

# SOMEWHERE BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND FICTION

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## Introduction

One of the most noteworthy examples of literary renaissance at the turn of the Enlightenment's period is provided in the chronicles written by Louis Sébastien Mercier or Restif de La Bretonne in the 1780s. Somewhere between journalism and fiction, they thought outside the box, portraying a new reality; a new spatial, social and soon a new political reality thanks to the Revolution while, in turn, expanding their work to add new chapters.

Their social background for Restif and/or their marginality regarding literary institutions can help to account for the boldness in their writing. Restif de La Bretonne, son of a well-off farmer, a self-taught man, was a member of the bohemian literary scene. Mercier nicknamed "a heretic to literature" by Jean-Claude Bonnet, lashed out at classical tragedies and verses during the 1770s and helped to conceive the definition of middle-class tragedies.

## Part 1 – The *Tableau de Paris*, a painting of contemporary reality

Incidentally, both men pursued different genres of writing; theatre was Mercier's utopia, while Restif de La Bretonne favoured autobiographical and novella writing. It's believed that by turning his back on the previous century and to its rigid forms, Mercier deliberately chose, in 1781, to portray the contemporary, the town and the evolution of traditions. This sentiment can be strongly felt in the *Tableau de Paris*. I quote "the reality of the times based on living figures". The words are very telling. It is about capturing from life unknown insights, fashions, customs of daily life, anecdotes and even new words.

A journalist by trade, Mercier would expand the range of articles published in the *Journal des dames* which, incidentally, he managed a few years before. Paris is picked apart in every sense and in very small, sometimes trivial detail, like we see in some of his chapter titles: "Peau d'orange", "Ecaillés d'huître" in *Le Nouveau Paris* and "Latrines publiques". In fact, the minute details of contemporary life greatly interested him, after all he was an Enlightened writer. He wanted to observe traditions and customs, even breaking with the norm when it came to his choice of words, which was just as trivial. He writes "the town is round like a pumpkin". This form of writing is based on accumulation and, by breaking from the classical norms, he aimed to portray a sprawling town where one is in keeping with the passage of time.

As he sees it, urban scenes are in perpetual change, and this is not without some despair being felt by the author, like we observe when he exclaims in a note: "Oh! How can one depict subjects which move too quickly for the pen to capture?" The abundance of chapters is devoid of any organisational order, whether it be geographical or chronological, just like interlacing lanes, roads and junctions in a town.

Incidentally, Mercier highlights the multiplicity of points of view on real life. "Suppose that a thousand men made the same journey; if each man were an observer, each man would write a different book on the subject, and there would always be something plausible and interesting to say for whomever came after them". As such, the book is a collection of short chapters which were added from 1781 to 1788, of which only the first two volumes would have any literary success. There would be 12 in total.

## Part 2 – *Les Nuits de Paris* by Restif, or the phantasmatic variant

Exploiting the editorial stratagem spearheaded by Mercier, Restif published *Les Nuits de Paris ou le Spectateur nocturne* in 1788. The title, which echoes that of the collection written by Young called *Night-Thoughts*, is not circumstantial. Restif chooses to add a narrative framework and an autobiographical dimension, maybe even a phantasmatic dimension, to his Paris which takes on a disturbing incongruity. The first night opens on an invocation by the narrator to his double, the owl. "Owl, how many times have your solitary cries not made me quiver in the dark of night? Sad and lonely like you, I venture alone within this immense capital." It is the half-light of great painters.

The epigraph *Nox et Amor*, "Night and Love", is reduplicated in an illustration which entices the reader just as an advertisement would do. It says: "We see an owl flying above his head and in the road a girl is abducted, burglars break down a door, a lookout on horseback, another on foot". Each day, the walker recounts his stories to a marquise who cannot sleep and who, in turn, relates everything to his own obsessions.

The foreword states: "Not only will you witness extraordinary scenes but also philosophical pieces inspired by the point of view of abuse committed under the dark cloak borrowed from the night". Interesting stories, in one word, everything which might arouse curiosity. His aimless wandering borders on voyeurism. The nocturnal spectator meddles in couple and family affairs, pries into homes, inscribes dates onto the Île Saint-Louis to keep account of all his sexual conquests. He is also not afraid of meddling in scenes which sometimes span several evenings.

*Le Nouveau Paris* by Mercier in 1798 and *Les Nuits révolutionnaires* by Restif in 1790 and 1794 depict tales from the Revolution which are just as different as the two writers themselves. Mercier, having become a deputy in the Convention, fought alongside the Girondins and was imprisoned in 1793 for having signed a petition which spoke in their favour. This would signal a slide into national representation which occurred after this date. As for Restif, he wrote a chronicle about the Revolution through the eyes of a homeless man, a disorientated spectator. The storming of the Bastille, the September's Massacres, the execution of Louis XVI, capturing from life, making use of terror and horror, all of this alternated with news which brought some respite.

We also find examples of Restifian-styled fantasies, incest, polygamy, notably in the last nights which are marked by a Jacobin rally. In conclusion, at the time when descriptive poetry was being developed, Mercier and Restif were inventing a contemporary genre of writing which mixed genres and introduced changing realities to literature, even the historic crisis of the Revolution. It created a new style of poetry, one linked to emotions and free of verse, which would take some time to be widely recognised. It also conveyed a change in the conception of time that the Revolution had simply accelerated or brought to light.