some rare exceptions like Mme du Châtelet's *Réflexions sur le bonheur*. This being the case, the field of "*littérature d'imagination*" remained to be investigated if one wished to know what the eighteenth-century men dreamed about.[54]

As for the research literature, the examination of Mercier's utopian vision in a very wide cultural historical context has also imposed demands for the choice

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51   See Chapter II p. 36.
52   Simonsuuri 1980, 31–32. See also Virtanen 1987, 76.
53   See Chapter II, p. 47.
54   See also Mauzi 1994, 9–10.

of the source material. The research literature used can be divided into three different categories. The first category consists of investigations focused on various aspects of Mercier's literary work. The second group of secondary sources includes studies on the modern tradition of utopian and future-oriented thinking more generally. Finally, extensive use has been made of studies which shed light on various aspects, – political, social, economic and cultural, – of society in late eighteenth-century France.

The two last categories help to shed light on Mercier's utopian thought from a double perspective: Whilst the studies on utopias have assisted in the examination of the a-historical and mythical dimensions of *L'An 2440* and in evaluating its status in the tradition of modern utopian thinking, the wide selection of studies approaching eighteenth-century French society from various angles have proved their importance in contextualizing the multiple themes of *L'An 2440* in the wider historical setting of its age. Since Mercier treats in his utopia subjects of great diversity, from religion to politics, economics and gender roles, the use of a restricted selection of studies on the *ancien régime* would not have been adequate. In this context it would be pointless to list at length all the studies made use of.

Among the more important individual sources of inspiration, the study by Robert Mauzi, already referred to several times, so far offers the most comprehensive survey of the theme of happiness in eighteenth-century French literature, and has proved of immeasurable value. Mauzi focuses, however, on the idea of individual happiness (without neglecting the concept of "*sociabilité*" as its integral factor), but does not address utopias. Otherwise utopias have received ample attention as a field of academic enquiry. One of the most ambitious efforts in this field is the *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (1982) of Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, which has served as one of the basic sources of inspiration for this study. As for the problem of time and future, F.L. Polak's *The image of the future* (1961) has offered many valuable insights for the better understanding of the development of modern future-oriented thinking.

The tradition of research specifically addressing Mercier and his work can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Many of Mercier's contemporaries held hostile attitudes toward him, and nineteenth-century scholars and historians of literature reinforced this negative image, maintaining a tenacious view of Mercier as a ridiculous and in a pejorative sense "original" literary figure. Mercier's bad reputation is largely indebted to works such as Cousin d'Avalon's *Merciériana, ou Recueil d'anécdotes sur Mercier; ses paradoxes, ses bizarreries, ses sarcasmes, ses plaisanteries, etc, etc*. (1834) and Monselet's *Les oubliés et les dédaignés*, mentioned above. The titles of these works already reveal their malicious attitude toward their target.

Since the early twentieth century, this dismissive attitude has gradually been replaced by a more positive view of Mercier, and it has become a commonplace amongst more recent Mercier scholars to repeat the reproach that Mercier's importance was undervalued by earlier scholars. Léon Béclard, the author of the first full-length biographical work on Mercier, *Louis-Sébastien Mercier. Sa vie,*

son oeuvre, son temps (1903), complains that Mercier has been "the victim of incredible and iniquitous rejection".[55] In his work of almost eight hundred pages, Béclard presents the first favorable portrait of Mercier. With his tendency to whitewash Mercier, however, Béclard fails to shed light on the complexity of Mercier's personality. Furthermore, Béclard's treatment ends at the year 1789; a biographical study of Mercier's final years is still lacking.

In his relatively recent study *Le Rêve laïque de Louis-Sébastien Mercier entre littérature et politique* (1995) Enrico Rufi campaigns against the tenacious myth of Mercier as "despised" and "forgotten", rejecting the persistent conception of him as an "extremist who should not be taken seriously".[56] In the same year a selection of writings by various authors was published under the title *Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814). Un hérétique en littérature* (1995), where Mercier's thinking is approached from a multiplicity of fresh, new perspectives. Here the label "*hérétique*" has been finally transformed from a pejorative into a positive label.

Almost twenty years earlier, another compilation of contributions from diverse scholars on Mercier had been published under the title *Louis-Sébastien Mercier précurseur et sa fortune* (1977). Here Mercier's value is acknowledged as a "precursor", and it is argued that he has left many traces for example in the German "Sturm und Drang".[57] The comprehensive critical bibliography compiled by Geneviève Cattin, included in this same collection, also makes one question Mercier's marginality. Mercier and his work have aroused considerable interest, especially in the German-speaking world.[58] Similarly, Rufi's bibliography of the large number of scientific treatises on *L'An 2440* and *Tableau de Paris*[59] is a further sign of Mercier's "revival".[60]

The awakened interest in Mercier and his work attests to the increasing interest in popular culture as a wider phenomenon. There is no doubt that literary works like Mercier's *L'An 2440*, produced by despised literary figures viewing their contemporary society from a marginal position, may reveal the polyphony of their epoch even more clearly than the canonized texts of the elites.[61]

The studies on Mercier display a tendency to follow one of two principal directions: Either he is seen as a "*philosophe*", or as an "*illuminé*" and a

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55 Béclard 1903, v.
56 Rufi 1995, vii.
57 Hofer 1977b, 8. For more detail, see Beriger 1977, 47–72.
58 Cattin 1977, 341–361.
59 Rufi 1996.
60 In addition to this, the many re-editions of Mercier's major works in the recent years testify to this. *L'An 2440* was fully reprinted in the 1970s. See Mercier, *L'An 2440. Rêve s'il en fut jamais*, prefaced by Alain Pons (1977); Mercier, *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante. Rêve s'il en fut jamais*, prefaced by Raymond Trousson (1971, 1977, facsimile of the edition of 1799). See also Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* I–II. Édition établie sous la direction de Jean-Claude Bonnet. Mercure de France: Paris 1994. See also Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*. Édition établie sous la direction de Jean-Claude Bonnet. Mercure de France: Paris 1994. As for the purposes of this study, the analysis is based on the re-editions of *Tableau de Paris* and *Le Nouveau Paris*. They contain the integral text of Mercier's original works.
61 See also Collier 1990, 99.

Romantic thinker.[62] The most prominent study in the latter category is definitely Henry F. Majewski's *The Preromantic Imagination of Louis-Sébastien Mercier* (1971). In his study Majewski succeeds in illuminating the "irrational" and "mystical" side of Mercier's visionary thinking with a compelling talent not equaled by any other study on Mercier. My own examination of Mercier's ideas on spirituality and his images of disaster have been greatly inspired by Majewski's ideas. The great achievement of Majewski's groundbreaking study is in his provision of a more complex and complete image of Mercier's personality than for example Béclard was capable of. This helps us better to understand Mercier's position in relation to the cultural elites of his time, his marginality and his stance between tradition and innovation, scientific rationalism and Romanticism.

Among Mercier's voluminous literary output, *L'An 2440* and *Tableau de Paris* are the two works which have aroused most interest among the scholars. The *Tableau de Paris* is a monumental representation of Parisian society on the eve of the French Revolution, and provides an authentic documentation of immeasurable value for any historian exploring the life of all social layers in late eighteenth-century Paris. It is specifically with his *Tableau de Paris* that Mercier has taken his place as a precursor of such great nineteenth-century social realists as Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac. In *La poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire* (1961), Pierre Citron accords to *Tableau de Paris* a key position in the creation of the romantic "myth of Paris",[63] and the mythical dimensions of Mercier's Paris are also emphasized in Helen Patterson's work *Poetic Genesis: Sébastien Mercier into Victor Hugo* (1960).

As far as Mercier's utopian thought is concerned, Raymond Trousson is without doubt the most important scholar. Both his introductions to the new editions of *L'An 2440*, and the pages on Mercier's utopia in his study *Voyages aux pays de nulle part. Histoire littéraire de la pensée utopique* (1975),[64] have contributed a great deal to the understanding of *L'An 2440*. Bronislaw Baczko, one of the most important scholars of the utopian thinking of eighteenth-century France, also devotes some useful attention to Mercier in his study *Lumières de l'utopie* (1978) and in his articles. Moreover, our knowledge of the production, distribution and reception of clandestine novels like Mercier's *L'An 2440* has been considerably enriched by Robert Darnton.

Furthermore, Paul K. Alkon devotes some interesting pages to *L´An 2440* in his study *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* (1987),[65] as do Alexandre Cioranescu,[66] Raymond Ruyer[67] and the Manuels[68] . Mercier's invention is also treated briefly

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62   See also Rufi 1995, 28.
63   On Mercier's different views on Paris, see Citron 1961, 116–138.
64   Trousson 1975, 175–179.
65   Alkon 1987, 117–129.
66   Cioranescu 1972, 193–197.
67   Ruyer 1988, 209.
68   Manuels 1982, 458–460.

in works such as Krishan Kumar's *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987),[69] Jean Delumeau's *Mille ans de bonheur. Une histoire du paradis* (1995),[70] Jean Servier's *Histoire de l'utopie*[71] and Gilles Lapouge's *Utopie et civilization* (1978).[72] In addition to those listed above, J.B. Bury's classical work *The Idea of Progress. An inquiry into its origin and growth* (1920) includes a treatment of the basic themes of *L'An 2440*.[73] By contrast, Robert Nisbet, surprisingly, ignores Mercier in his *History of the Idea of Progress* (1942).

In general, the prevailing attitude towards Mercier's *L'An 2440* has not been very positive. The birth of the modern future-oriented utopia is almost totally ignored, for example, in Marie Louise Berneri's *Journey through Utopia* (1950), and in Ian Tod's and Michael Wheeler's *Utopia* (1978). Among more recent studies, for example in Georges Minois' *Histoire de l'avenir. Des prophètes à la prospective* (1996), the emphasis is on the authoritarian aspects of Mercier's utopia.[74] Increasing attention has been paid in recent decades to the anti-utopian dimensions of many utopias,[75] which is a sign of disillusionment with utopias and "progress" following of the world wars of the twentieth century. In particular Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), first published in the aftermath of the Holocaust, has opened our eyes to the self-destructive dimensions of the Enlightenment and to the fatal consequences of its teleological concept of rationality.[76]

Although interest in Mercier has been steadily increasing in recent years, there still to my knowledge exists no other overall cultural historical study focused on his utopian thought. At least two unpublished dissertations have been made on Mercier's utopian vision, both of them, however, approaching their subject from a literary perspective.[77] The same neglect concerns the future-oriented thinking of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment in general.[78] It was thus high time for a critical re-examination of Mercier and his vision of the twenty-fifth century, together with a selection of his writings, which help to provide a fuller understanding of how the people of pre-Revolutionary France conceptualized their world, what they thought about the future and about the ways man would best be able to maximize his well-being and satisfaction this side of the grave.

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69   Kumar 1987, 38–39.
70   Delumeau 1995, 307–310.
71   Servier 1991, 203–207.
72   Lapouge 1978, 235–238.
73   Bury 1920, 192–201.
74   Minois 1996, 441–444.
75   See for example Berneri 1951; Kateb 1963.
76   Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, 3–42, especially 9.
77   Wiseman 1979; Denoit 1983.
78   Männikkö 1986, 32.