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“Blushing before the Muses”: Copernican Form and Zany Productivity in Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *My Night Bonnet*

Don a hat, Nietzsche urges, and be gay. “Precisely because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings,” the philosopher affirms in *The Gay Science*, “nothing does us as much good as a *fool’s cap*: we need it in relation to ourselves—we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish and blissful art.” In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai cites this moment as a token of the tonal instability that pervades *The Gay Science*, where the exorbitant efforts Nietzsche makes to enact gaiety through lyric or aphorism relay an antic stress instead.[1] If gaiety is Nietzsche’s word for the transformative joy that assuming new hats (or, more typically, masks) excites, zaniness, Ngai writes, “is what emerges when an all-too-obvious effort to express and thus produce that gaiety fails.”[2] As Ngai contends, zaniness in general—that of Nietzsche but also of Gioacchino Rossini’s Figaro, Lucille Ball’s Lucy Ricardo, or Jim Carrey’s Cable Guy—develops when labor, scrambling to meet impossible demands, produces inadvertent value (hilarity, poignancy, etc.) in falling short. In Ngai’s estimation, Nietzsche is not just zany because he flubs his effects but because he lets slip how strenuously he works to achieve them.

Another hat—possibly a fool’s cap—and another science—gay?—enliven *Mon bonnet de nuit* (My night bonnet), an unclassifiable work by the misfit writer and philosopher Louis-Sébastien Mercier. In June 1781,

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ABSTRACT In recent years, literary critics grappling with the misfit writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s sprawling oeuvre have recovered a “modernist” who deploys formal tropes like the fragment or sketch to capture the city’s fugitive qualities. In this essay, I show that Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s little-read *Mon bonnet de nuit* (My night bonnet) transposes formal indeterminacy to the writing of the everyday, the thinking of thought, and the representation of cosmic space. Mercier’s growing commitment to geocentrism counterbalances Friedrich Schlegel’s call for a “Copernican” poetics, while his writerly hyperproductivity gives rise to a style of indifference and zaniness that offers insight into the creation of “literary value” at the critical juncture when patrons gave way to publishers as mediators of production in European literary history. Representations 161. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 94–123. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.161.5.94.

Mercier fled Paris just ahead of the royal condemnation of the *Tableau de Paris*, his omnibus of urban observations. Settling in the Swiss principality of Neuchâtel, he busied himself with expanding the *Tableau* and embarking on his *Bonnet*, which begins: “Every night, before going to sleep, I’ve contracted the habit of putting in writing what remains of the impression of the day. . . . How sweet it is to converse alone with the tip of one’s plume, one’s night bonnet on one’s head!”[3] Mercier’s bonnet capped a successful sojourn in Switzerland, with the *Tableau* additions and the new work, too, garnering significant acclaim.[4] Yet, avidly as these works were read, the literary identity of their author remained something of a cipher to his readers. Writing in 1798, one Marquis de Langle summed up his friend’s achievement in these equivocal terms: “He wrote in various genres, and made a mark in almost all. His literary physiognomy is difficult to grasp. The stamp of originality in him cannot be disputed, and even his paradoxes, for which he is reproached, perhaps compose part of his merit.”[5] Langle’s appraisal captures a consensus about Mercier’s literary reputation, although others indulged his “originality” far less. A protégé of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, and inventor—according to one estimable commentator—of Enlightenment *opinion publique*, Mercier would go on to achieve national consecration as a deputy in the Revolutionary Council of 500 and member of the Institut de France (successor to the ancien régime Académie française), along with Europe-wide fame as the author of the *Tableau*, *The Year 2440*, and countless bourgeois dramas.[6] But, cherished for the depictions of Parisian life he sketched in the *Tableau*, he was also widely reviled, as Langle’s testimony suggests, for his “paradoxes,” the contrarian positions he took in opposition to Jean Racine or Homer, funerary conventions, even the art of painting per se. By his death in 1814, Mercier’s literary physiognomy had only become more difficult to read—not least because, like Nietzsche (though for different reasons), he bridled at the “gravity” of institutionalized science. Having started out as an heir to the philosophes, Mercier ended his life as a vociferous geocentrist, devoting public lectures, newspaper articles, doggerel, and a full-scale treatise to combatting Isaac Newton, Nicolaus Copernicus, and the contemporary Parisian savants who believed the earth revolved around the sun.[7] In the words of one especially cruel posthumous appreciation, Mercier “began in the eyes of the youth as something of a great man; by the time he finished he was no longer anything at all.”[8]

In recent decades, literary critics grappling with this legacy have recovered a “modern” Mercier, in whose work performative tropes like the fragment or sketch orchestrate the “dynamic representation of the real.”[9] As Jean-Claude Bonnet, Shelly Charles, Joanna Stalnaker, and others have shown, motifs of rapidity and incompletion appear in a number of guises in the *Tableau de Paris* and *Le nouveau Paris*, its successor work.[10] Like Charles Baudelaire's "painter of modern life," these critics emphasize, Mercier strives to capture the "transitory, the fugitive, the contingent" in the tumult of the city.[11] In service to this aesthetic, Mercier not only tried his hand at diverse genres, as Langle notes, but also forged his own. With the *Tableau* and *Le nouveau Paris*, Mercier developed what amounted to a new genre, Bonnet contends, a "mélange" of pieces of varied lengths, styles, themes, and provenances that reflects his taste for the desultory and the discontinuous.[12] And, as Bonnet further proposes, the common unit of these collections is the "page," a measure that conveys the writer's preference for spontaneity over considered reflection on "what makes the unity of a book."[13] While these readings have by and large centered the Parisian tableaux, I aim to show in this article that essayistic or fragmentary aesthetics equally invest *Mon bonnet de nuit*—but only go so far in explaining the slipperiness and sprawl of the work. Formal motifs fall short of characterizing *Bonnet*, we shall see, for reasons that echo the tension between gaiety and zaniness in Ngai's reading of Nietzsche and pertain to Mercier's other mélanges as well.

Running to over a thousand pages in the modern edition, *Mon bonnet de nuit* consists of hundreds of "pages" on topics as diverse as "Milton," "Rivers," "Laziness," or "Cannon Powder," each unnumbered and arranged in no apparent order. While in the *Tableau* and *Le nouveau Paris* Mercier locates grounds for essayistic or fragmentary writing in the mobility and limitlessness of the city, in *Bonnet* he turns inward to discover such grounds in the flux of his own thoughts and impressions. Conversing "alone with the tip of one's plume, one's night bonnet on one's head," gives rise, Mercier exults, to an essayistic freedom. "You are master of your ideas, of your expressions," he enthuses in the foreword; "you forge your thought in your own fashion; you no longer have an inkling of the critic or the purist; you write abundantly, and not without voluptuousness."[14] As his habit of jotting down the remains of the day "every night" suggests, nightly writing incites formal play not just through wayward essayism or ludic self-referentiality but also through the thematization of the "everyday." *Bonnet* thus develops a thematic corollary to the "writing of the everyday" (l'écriture *du* quotidien) that the critic Shelly Charles has identified in Mercier's journalistic practice with a habit of "everyday writing" (l'écriture *au* quotidien). It goes this motif one better, moreover, by setting the practice at night, in bed, on the verge of sleep—a conceit that awakens the playful possibilities of drowsy thinking.[15] And if, as the critic Michael Sheringham has posited, the writing of the everyday elicits a certain essayistic "indeterminacy," immanentist and open-ended, the indeterminacies of *Bonnet* find yet more fodder in the work's ruminations on the cosmos.[16] Featuring some of the earliest expressions of Mercier's growing doubts about Newtonian and even Copernican cosmology, the work incites indeterminacies that derive not just from the writing of the everyday or the conceit of drowsy thinking but also from earnest efforts to come to grips with relational space.

These formal concerns lend *Bonnet* a resemblance to canonical instances of fragmentary writing, as well as to Mercier's other mélanges. Rare though Mercier's presence in general accounts of fragmentary writing may be, *Bonnet* bears distinct thematic affinities to Friedrich Schlegel's "romantic poetry."[17] Like other practitioners of fragmentary writing, Schlegel among them, Mercier inherits a tradition that includes "relative incompletion (the 'essay') or absence of discursive development (the 'thought')," along with "the variety and mixture of objects that a single ensemble of pieces can treat."[18] These affinities extend to the self-distancing irony afforded by the work's guiding conceit, night-thinking, understood either as the reflexive problematization of thinking while drowsy or as the clash of one night's thought with the next's. Like Schlegel and the *Athenaeum* collaborators, in fact, Mercier undertakes what Walter Benjamin calls the "canonical form" of philosophical reflection, the thinking of thinking.[19] Mercier's sensitivity to the rectos and syncopes of thought emerges in the aptly titled "Thought" (La pensée), whose first line reads: "Thought sees all and does not see itself. It embraces the whole world, and it escapes itself."[20] Undertaken in service not just to stylistic play but also to metaphysical truth-seeking, Mercier's querying of the elusiveness of thought to itself engages Novalis's conviction that "the ground of philosophizing lies in thought's endeavoring to uncover a ground for itself."[21] Most strikingly, the French writer's cosmological preoccupations anticipate the poetics as well as the philosophy of the *Athenaeum.* As Leif Weatherby has observed, Schlegel conceived the new critical poetry by analogy with post-Copernican cosmology. Romantic poetry would supersede existing poetics, a Schlegel fragment affirms, just as surely as the heliocentric universe had "the rough and childish . . . systems of astronomy before Copernicus." If in these obsolete systems, Schlegel argues, "whatever somebody is capable of producing, or whatever happens to be in fashion, is the stationary earth at the center of all things," the new writing would assume the poetic corollary to what Schlegel construes as the relational space of the Copernican cosmos, the medium in which the decentering reflexivity of fragmentation can take shape.[22] In *Bonnet,* Mercier, too, imagines the decentering of stationary forms, including, though not exclusively, through the projection of thought into indeterminate space. In at least one place in *Bonnet,* Copernican motifs shape these thematic and poetic tendencies into a form resembling that which Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy identify with the Romantic fragment proper. Within the overall problematic according to which the thought that constitutes a given fragment reflects on the possibility of thought per se, the page “Astronomy” (Astronomie) can plausibly be seen as exemplifying the notion that “fragments are definitions of the fragment.”[23]

As we shall discover, though, not every “page” of *Mon bonnet de nuit* is fragmentary or indeterminate. While Mercier inherits the “relative incompletion” and “the variety and mixture of objects” characteristic of fragmentary collections, he does not for all that adhere to what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy distinguish as a further criterion of *Athenaeum*-style fragmentation, namely the cohesiveness of the “project.” Over and beyond the diversity of individual fragments, they write, the *Athenaeum* project enacts “the unity of the ensemble . . . constituted in a certain way outside the work.”[24] But, far from implementing such a unified plan, *Bonnet* multiplies schema for brief or incomplete writing, ranging, as I have suggested, from the writing of the everyday to various appeals to the thinking of thought. What is more, the work often forecloses indeterminacy altogether. Wavering between geo- and heliocentric cosmos, Mercier also oscillates between a centered and a decentered poetics. In the very page, “Thought,” which articulates thought’s elusiveness to itself, Mercier ultimately opts for an alternative source of certitudes: “If man is weak when he reasons on matters,” he claims, “he is sublime when he feels them: his mind is narrow, but his heart is boundless.”[25] Not incidentally, “Thought” ends by affirming an anthropocentric universe. Mercier’s subsequent career would show that this affirmation of sentiment over thought was more than a literary ploy ironized by the form of the fragment. Such sentimental certitudes would prove instead both intellectually and formally inconsistent with the indeterminacy of fragmentation.

Along with the style of indeterminacy, “style” per se, we shall discover, is frequently attenuated in *Bonnet.* Indeed, as this reading will try to show, Mercier’s literary physiognomy can never come into focus through an analysis of formal strategies alone, but must equally be considered in light of his characteristic disregard for such strategies. In vaunting the pleasurable abundance of his writing, the passage from the foreword in which Mercier establishes the work’s essayism—“you forge your thought in your own fashion; . . . you write abundantly, and not without voluptuousness”—also hints at its circumscription.[26] Pre-Copernican cosmology is not the only obstacle to the free play of form in *Bonnet.* After all, the writer himself was known to acknowledge an inverse relationship between style and quantity in his work and frankly attributed the abundance of his writing to economic pressures. “I have only this plume to live on,” he is recorded as complaining to a friend; “it has already earned me one hundred-forty thousand livres, and enabled me to support me and mine in decent fashion. I wish a modest income gave me the opportunity to let my productions ripen, as it has you; but I am in a position where it is much more important to me to write quickly than to write well."[27] Both Mercier's sacrifice of quality to quantity and his blithe acknowledgment of that sacrifice evoke the curious exposure of labor captured in Sianne Ngai's notion of zaniness.

Reading *Bonnet* offers much more, then, than an opportunity to revise Mercier's modernity. The great man's zaniness further registers a generalized uncertainty around the nature of literary "value" at a critical moment in European literary history, just as the reign of patrons was giving way to that of publishers as mediators of production.[28] In that transition Mercier played a major role. One of the first famous writers to try to earn a living entirely "by his pen," he essayed for all to see just what it might mean to balance quality and commerce, literary reputation and literary celebrity, in the last years of the Old Regime.[29] In this conjuncture, zaniness exposes the terms according to which the style of the work reflects the circumstances of its production. As Ngai often asserts, zaniness "indexes" historically variable conditions of desperate or casualized labor—those of late capitalism, yes, but also of economic eras stretching back to the time of the commedia dell'arte *zannis*.[30] And while moments of zaniness may arise from consummate performance—e.g., the physical comedy of Lucille Ball or the stylistic mastery of Thomas Pynchon (Ngai cites *The Crying of Lot 49*)—they may just as well issue from actual misfires and botched effects. In cases of tonal instability, zaniness is capable of indexing not just the prevalence of casualized labor (and the meanings attached to it) in a given cultural space, but also the specific conditions of the artifact's production. Seesawing for its part between formal invention and high-tempo production, *Bonnet* represents a bold experiment in sustaining oneself by one's writing, undertaken in a literary market shot through with piracy and devoid of authors' royalties or international copyright. As such, it challenges us to face literary works' status as "symbolic goods"—commodity and artwork at once. If our aesthetic dispositions are shaped to the appreciation of "pure" works of art, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, how can we countenance alloys like *Bonnet*?[31]

With its tendency toward "rough" cosmologies (and their formal correlates), then, and its conspicuous standing as a symbolic good, *Mon bonnet de nuit* transgresses the aesthetic autonomy integral to Schlegelian poetics and its modernist posterity—and remains a puzzling read to this day. It is symptomatic of these difficulties that, to my knowledge, the present essay marks the first scholarly article on this major work, and the first extended reading of it since Bonnet's critical edition and a 1971 monograph.[32] Beginning with an exploration of the work's engagement with indeterminacy, the essay goes on to spotlight the zaniness of its sheer enormity and disparity. From "Ocean" to "On a few French laws," we shall see that the style of indeterminacy in the work is interfolded with an indifference to style or even a style of indifference—with what Ngai calls, more particularly, "the radically improvisational, even formless style of doing we call zaniness."[33]

Night-Writing

In *Mon bonnet de nuit*, the everyday writing of the everyday that Shelly Charles has identified as a feature of Mercier's journalistic practice is thematized and reframed through the motif of nightly jottings. As Charles argues, Mercier's journalism embodies this practice through an "accumulation of observations, of knowledge, of opinions" whose ad hoc character transforms the newspaper, for the writer's purposes, into "a site for essayistic writing" (un lieu d'essais).[34] Even as *Bonnet* seizes on the everyday writing of the everyday as a stylistic conceit (and in fact incorporates some of the short newspaper articles that issued from this practice), it also thematizes the writing of the everyday in terms which anticipate those laid out by Henri Lefebvre, Maurice Blanchot, and critics working in their wake. Mercier's determination to record "what remains of the impression of the day," or "what I saw, felt, what I thought, heard, as well as the results of my readings and conversations," resonates with these theorists' valorization of everydayness, or what Blanchot termed "existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived."[35] Beyond the foreword, in fact, many of the pieces of *Bonnet* communicate just such a sense of ordinary, spontaneous everydayness. "On the cat" (Du chat) bemoans the remarkable stridency of feline noises; "My window" (Ma fenêtre) extols the view from the writer's room; "Stirrups" (Étriers) and "Stoking, *Anecdote*" (Tisonner, *Anecdote*) notice the ingenuity of common tools.[36] It is the simple givenness of these moments that elicits the indeterminacy of the everyday, the productive formlessness of what Sheringham, following Blanchot, identifies as "lived but uncategorizable experience."[37] At the same time, this indeterminacy is only ever equivocally observed in *Bonnet*. Whereas for Blanchot the power of the everyday lies in its exposure of a zone where lived existence "escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity," pages like these eventually subordinate the openness of noticing to moral and philosophical reflection.[38] "On the cat" casts loud meows as a natural historical question, invoking Buffon to ask why they should sound more grating than do noises made by dogs; "My window" ruminates on the lofty moral feelings inspired by a view of the Alps; "Stirrups" and "Stoking" each concludes with a theory of technological and scientific innovation. Yet even as these pieces systematize everyday iota, the spontaneous character of existence continues to shine through in their basic inspiration. In their unbidden emergence from the page, it often feels possible to heed the moment when a caterwauling cat, a pause at the window, or a sudden appreciation for humble tools struck the writer.

The spontaneity of the everyday is just one of the motifs through which everyday writing elicits indeterminacy in *Bonnet*, however. Daily, indeed nightly, writing gives rise to a tangle of overlapping, often disparate conceits. A second kind of indeterminacy emerges through the work's thematization of the "thinking of thinking," a motif bound up in the drift of thought from one day to the next. Commenting on Mercier's journalism, Charles has shown that the writer defended his right to publish "each day's thought" on the grounds that "each day has a different point of view" (J'ai la pensée de chaque jour, car chaque jour a son point de vue différent).[39] In Mercier's formulation, daily writing relativizes thought by registering its self-difference over time, a pattern that equally invests the chapters of *Bonnet*. In fulfilling the work's guiding conceit, according to which the writer sets down the day's musings "each night," the individual chapters highlight a dimension of the everyday linked to the dailiness of the writing itself. Though undated, the pages of the work can thus, in principle, be read as "entries" in the day-to-day flux of the mind. By this means, the work incites a problem of indeterminacy similar to that which the page "Thought," as we have seen, states in programmatic terms. In its punctual drift, thinking "eludes itself" in ways that hint at the futility of vaunting one moment's thinking over the next's.

A host of further motifs springs, moreover, from the nightliness of this everyday writing. The titular night bonnet links the homey grain of the everyday with philosophical concerns by calling into question the kinds of thinking and, by extension, writing that take place when it is worn. In the preface, the bonnet emblematizes the genre indeterminacy that Sheringham identifies as a trait of the everyday, a tendency toward "heterogeneous contingency" (like that underpinning Mercier's "each day's thought"), which resists encoding in consecrated forms.[40] As Sheringham observes, the everyday's affinity for the "open-minded, mind-opening essay" is one exception to this resistance.[41] The essay's departure from convention and systematicity, its spontaneity and open-endedness, suit it to expressions of the everyday, including everyday thinking and writing. For Mercier, night provides the setting where essayistic writing can flourish. In silence and solitude, he reflects on the day past and writes according to his fancy, blissfully indifferent to literary convention and the expectations of his readers. "Ah grave aristarchs," he pleads, "leave me my pen an hour each night before I go to sleep!" The essayism of the conceit is suggested not just by the cheerful eclecticism of Mercier's program, his intention to put "everything" down on paper, but also by its wayward pursuit, the pleasure he feels in "forging one's thought in one's own manner," as we have seen, or remaining "master of one's ideas, of one's expressions."[42]

Night-writing further enacts the self-relativization of thought through the vagaries of drowsy reflection. Crucially, Mercier develops the motif of night-thinking or -writing through recurrent moments of identification with Newton and astronomers more generally. These moments do not always impute the same meaning to night-thinking but rather advance a range of possibilities for understanding just what it could mean to read the individual chapters as products of a bonnet-clad head. In one of these possibilities, the night bonnet motif induces indeterminacy by calling into question the alertness of the mind producing it and, by extension, the standards by which we can appraise thinking at all. Placed soon after the introduction of the night-writing motif in the foreword, the chapter “Sleep” (Sommeil) invites identification between Mercier and a dozing Newton, the first of the work’s conflations of nocturnal and cosmic indeterminacies.[43] Its evocation of Newton anticipates other chapters that exhibit lurid satisfaction in figuring the great philosopher as weak or passive. In “Old age” (Vieillesse), for instance, Mercier evokes a senile Newton “lapsing into childhood, no longer possessing the slightest idea of the sublime truths he discovered; what humiliation for human nature.”[44] “Sleep,” whose topic and placement in the work lend it programmatic importance, imagines the philosopher at the somewhat less humiliating mercy of drowsiness. “Newton is falling asleep,” we read:

> Instantaneously that active, penetrating faculty that gave body to the most abstract sciences, that unraveled the system of the universe with such justice and clarity, falls into a state of confusion and obscurity. It is now nothing more than an amalgam of erroneous images. Instead of firm and fruitful principles, it chases vague phantoms, surrenders to ridiculous perceptions. The brain of the man of genius, which sought truth with such wonderful sagacity, is abandoned to the most disorderly irregularity. Grotesque shapes replace the lines of the most sublime geometry. In this head that astonished its peers all harmony has fled. For it, time itself has lost its rhythm and duration.
>
> [Newton s’endort; à l’instant cette faculté active et pénétrante, qui donnait un corps aux sciences les plus abstraites, qui débrouillait le système de l’univers avec tant de justesse et de clarté, tombe dans la confusion et dans les ténèbres. Elle ne forme plus qu’un mélange d’images erronées. Au lieu de ces principes fermes et fertiles, elle suit des fantômes vagues, elle s’abandonne à des perceptions ridicules. Le cerveau de l’homme de génie, qui poursuivait la vérité avec une sagacité si admirable, est livré à l’irrégularité la plus désordonnée. Des figures grotesques remplacent les lignes de la plus sublime géométrie. Il n’y a plus d’harmonie dans cette tête qui étonnait ses semblables. Le temps même a perdu pour elle son mouvement et sa durée. (21–22)]

The choice of Newton as exemplar of drowsy thought is not incidental. Despite endorsing the “justice and clarity” of the philosopher’s mind, the piece highlights the strange proximity of clear and fanciful thinking, and thinking’s subjection to bodily affects, in ways that undermine the integrity of his thought. Indeed, while Mercier somewhat stagily, even ironically, emphasizes the rapidity of waking thought's ebbing and return, the piece has the effect of dilating those liminal moments, highlighting the juxtaposition of "firm and fecund principles" with erroneous images. In imagining Newton's thinking as the result of obscure psychological processes, "Sleep" surfaces grounds for relativizing Newton's cosmology; just as his experience of duration falls away from time, the contortion of sublime lines into grotesque shapes suggests the decay of his conception of space. Read against the foreword, moreover, "Sleep" establishes drowsiness as a self-reflexive motif, evoking the kinds of ideation that might be taking place under the writer's own bonnet. The resulting chiasmus operates the relativization of Mercier's thought as well as Newton's. To the degree, that is, that Newton's mind wanders grotesquely at the threshold of sleep, the conceit of night-writing alerts us that in this or any other chapter Mercier's might be doing the same.

Yet Mercier elsewhere identifies with astronomers in ways that foreclose the indeterminacies of night-thinking, in much the same way that dogmatic speculation stills those of the everyday. The tendency to develop both the epistemological stakes and the authorial persona implied by night-writing through reference to cosmology recurs in a second programmatic piece, the opening chapter of volume 2. Entitled "Pillow"(Oreiller), it recalls the work's guiding conceit while renewing the previous volume's designation of the astronomer as proxy for the writer. "The stroke of midnight, a solemn hour!" Mercier exclaims:

> As night obscures the earth from my sight, it seems to place the heavens in my possession. These millions of suns and worlds that the Eternal has sown with such profusion give man the opportunity to observe the immutable laws to which they are subject.
>
> It is to night that the Cassinis and Galileos owe their greatest discoveries. And you, tireless Messier, the comet that would otherwise have passed over a drowsy world encounters your vigilant eye. Alert sentinel of celestial marvels, you are there to identify it, announce it, class it among the great bodies floating in the ether.
>
> [Minuit sonne, heure solennelle! La nuit faisant disparaître la terre de mes regards, semble me mettre en possession des cieux. Ces millions de soleils et de mondes que l'Éternel a semés avec tant de profusion, donnent à l'homme le loisir d'observer les lois immuables auxquelles ils sont assujettis.
>
> C'est à la nuit que les Cassini et les Galilée sont redevables de leurs plus belles découvertes. Et toi, infatigable Messier, la comète qui allait passer devant un monde assoupi, rencontre ton oeil vigilant. Sentinelle attentive des merveilles célestes, tu es là pour la reconnaître, l'annoncer, la classer parmi les grands corps qui flottent dans l'éther. (286)]

Even as this passage reprises the theme of nocturnal thinking, it enriches it with a series of further, in some ways conflicting, meanings. Beginning with a natural theology-inflected appreciation of the work of the “Eternal,” the passage soon shifts to praising the more technical scientific labors of Galileo, Messier, or the Cassini family, which culminate in the classic Enlightenment tasks of observing, classifying, and publishing. A third, quite different model of night-knowing crops up, moreover, in the following paragraph. “All of the privileged beings who cultivate their reason,” Mercier posits, “more or less keep vigil; the silence and calm of the night favors meditation, taking the place of the voluntary darkness to which the sages of Greece once condemned themselves, so that they might see the truth alone.”[45] This is the mode that most closely matches the meaning Mercier attributes to night-thinking at the beginning of “Pillow”: “When the lights are off,” he reflects, “the head is on the pillow, and in looking into the depths of the soul we discover nothing that could offend our fellow humans, what a delicious balm then spreads through our whole being!” The moment our heads hit our pillows, he affirms, is “the moment when truth speaks to us.”[46] Absent are Newton and his drowsy divagations—in each of these formulations the world dozes, not the astronomer-writer. Indeed, where “Sleep” problematizes truth by placing thought at the threshold of consciousness, “Pillow” subverts Enlightenment’s master metaphor by locating truth in darkness, all the more certain for being obscure.

A certain inconsistency thus marks night-thinking as a metaprinciple in the work. Associated with drowsiness as well as vigilance, error as well as truth, night-thinking acts both as a motif of indeterminacy and as a vehicle for certainties that in some measure counteract it. But if nocturnal certainty functions as a self-reflexive principle in the work, what formal and philosophical values exactly does it represent? Mercier’s cosmology embodies Nietzsche’s “anti-epistemological relation to knowledge,” insofar as his adhesion to a providential firmament immediately, sensuously available to human understanding recalls the philosopher’s “instinctive” knowing.[47] But where Nietzsche aestheticizes knowing, Mercier is here inclined to moralize it. The moral dimension of night-thinking prevails where Mercier, citing the Greeks, reframes it as an examination of conscience. Beyond identifying the Greeks’ askesis with the conversations we have with ourselves in bed, lights out, Mercier personalizes their practice by likening it to the experience of an author rereading his own works. “Whatever has spurred the passion of the moment appears puerile and paltry,” he reflects: “but if you have been lucky enough to have sacrificed vengeance, your writing consoles, fortifies; you forgive yourself for all the mistakes for which you have only to blush before the muses” (Ce qui a dicté la passion du moment paraît puérile et misérable: mais si l’on a été assez heureux pour avoir sacrifié la vengeance, l’écrit console, fortifie; on se pardonne toutes les fautes dont on n’a à rougir que devant les muses). Turning the other cheek, he congratulates himself on his forbearance; "the author who was good-hearted once, discovers himself to be good-hearted still" (L'auteur qui a été bon tel jour, se retrouve bon encore). Night becomes the occasion for the writer, in rereading himself, to reflect on how well he has adhered to the canons of "sound morality" (la saine morale) in the past and to revel in the voluptuous emotion that attends the recognition of his own goodness.[48] As a metaprinciple of certainty, night-thinking thus acts most convincingly as a reflection of Mercier's own authorial practices and the ethical commitments that subtend them.

These moments of identification between the writer and astronomer-philosophers articulate two distinct poles in the work, one representing the philosophical and formal indeterminacies of night and relational space, another representing moral and cosmic certainties and an indifference to formal concerns. In pitting these values against one another, Mercier unleashes a second-order indeterminacy whose epistemological and formal status remains unresolved in the work. The management of this second-order indeterminacy contrasts markedly with the contest between pre-Copernican and Copernican cosmologies and their poetical corollaries in Schlegel's *Athenaeum* 434. For Schlegel, the dogmatic character of classical poetics is to the fixed earth of pre-Copernican cosmologists as the self-reflexivity of the Romantic fragment is to the relational space of Copernican cosmology; the fragment itself does not prescribe a poetics but only evokes the space of relationality in which it could appear. In *Bonnet*, on the other hand, Copernican cosmology never definitively displaces its predecessors; at most, the suspension of this decision only sustains the second-order indeterminacy I have been laboring to draw out. But contrary to the indeterminacy espoused by Schlegel, this formal indeterminacy proceeds from scientific doubt (the hesitation between a geocentric and infinite universe), not scientific certainty (the repudiation of geocentrism). If there is irony in Mercier's geocentrism, this irony emerges not from the work's treatment of geocentrism, as if the scientific position were relativized by formal intent, but from the incidental way in which effects of formal indeterminacy sometimes proceed from the prioritization of scientific over formal imperatives.

The piece "Astronomy" lends this ambiguous dynamic an air of formal intentionality. In the space of four short paragraphs, the page affirms a nostalgic preference for the old geocentrism, before going on to envision a decentered universe from a regress of standpoints. The first two paragraphs follow the same pattern in lamenting the bygone familiarity of an immobile, centered earth, only to grumble assent to the Newtonian "void":

> We must reason a great deal to abolish the testimony of the senses, which seem to assure us that the earth is motionless and the sun turns. This system makes us small in our own eyes, and we have adopted it in spite of our pride: we must not have been able to do otherwise.

> It was so nice to think of ourselves as inhabiting the primary globe, as being the sole object of creation, that I am astonished we agreed to relegate ourselves to a corner of the universe with so many other planets.
>
> [Il faut beaucoup raisonner pour vaincre ce témoignage des sens qui semble nous assurer que la terre est immobile, et que le soleil tourne. Ce système nous rend bien petit à nos yeux, et nous l'avons adopté, malgré notre orgueil: il faut que nous n'ayons pas pu faire autrement.
>
> Il était si beau de se regarder comme habitant du premier globe, comme l'unique objet de la création, que je m'étonne que nous ayons consenti à nous rejeter dans un coin de l'univers avec tant d'autres planètes.]

The paragraphs echo one another in advancing grounds for preferring geocentrism, the first alleging the "testimony of the senses," the second the personal fulfillment derived from residing on the "primary" planet. But where the first paragraph ends with a bare supposition of the necessity of an infinite universe, the second builds on this supposition to imagine what such a decentered universe might look like. Here, the piece achieves liftoff:

> And this unshakeable, stationary sun in the center of the firmament, sweeping along all the planets that surround it, is itself but a luminous point in the vast system of the universe.
>
> Let the imagination leap from the highest star, and look out from there; it will glimpse an even deeper, more seductive vault. A new firmament will extend to infinity; the contemplator will be left with only the surprise and fright that follow on the heels of this admiration.
>
> [Et ce soleil immuable et fixe au centre du firmament, entraînant toutes les planètes qui l'environnent, n'est lui-même qu'un point lumineux du vaste système de l'univers.
>
> Que l'imagination s'élance vers l'étoile la plus élevée, que de là elle contemple; elle apercevra encore une voûte plus séduisante et plus profonde. Un nouveau firmament s'étendra jusque dans l'infini; il ne restera au contemplateur que la surprise et l'effroi qui suivent cette admiration. (402–3)]

Inciting us to survey the universe from one "luminous point" after another, the piece ends by acknowledging the "infinity" of this recursion. This movement relativizes the pride and sense evidence associated with viewing one's world (and oneself as the "inhabitant" of that world) as the center of the universe. In that sense, "Astronomy" enacts the precedence of relativist cosmology that Schlegel prescribes. Overcoming "the resting earth" and its dogmatic poetics, "Astronomy" launches thinking into a universe in which the relationality of celestial bodies—where "everything becomes and transforms itself and moves harmonically"—models the literary expression of thought's relationship to itself.[49] Having overcome dogmatic space, thought is on this reading released in "Astronomy" into its relational successor.

But “Astronomy” is not quite Schlegel avant la lettre. Its indeterminacy is more than the indeterminacy of the fragment borrowing the medium of relational space to enact the reflexivity of thought; it is also the indeterminacy of thought hesitating between relational and dogmatic space. The judicious attribution of equal text space to each position encourages the sense of a suspended verdict on which might be truer. Moreover, in ending by prescribing an affective response to this regress, it effects an uneasy truce between “surprise and fright” on the one hand and “admiration” on the other, the latter hardly sufficient to still the anguish incited by the prospect of an infinite void. Even as the fragment performs the movement of thought through which we might try to comprehend a centerless universe, it seems to query the nature of the movement itself, as if from a slight remove. Mercier gives in to the void here, yet the fragment can still not quite be read as enacting the definitive victory of relational space. Instead, its fragmentary form condenses two layers of indeterminacy—that of thought in its multi-perspective leap into relational space, and that of thought hesitating between two models of space. In that hesitation we can detect the persistence of a real allegiance on Mercier’s part to geocentric space. Indeed, if we must “reason a great deal” to abolish the testimony of the senses, Mercier seems through this thought experiment to be rehearsing the repercussions of trying.

Like “Sleep,” then, “Astronomy” leverages Mercier’s cosmological ambivalence to formal effect. Yet, across the work’s expanses, this ambivalence also expresses the equivocal status of formal or aesthetic criteria per se within it. In *Bonnet* and in Mercier’s subsequent works, geocentrism emerged with increasing force as an epistemic rather than a poetic principle. By 1799, the anti-Copernican lectures he was delivering at the Lycée de Paris were exciting unanimous derision in the press, leading to noisy polemics that flared up through the publication of his last major work, the treatise *De l’impossibilité du systême astronomique de Copernic et de Newton* (On the impossibility of the astronomical system of Copernicus and Newton) (1806).[50] Wavering between geocentrism and the “void” of relational space, and incorporating writings from prior phases of Mercier’s career, *Bonnet* for its part gives every appearance of real cosmological indecision.[51] But while the formal ambiguity of cosmological indeterminacy in *Bonnet* may be linked to Mercier’s initial uncertainty about the truth of geocentrism, it is also grounded in what we might call the denigration of style in general in the work. Not just the precision compositio of fragmentary writing but formal niceties more broadly appear fitfully within it. In the commitment to writerly charity and indifference to offending the muses attested by “Pillow,” we have already gained a sense of the priority of authorial virtues over style in *Bonnet.* But science and personal virtue are not the only reasons Mercier has to blush before the muses. Where “Pillow” suggests that wronging one's literary adversaries is liable to keep a writer up at night, the piece "Economy" (Économie) goes on to establish that his relationship to his pillow is further defined by financial security. "Economy," Mercier proposes, "is a soft pillow where we doze without fear of the future, always obscure and hence forbidding."[52] Mercier's financial economy stands in telling juxtaposition to his textual hyperproduction; the logic of "accumulation" that Charles sees as governing Mercier's everyday writing pertains as much to the financial motives that drive his textual production, I would contend, as to the volumes of publications that result. In this respect the sheer quantity of text that issues from Mercier's abundant, voluptuous production plays a crucial role in the smothering of the muses in *Bonnet*—and bespeaks writerly practices that extend to Mercier's other mélanges to boot.

Zany Pages

Per Langle, form (genre) and content (paradox) blurred Mercier's literary image, but the sheer quantity of his output played a part in the confusion, too. The critic and gastronome Grimod de la Reynière symptomatically complained that Mercier had "singularly weakened and ruined [the *Tableau de Paris*] by diluting the two volumes that originally composed it into twelve," and the actor Fleury concluded a reminiscence of his friend with the observation that he would have been a "man of genius, had he not placed ramparts of volumes between himself and glory."[53] Recall as well that Mercier himself cheerfully acknowledges that "to write quickly" is more important to him than "to write well."[54] In *Bonnet*, the sheer volume and heterogeneity implied by this emphasis on productivity swamp the various formal principles we have encountered, stymying the consistency that, for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, underwrites the unified "project" of fragmentary writing. Neither nightly writing as an iteration of the writing of the everyday, nor the ludic reflexivity of the "thinking of thinking," nor fragmentation per se fully governs the work's thousand plus pages. In its incorporation of diverse genres and pieces from different periods of Mercier's literary career, *Bonnet* ultimately does little, in fact, to sustain daily writing as a formal conceit or enact the essayistic program it affords. And while in the early going the work establishes the self-reflexivity of drowsy writing as a distributive property, notionally applicable to any and every chapter, the individual chapter-pieces rarely index that principle. In its thematization of the "everyday writing of the everyday," which Shelly Charles has identified as a feature of Mercier's journalistic writing, *Bonnet* in fact offers an occasion to tease apart the two halves of that formula—the writing of the everyday as a deliberate formal gambit and everyday writing as a practice of compulsive productivity. In fulfilling this latter principle, *Bonnet* embodies Ngai's notion of zaniness as an aesthetic category that is in some essential way "'about' production."[55] Indeed, the hyperproductivity that Ngai associates with zaniness gives this category purchase on qualities, like sheer material extent, that exceed interpretation. If, in fact, Mercier's writings incorporate aesthetic forms like the fragment or the sketch, as other scholars have argued, the mélange overruns these forms to locate literary "value" in the activity of production itself. As we shall see, production in Mercier's case implies not just writing but publishing too, in a book trade pegged to the frenetic pace of piracy.

Among Ngai's gallery of zanies, the title character of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* stands out as particularly illuminating for Mercier's case. For Ngai, the Nephew illustrates the conversion not just of any worker but of the artist in particular into casualized laborer, and the concomitant dissolution of artistic production into "a continuous succession" of value-producing "activities."[56] In the Nephew's case, economic prostration takes the shape of "amusing/servicing/educating the rich" who patronize him for his wit and mimetic virtuosity. Over the course of Diderot's dialogue, the Nephew demonstrates his abilities by launching into a tornadic pantomime of people, moods, and things—"a woman in a spasm of grief, a wretched man sunk in despair, a temple being erected . . . a storm, a hurricane," a succession of musical instruments, and so on.[57] These antics exemplify, Ngai writes, "the desperation and frenzy of [zaniness'] besieged performers, due to the precarious situations into which they are constantly thrust," as well as the "radically improvisational, even formless style of doing" associated with the aesthetic.[58] As Ngai points out, the desperation often associated with zaniness—including the Nephew's sweaty, orgasmic performance—clashes with the ironic detachment of Schlegelian poetics. If Schlegel's concept of "interesting" art elicits the indeterminacy of the absolute, as we have seen, Ngai locates a different kind of indeterminacy in zaniness, an aesthetic that "always threatens to dissolve the performer into a stream of undifferentiated activity."[59] Where the indeterminacy of the Romantic fragment safeguards form by pitting it against the negativity that it in some measure incorporates, the indeterminacy of zany works pertains to the indifferentiation of one form relative to another. (In its haste, zaniness not only neglects the differentiation of forms but also conduces, as Mercier's case will attest, to an indifference to style in general and, withal, to readerly experience.) Zaniness shifts the meaning of form altogether, Ngai writes, asking us to view it "not as structure but as activity."[60] More specifically, it corresponds to modes of activity that do not enact formal concerns in the manner of the fragment but rather resist resolution in form. In that respect, the undifferentiated activity of zaniness implies a further distinction with regard to the notion of the "project." Where the unity of the project underpinning the fragmentary work guarantees the coherence of its diversity, the desultoriness of the zany "project" gives out onto the jumble of mere disparity. In zany style, the gig project is a mode of activity associated with casualized labor, a "short-term, transient form of action" that entails "a certain deformation of the forms of activity," Ngai writes, "a certain indifference to their qualitative differentiation."[61]

In *Bonnet*, this formlessness or indifferentiation inhabits the very same night-writing motif that initiates the thematization of indeterminate form. The foreword both communicates the essayism of Mercier's approach and hints at the limits of its indeterminacy. If nighttime affords the possibility of writing freely, it also corresponds to an idiosyncratic conception of the "pleasure of the text," defined not by the recipient's delight in reading but by the writer's in producing. For Mercier, we have seen, writing in bed means writing "abundantly, and not without voluptuousness."[62] And while his abundant production is pledged to pleasurable play, the work's thematization of night also recalls what Ngai identifies in zaniness as a "strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a deeper level about work."[63] In this conjunction, it is telling that the claim Shelly Charles cites as illustration of Mercier's everyday writing of the everyday—"I think differently everyday, because each day has a different point of view"—appears in an article he wrote to defend a notorious political about-face. Having decried the moral effects of the public lottery, he subsequently accepted a role in its administration—an inconsistency that contemporaries viewed as glaringly mercenary.[64] Mercier's homage to essayism thus appears not as a gambit for exploring the indeterminacies of thought from one day to the next but as an instrumentalization of essayistic style for naked self-interest. Or more to the point, it articulates a specious kind of play—in the event, the playfulness of the essay—that tries and fails to distract from mere financial expediency or even blurs the boundary between the two. In Mercier's everyday writing of the everyday, the zigzags of the essay as often as not overdraw the backbends and low bows of the hypocrite. Double games like these caused Mercier to lose face in ways that undoubtedly muddled his literary physiognomy. And given that Mercier's contemporaries saw so easily through his strenuous protesting, this transparency, too, recalls the hectic, hapless hyperactivity of Ngai's many zanies, too erratic and perhaps too innocent to keep up their "all-too-obvious" bluffs.[65]

If night-work encompasses abundant, self-interested production, Bonnet and his collaborators have shown the theme of abundance to reflect *Bonnet*'s specific compositional circumstances. Mercier's flight to Neuchâtel inaugurated a period of fruitful cooperation with not one but two *sociétés typographiques*, the first of Neuchâtel, the other of Lausanne.[66] These collaborations represented a rare occurrence in French book publishing—a writer dealing directly with a pirate firm in the publication of an original work.[67] During his stay in Neuchâtel, Mercier sought to capitalize on the initial success of the *Tableau de Paris* by supplying the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) with additional volumes of the work, even as he began writing what would become *Mon bonnet de nuit.* "Eager to take full advantage of his proximity" to the STN, Bonnet remarks, Mercier "was evidently resolved to supply an indefinite quantity of copy."[68] Following the collapse of the STN, Mercier addressed a number of propositions to its counterpart in Lausanne, which ended up publishing the subsequent volumes of *Bonnet.* "I can get you copy in two weeks," he promises his Lausanne correspondents, "and there will be no interruptions" (Je pourrois fournir de la copie dans quinze jours, et il n'y auroit point d'interruption). "If your presses still need feeding, I'll have something sent to you" (Si d'ailleurs vos presses avoient besoin d'être alimenté, je vous ferois passer quelque chose).[69] These close collaborations with printers actualized a scenario that Mercier had long fantasized and even substantially realized through ownership of his own newspapers and close ties with publishers and journalists. In *Le nouveau Paris,* he would even go so far as to ask (and boldly answer): "What is a printer's shop? It is my writing desk."[70]

As a scenario of production, this conflation of drafting and printing concretizes the self-interested practice Mercier's protégé Varot d'Amiens records in the image of the writer dictating "to his scribe *ex abrupto* different pieces of literature or politics, which he sent off to the printers post-haste."[71] But the equation of drafts with finished works also reflects an ethos of authorial "indifference" to the completed works themselves. In fact, Mercier regularly compares his published works to abandoned children (a neat inversion of Rousseau's abandonment of his real children for the sake of writerly disinterest).[72] In one characteristic statement of this theme, Mercier declares, "In order to be at peace and not become the martyr of his talent, an author should do with his works what certain peoples do with their children—leave them to their fate as soon as they're able to run and never give them a further thought." Despite his claim that this practice frees writers to nurture textual progeny that are "weak and unformed," the impression remains of a continuous succession of half-formed publications. "I have the greatest indifference for any printed work," he continues. "Tossed out into the world, it's up to it to provide for itself and prosper. . . . I give all my care and my love to the unhatched little ones that I keep warm, that I brood, that I watch fledge with pleasure: once they fly away, I am no longer the master of their fate, and I forget all about them."[73] Mercier's indifference to his works thus coincides with a kind of formal indifferentiation, the reduction of distinct forms to an "incessant flow or stream of continuous activity" whose smallest unit is the formally ambiguous "page."[74] Moreover, the terms in which he construes this activity reflect a number of further zany qualities. What care he devotes to his textual hatchlings evinces the tight association Ngai identifies between zany aesthetics and affective labor, a motif bound up in the indistinction of work and personal fulfillment. The writer's self-image here as mother (?) bird engages the gender vagaries of zany production, its penchant for unsettling boundaries between productive and reproductive labor, at the same time as the promiscuousness of his reproductivity embodies the libidinous tendencies that Ngai locates in zany tradition. Like many zanies, moreover, Mercier performs this affective labor poorly. In his bad maternity, the writer skirts and even inverts the canons of authorship, trading its associations with genius, mastery, masculine heroism, and proximity to God for others with craft, creative compulsion, female subjection, and creaturely profligacy.

In the event, Mercier's "abandonment" of published works collides with his habit of recycling them. Not all of the copy he furnished the Sociétés typographiques was new. By Bonnet's estimation, over a quarter of *Bonnet* consists of republished texts—early works in genres like the fable, the dialogue, the idylle, or the héroïde, reflections on literary life including the tracts *Le bonheur des gens de lettres* (1763) (For the good of the literary classes) and *De la littérature et des littérateurs* (1778) (On literature and literary people), and articles Mercier had published in his own newspaper, *Journal des Dames,* in 1775.[75] They also include a collection of dream-pieces, short texts recounting dreams the writer purportedly experienced, some of them straightforwardly allegorical, others more perplexingly oneiric. Mercier initially published these *Songes philosophiques* (Philosophical dreams) in 1768 before adding to their number in *Bonnet* and republishing the lot as a separate collection in 1788.[76] While the *Songes* in particular reflect the work's thematic concerns, these recycled texts frequently depart from other "pages" in both form and theme. The piece "Éloge of Charles V, King of France" is a flagrant but characteristic example. Initially printed in 1767, it was republished in 1776 in a collection of academic éloges before appearing once again in *Bonnet.* Dealing with the king's lofty deeds and extending to forty-some pages in the modern edition, its historical bent, length, and oratorical tone jar with the subject matter, brevity, and waywardness of the pages that hew to *Bonnet*'s stated conceit.

These recycled works are certainly as amenable to exegesis as any other, and Bonnet has proposed an interpretation that fits them into a deliberate formal strategy. While in Neuchâtel, Bonnet recounts, Mercier tried but failed to arouse interest in an edition of his collected works. "By bringing together an astonishing 'collection' of works from the distant past," the critic hazards, "Mercier seizes an opportunity to create, once and for all, a kind of self-portrait."[77] This interpretation works to resolve Mercier's literary physiognomy into an intelligible expression and, for good measure, engages the motif of self-portraiture limned by the image of the writer in his bonnet. But it also absolves *Bonnet* of some of its more Messerschmidtian complexities and discounts the cycles of publication and republication that characterize Mercier's oeuvre in general.[78] A less exegetical reading might see the writer's tendency to recycle his works as an extension of the indifference that leads him to "abandon" them. This iteration of indifference is bound up, I would argue, in Mercier's understanding of literary property. Adapting or simply republishing old work throughout his career, Mercier tellingly defends this practice in commercial rather than creative terms. In a letter concerning two of his plays, for instance, he goes so far as to cast his recycling of past work as a right: "It is permitted, I believe, Messieurs," he writes, "to take back one's property [*son bien*] and do with it as one will; that's what I did in a play entitled *The New Doyen of Killerine*, which will be performed at the *Variétés*. The first two acts are taken from the *False Friend*, which I had printed in 1771."[79] The interpolations in *Bonnet* reflect just such a pattern of doing "as one will" with earlier publications, in line with a sovereign conception of literary property.[80]

Just as in Ngai's reading of Nietzsche, these elements of zany style index something about the circumstances of the work's production, including, as for Nietzsche, the writer's attitudes toward artistic labor. But they also index the specific historical circumstances that incentivized Mercier to conceive of literary property in this way. In conjunction with royal reforms that for the first time allowed writers to arrange directly for the printing and sale of their own works (and freed them from the obligation to sell long-term publication rights to members of the Parisian publishers' guild), the question of authors' property rights roiled the literary production of the period.[81] As Diderot wrote in the lead-up to the reforms, the ideas animating texts are "the most inviolable form of property because they spring directly from the individual mind."[82] But arguments in favor of authors' property rights hinged just as much on the nature of literary labor as they did on an "Enlightenment epistemology." "What property [*bien*] can possibly belong to a man," Diderot further asks, "if a work of his mind, the unique fruit of his education, of his studies, of his vigils [*veilles*], his time, his research, his observations, if his finest hours, the most beautiful moments of his life, if his own thoughts, the sentiments of his heart, the most precious portions of his self, that which does not perish, that which immortalizes him, does not belong to him?"[83] Within these debates, the "vigil" became a topos of the writer's property rights. Night-writing justified authors' entitlement to financial as well as symbolic compensation, even if, "since the art of print was invented," as one commentator complained, "publishers have always reaped almost exclusively the fruits of the studious man's nightly labors [*veilles*]."[84] Indeed, proponents argued, writers' labor and substance together earned them stronger property rights than those secured in ordinary transactions. As one jurist affirmed of writers, "literary productions are the fruit of their sleepless nights [*veilles*]; they are the ones who give them existence. They therefore have a greater right to them than one has to land acquired in an ordinary way."[85] In this light, the analogy Mercier draws between his own vigils and those of the astronomers appears not just as an inversion of Enlightenment values but an inversion grounded in the casualized labor that diffusing those values supposed.

Mercier's decision to publish with the STN registers an intent to maximize the rewards of his vigils. By operating outside French law, Mercier had freer rein to publish to market demand, since Parisian publishers retained long-term rights to manuscripts and tended to put out small quantities of relatively expensive books, while pirate presses maintained no such exclusive rights and produced more, lower-quality books for less.[86] In so doing, however, he was exposing himself to market conditions that incentivized short-term compositional and production strategies. As one of the decade's few bona fide French literary celebrities, Mercier rightly presumed that enormous unmet demand existed for his work.[87] But prior to the institution of author's royalties, he, like other writers, had no financial stake in the circulation of his books as commodities (beyond his ability to sell further manuscripts).[88] Under these conditions, he could best earn income commensurate with demand by producing a continual stream of work. As Robert Darnton has recently observed, moreover, "time was the most important factor in the pirating business."[89] Pirate presses had to copy, print, and transport their own editions quickly enough to outpace other pirates and outwit French authorities; by reducing publishers' margins, piracy acted, according to some, to accelerate the book trade as a whole.[90] Mercier's prose represents a response to these conditions insofar as short-form "pages" could be sent off quickly, reprints *a fortiori*, and the resulting mélange extended indefinitely with demand. In that context, his commitment to furnishing copy "without interruption" ensured that the whole book could be printed off before other presses pirated it. As it was, the STN's printers lost no time in smuggling sheets of *Bonnet* to rival presses.[91]

More than reflecting the pressures of piracy, though, Mercier's strategies reproduce its logic. By pillaging previously published works, Mercier multiplied versions of the same texts in ways that tended to devalue existing editions. And while it's possible this devaluation disadvantaged the original publishers, it certainly hurt Mercier himself.[92] At the moment of *Bonnet*, Mercier's literary reputation derived in large part from the huge popularity of the *Tableau de Paris*. Yet, as he "diluted" the *Tableau* with subsequent volumes and churned out *Mon bonnet de nuit,* Mercier was essentially mortgaging his reputation to keep up with demand.[93] To that effect, the STN's agent in Paris claimed that the second edition of the *Tableau* had annoyed readers by extending three volumes' worth of contents over four: "I doubt the author will be able to cleanse himself before the same public of the obvious trickery that can be found from one end of this work to the other," he observed.[94] In borrowing against his literary reputation, Mercier was effectively plundering his own symbolic booty.[95]

(In this respect, Mercier occupies both roles in an anecdote Bourdieu tells to illustrate the relationship between contrasting forms of literary capital. The anecdote pits the *belle époque* prestige writer Paul Bourget against the boxer and literary provocateur Arthur Cravan. "'Were I as glorious as Paul Bourget,' Arthur Craven [*sic*] used to say," recounts Bourdieu in this uncharacteristically zany passage, "'I'd present myself in music-hall revues in nothing but a G-string, and I guarantee you I'd make a bundle.'" Cravan, that is, would liquidate the kind of high-brow literary capital accumulated by a respectable writer like Bourget by transposing it to the realm of celebrity spectacle. "This attempt to turn literary glory into a profitable undertaking only appears at first sight to be self-destructive and comical," Bourdieu glosses, "because it assumes a desacralized and desacralizing relationship with literary authority. And such a stance would be inconceivable for anyone other than a marginal artist, knowing and recognizing the principles of cultural legitimacy well enough to be able to place himself outside the cultural law."[96] In Mercier's case, though, it isn't so certain that the "principles of cultural legitimacy" were as fixed as they would be a century later, that the rules of the literary game were as transparent to him in his moment as they would be in a later iteration to Cravan, or that his production strategies weren't "self-destructive and comical" after all. If Cravan's G-string flaunts the provocateur's marginal literary status, Mercier's night bonnet is the infraction that lands him outside the "cultural law.")

The problem for Mercier, then, is that he wants to be Bourget and Cravan, éminence and troll, at once. Indeed, as writer, celebrity, printer, pirate, and often his own best reader, Mercier displays the zany's knack for leaping into every role, much as Rameau's Nephew, Ngai points out, mimics the "trade idioms" of "the financier, the judge, the soldier, the writer, the lawyer, the public prosecutor, the merchant, the banker," and so on, in succession.[97] Where Mercier's conflation of desk and press usurps the role of the publisher, his tendency to fix the symbolic value of his own texts does as much for the roles of reader and critic. In the foreword to *Bonnet,* he couches this displacement in a language of economic exchange. "How sweet it is to say to oneself, head on the pillow," he sighs: "I fulfilled my vocation; and when I give to the public much more than I receive in return, it owes me: in mass it is my debtor, and I am not its. I gave it agreeable sensations, and what can it add to those I felt when writing?" Indeed, Mercier estimates, a writer who wants to be repaid in acclaim is likely to be a "cheated creditor," "for sometimes you receive nothing from this disdainful and frivolous public, which judges us so arbitrarily, and which, whether it praises or denigrates us, is never equal to us."[98] Whimsically ironic as Mercier's chauvinism may be, it is also literalized in his practices and commentary. And while this chauvinism pertains to the public's inability to assign the proper symbolic value to his works—its failure to be "equal" either to the writer himself or to the task of judging—it is telling that this reception scenario is itself cast in economic terms. Precisely because the debt incurred by the public is too great to be acquitted symbolically, Mercier presumes, he is warranted in treating his texts as mere commercial goods, not so different from the calicoes the pirate porters sometimes smuggled for lack of contraband books.[99]

Everyday Speech

Zany style in *Bonnet* is thus defined not just by Mercier's incessant writing but by practices of publication and republication, not just by the indifferentiation of "copy" but by indifference to texts and publics. This deflected address results in textual qualities not often associated with zaniness—the brute materiality and blind heft of the book's volumes, the monotony of its contrasts, the flatness of its trajectory, the specific boredom of processing signs only partially laid down to signify.[100] Indeed, Mercier's delight in producing situates the pleasure of this particular text in the experience of the writer at least as much as in that of the reader, in ways that sometimes lend it the character of what Roland Barthes called literary "prattle." As "undifferentiated" or "unweaned language," prattle bespeaks, in Barthes's terms, "a simple need of writing," an impulse for symbolic production that nonetheless falls short in some way of incorporating scenarios of symbolic exchange into considerations of form.[101] But *Mon bonnet de nuit* is not only a vehicle of prattle or zany excess. In many ways, it embodies the duality that Blanchot recognized in the category of the everyday itself—"the daily with its tedious side, painful and sordid (the amorphous, the stagnant), and the inexhaustible, irrecusable, always unfinished daily that always escapes forms or structures (particularly those of political society: bureaucracy, the wheels of government, parties)." In the first instance, reading the work is not so unlike the experience Blanchot cites as symptomatic of the twentieth-century "everyday," the experience of "universal transmission": "How many people turn on the radio and leave the room, satisfied with this distant and sufficient noise?" As mere copy or undifferentiated prattle, *Bonnet* itself, that is, incarnates what Blanchot calls "everyday speech"—an "insistent prolixity that says and shows nothing."[102] Here, zaniness in its indifferentiation rejoins the everyday as insistent noise. Given that for Blanchot, moreover, the murmurs of the mass media embodied this prolixity par excellence, it is opportune to recall Mercier's equation of journalism and essayism, and the origin of many of the texts Mercier interpolates in *Bonnet* in previously published newspaper articles. Yet Mercier's writing also buries rare forms in amorphous transmission. In its flirtations with the writing of the everyday or Copernican poetics, *Bonnet* conveys the indeterminacy that Blanchot associates with the everyday's escape from doxa, its openness to formal and philosophical possibilities unsuspected by literary convention. Sometimes a throw of the dice, sometimes mere "universal *reportage*," *Bonnet* folds the aesthetics of the fragment or sketch into the hot press of copy.[103]

Similar irresolution would prevail in the last of the mélanges; *Le nouveau Paris* flopped on its appearance in 1799. Yet even as readerly demand softened, Mercier's determinacy kept hardening. Twenty years after *Bonnet, De l'impossibilité du système astronomique de Copernic et de Newton* (1806), the capstone to his anti-Copernican campaign, took the classically dogmatic form of the treatise. Despite the philosopher's inexhaustible zeal, one of the very few notices the book garnered chalked up his geocentrism to a desire to be at "rest." Where Schlegel had written that "nothing stands still in the universe of poetry," the *Gazette de France* contributor lampooned Mercier's stubborn fixity: "the sun must travel an immeasurable distance," M . . . D, the anonymous reviewer, regrets, "so as to respect M. Mercier's repose, taking the armchair of our philosopher, if you will, as the center of all its movements."[104] In Mercier's case, "the stationary earth at the center of all things" was not "whatever happens to be in fashion," as Schlegel had put it, but his own unshakeable, unfashionable belief.[105] Foreclosing the formal relationality of Romantic poetry, his geocentrism equally flouted the social dialectic of "fashions" that fuels the drift of any cultural field. Mercier's writing remained one-way traffic, a continual emission that emulated the givenness of nature, of *natura naturans*, in its sheer volume of noise and signal.

Stationary though he may have become, Mercier never kept mum for long. In his volubility, he evokes a style of thinking singularly apt to describe his own, cast in none other than cosmological terms. "Man's errors bear the imprint of his genius," he affirms in the *Bonnet* chapter "Globe":

> he goes astray so often only because he combines too many ideas, and their frequency, their multiplicity obscures the clarity they should have. The sphere of activity that animated the erroneous genius of the Cardans, the Paracelsuses, the Alberts, was perhaps greater than that of the Bacons, the Descartes, the Newtons.

> There is such a thing as sublime error; the more ideas one encompasses, the more difficult it is to link them together. Alas! human reason's activity reveals its own weakness more promptly than does its inertia.
>
> [Les erreurs de l'homme portent l'empreinte de son génie; il ne s'égare souvent que parce qu'il assortit trop d'idées, et que leur fréquence, leur multiplicité leur dérobent la clarté nécessaire. La sphère d'activité qui animait le génie erroné des Cardan, des Paracelse, des Albert, était peut-être plus grande que celle des Bacon, des Descartes, des Newton. Il est des erreurs sublimes: plus on embrasse d'idées, plus il est difficile de les lier. Hélas! l'activité de la raison humaine en découvre plus promptement la faiblesse que son inertie. (36)]

On this account, the latitude of a thinker's thoughts takes precedence over their correctness, the "erroneous genius" of the astrologers Mercier cites superior in this respect to the right thinking of Bacon, Descartes, or Newton. The excess, multiplicity, and intensity of Mercier's production ranges him not just on the side of the zanies but, by this measure, on that of the astrologers as well. Where Schlegel scoffs at a "rough and childish" poetics, Mercier aligns his work here with what we might call a Paracelsian epistemology, or even a gay science—an ideal of intellection in which the power and originality of thinking can be exalted over the verifiability of its results, the economy of its means, even the cohesion of its form. In this dynamism, we can glimpse the value of Mercier's particular brand of genius and, with it, the distinctive blur of his literary star.

Notes

This essay grew from work supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I would like to thank the NEH, Tristram Wolff, and members of the University of Minnesota Center for Premodern Studies.

1. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 184.
2. Ibid., 186.
3. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, "Avant-propos," in *Mon bonnet de nuit* (Paris, 1999), 11. A two-volume English translation appeared as *The Nightcap* in 1785. All translations are mine.
4. Jean-Claude Bonnet, introduction to *Mon bonnet de nuit* (Paris, 1999), vii–viii. For details on Mercier's career, see also Bonnet's introduction to *Le Tableau de Paris I* (Paris, 1994) and introduction to *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Un hérétique en littérature*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1995); and Léon Béclard, *Sébastien Mercier: Sa vie, son oeuvre, son temps* (Paris, 1903). Biographical work on Mercier in English is scarce, apart from Gregory Brown's work on the writer's earlier career in *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* (New York, 2001).
5. Bonnet, introduction to *Louis-Sébastien Mercier*, vi–vii.

6. On Mercier's role in formulating "public opinion," see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 95; for Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, see Béclard, *Sébastien Mercier*, 68–82.
7. Two articles on Mercier's geocentrism have appeared: Joël Castonguay-Bélanger, "'Comme un dindon à la broche': La campagne de Louis-Sébastien Mercier contre Newton," in *Le tournant des Lumières: Mélanges en l'honneur du professeur Malcolm Cook* (Paris, 2012), 45–61; and Stéphane Zékian, "La reconquête de l'espace: Mercier, Newton et la 'farce des fabricateurs d'univers'," *Orages* 13 (March 2014): 41–55.
8. Jean-Joseph Dussault, "Sur Mercier," *Journal des débats*, 15 May 1814, 1–4, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k420905z.
9. Shelly Charles, "L'écrivain journaliste," in *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Un hérétique en littérature*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1995), 95.
10. Bonnet, introduction to *Mon bonnet de nuit*; Shelly Charles, "L'écrivain journaliste," 83–120; Jean-Rémy Mantion, "L'oeil: Modes d'emploi. Les psychés de Louis Sébastien Mercier," in *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Un hérétique en littérature*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1995), 153–98; Joanna Stalnaker, "Mercier's Unframed Paris," in *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Ithaca, NY, 2010), 152–58. See also the excellent dissertation by Annie Cloutier, *Un corps et une plume pour habiter le temps: L'oeuvre en miettes de Louis Sébastien Mercier* (PhD diss., Université Laval, 2011), http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11794/22543.
11. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London, 1964), 13.
12. Jean-Claude Bonnet, "Présentation," in *Mon bonnet de nuit*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1999), vi.
13. Bonnet, introduction to *Tableau de Paris*, xxvii–xxviii.
14. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 11.
15. Charles, "Écrivain journaliste," 92–93.
16. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford, 2006), 16–58.
17. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragment* 116. For an account of Schlegel's formulation of "Romantic poetry," see Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism and the Production of Literary Form* (New York, 2016), 22–23.
18. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, 1988), 40.
19. Quoted in Christopher Kubiak, "Sowing Chaos: Discontinuity and the Form of Autonomy in the Early German Romantics," *Studies in Romanticism* 33, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 438.
20. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 291.
21. Quoted in Kubiak, *Sowing Chaos*, 440.
22. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragment* 434, in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, 1991), 90; Leif Weatherby, "A Reconsideration of the Romantic Fragment," *Germanic Review* 92, no. 4 (2017): 417. Translations modified.
23. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 44.
24. Ibid., 40, 43.
25. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 292.

26. Ibid., 11.
27. Varot d'Amiens, *Mémoires sur la vie et les ouvrages de L.-S Mercier* (1825), Ms B.N., nouv. acq. 10260, 31, Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10086386b?rk=21459;2; cited in Bonnet, introduction to *Le nouveau Paris* (Paris, 1994), lxix.
28. See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993), 112n1.
29. Robert Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing: The Book Trade in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York, 2021), 234. On literary reputation versus literary celebrity, see Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, trans. Lynn Jeffress (Malden, MA, 2017), 14–23.
30. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 189–97.
31. Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," 120–25.
32. Henry Majewski, *The Preromantic Imagination of L.-S. Mercier* (New York, 1971).
33. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 194.
34. Charles, "Écrivain journaliste," 93.
35. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 11; Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* 93 (1987): 13.
36. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 995, 572, 262, 620.
37. Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 17.
38. Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 13.
39. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Censeur des journaux*, 9 April 1797; quoted in Charles, "Écrivain journaliste," 83.
40. Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 49.
41. Ibid.
42. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 11–12.
43. Ibid., 21–22.
44. Ibid., 376.
45. Ibid., 286.
46. Ibid., 283.
47. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 184.
48. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 285.
49. Weatherby, "Reconsideration," 417.
50. Castonguay-Bélanger, "'Dindon à la broche'"; Zékian, "Reconquête de l'espace."
51. *Bonnet*'s indecisiveness on these issues further appears in its ambivalence toward Newton, a leitmotif in the work. Beyond "Sleep" or "Old age," the great philosopher threads through the work as a bearer of shifting, sometimes contradictory values—a paragon of humanity in pieces like "Anatomy" (Anatomie), "On God" (De Dieu), and "Fear of God" (Crainte de Dieu), or a charlatan whose cosmology is just an "audacious folly" in the chapter "On Newton" (De Newton), explicitly dedicated to him.
52. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 22.
53. Grimod de la Reynière, "Le Nouveau Paris," in *L'Alambic littéraire* (Paris, 1803), 162–63; Fleury, "Portrait de Mercier par Fleury: 'Mercier le dramaturge,'" in *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Un hérétique en littérature*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1995), 464.
54. D'Amiens, *Vie et ouvrages*, 31.
55. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 13.
56. Ibid., 196.

57. Ibid., 189–90.
58. Ibid., 12, 194.
59. Ibid., 30.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 197.
62. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 11.
63. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 7.
64. Mercier, *Le Censeur des journaux*; Béclard, *Sébastien Mercier*, 582.
65. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 184.
66. On the meaning of the *société typographique* moniker and relations among the *sociétés*, see Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 74, 140–68. See also Matthew McDonald, "'A Society of Men of Letters': Provincial Cosmopolitanism and Swiss Sociability at the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, 1769–1789," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2022): 421–48. The STN is famous as the basis for most of Robert Darnton's work on Enlightenment publishing, thanks to its surviving archives. Yet, according to Darnton, only four of Mercier's letters survive in the STN archives; *Pirating and Publishing*, 255.
67. According to Darnton, all of the STN's efforts to deal directly with writers fell through—with the exception of Mercier; *Pirating and Publishing*, 241–48.
68. Bonnet, "Présentation," viii.
69. Quoted in Michel Schlup and Caroline Calame, "L'Édition de *Mon bonnet de nuit*," in *Mon bonnet de nuit* (Paris, 1999), lxiv–xv.
70. Mercier, "Imprimeries"; quoted in Cloutier, *Corps et plume*, 154.
71. D'Amiens, *Vie et ouvrages*, 31.
72. Rousseau famously sent his children to the foundling hospital. For the strategies through which he constructed a persona around disinterested poverty, see Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, 128–33.
73. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Notes et fragments divers*, MS 15082, Fonds Mercier, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris; quoted, along with a number of other iterations of this theme, in Cloutier, *Corps et plume*, 151.
74. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 9.
75. Critics agree that Mercier takes the practice of recycling that appears in his other mélanges to its furthest extreme with *Bonnet*. See Bonnet, introduction to *Mon bonnet de nuit*, vii; Cloutier, *Corps et plume*, 135–44.
76. Bonnet, introduction to *Mon bonnet de nuit*, xi–xix.
77. Ibid., xvii–xviii.
78. The career of the misfit German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–83) parallels that of Mercier in the accumulation and dissipation of a notable artistic reputation; at the same time, the series of enigmatic "character heads" that prompted his downfall emblematizes Mercier's literary physiognomy in their spasmodic, even zany expressions. See Michael Yonan, *Messerchmidt's Character Heads: Maddening Sculpture and the Writing of Art History* (New York, 2018).
79. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Lettres de Mercier*, 15078 (2.1), Fonds Mercier, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris; quoted in Cloutier, *Corps et plume*, 149.
80. For an overview of the importance of this moment in the history of intellectual property in general, see Carla Hesse, "The Rise of Intellectual Property, 700 B. C.–A.D. 2000: An Idea in the Balance," *Daedalus* 131, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 26–45.
81. On the royal reforms, see Carla Hesse, "Enlightenment Epistemology and the Laws of Authorship in Revolutionary France, 1777–1793," *Representations* 30

(Spring 1990): 109–37; Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 32–44; Geoffrey Turnovsky, *The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia, 2010), 153–83; and Laurent Pfister, "Author and Work in the French Print Privileges System: Some Milestones," in *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright*, ed. Roman Deazley et al. (2010).

82. Hesse, "Enlightenment Epistemology," 114.
83. Quoted in Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 14.
84. Quoted in Turnovksy, *The Literary Market*, 164.
85. Ibid., 154.
86. Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 289–90; Robert Darnton, "Sounding the Literary Market in Prerevolutionary France," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 477–78.
87. Darnton lists Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and Simon-Nicholas Linguet alongside Mercier as the three great French literary celebrities of the early 1780s; *Pirating and Publishing*, 200.
88. For the means by which publishers estimated demand, see Darnton, "Sounding the Literary Market," 477–92.
89. Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 89.
90. Darnton estimates that half of trade books sold in France in this period were pirated, a major influence on publishing dynamics as a whole; ibid., 4. See also Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 439.
91. Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 368n49; Michel Schlup, "Les querelles et les intrigues autour de l'édition du *Tableau de Paris* de Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1781–1783)," in *L'édition neuchâteloise au siècle des Lumières: La Société typographique de Neuchâtel (1769–1789)* (Neuchâtel, 2002), 132.
92. The perverse incentives of pirating were such that "publishers even pirated themselves" at times; Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 207, 235; Schlup, "Les querelles," 133. Darnton describes similar dynamics in Voltaire as well; *Pirating and Publishing*, 69, 178–79.
93. Darnton reports that if Mercier hadn't filled the demand for works like the *Tableau de Paris*, the publishers had already scared up imitators who would; *Pirating and Publishing*, 235.
94. Quoted in Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 355.
95. The prices Mercier accepted for his works trace a curve of devaluation—from 8,400 livres for the second, expanded edition of the *Tableau de Paris*, to 1,410 livres for the first volume of *Bonnet*, to 1,200 livres for the second and third volumes; Darnton, *Pirating and Publishing*, 234; Schlup and Calame, "L'Édition," liv, lxiv.
96. Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," 132. On Arthur Cravan, see Edward White, "Arthur Cravan, the Original Troll," *Paris Review*, 5 January 2018. Paul Bourget converted to Catholicism in later life and was nominated for the Nobel Prize five times; meanwhile, Cravan staged nude, proto-Dada poetry and boxing spectacles starring himself, emigrated to Mexico with the poet Mina Loy during World War I, and disappeared off the coast of South America in 1918 on his way to join her in Buenos Aires.
97. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 191.
98. Mercier, *Bonnet*, 13.
99. Robert Darnton, "Books and Border Crossings in the Age of Enlightenment," in *Lumières sans frontièrs: Hommage à Roland Mortier et Raymond Trousson* (Paris, 2016).

100. In fact, Ngai distinguishes between zaniness as an aesthetic effect (capable of making us laugh or cringe) and as a mere "cognitive or descriptive" category (which leaves us indifferent) and notices its tendency to hover between these poles; Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 231. While *Bonnet* abounds in moments of such "aesthetic" zaniness, the textual effects of Mercier's indifferent hyperactivity tend to fall, I would argue, on the cognitive or descriptive end of the spectrum.
101. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1975), 3–5.
102. Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 13–14.
103. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse," in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 210.
104. *Lettre à MM les rédacteurs de la Gazette de France, sur un ouvrae intitulé: De l'impossibilité du système astronomique de Copernic et de Newton, par M. Mercier*, in *Le Spectateur français au XIXme siècle, Douzième année* (Paris, 1812), 231–32.
105. Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragment* 434.