

Canto I
*Frightening signs in the heavens. The security of
scholars. Alarms of the people.*

.....I sing
Of the Fear, Hunger, Thirst and Joy uprising
Experienced by our ancient and celebrated city
When an impure reptile of Egyptian celebrity
Came without quitting Memphis to the Seine.
In order to.....with an immense disdain.

Muse, tell me how many marvelous facts
Removed from some mortal eyes the cataracts;
Tell me what the Academic Corpus thought;
Tel me how the African Legate was fought
And finally punished for all he unchained;
Tell me, O Muse, or rather, refrain;
For the facts are written in the temple of memory,
And I don't need you to recall the whole story.¹

(Dear reader, since I'm doing without the Muse, it will be necessary for you to do without verse, for one ought not to make them unless one of those goddesses dictates them to us. Now, those favors being rare for me, you won't often be able to find my verses in this work, but if you happen to encounter any, you can be sure that they're not contraband verses, such as my colleagues sometimes furnish you.)

For several months extraordinary signs had been seen in the sky; the Virgin's Spica had failed to respond to the Observatory's summons; the Moon had uttered moans, as if she had been hard at work; Berenice's hair had first appeared powdered with white and then, with a gust of wind, had become as black as crepe. All the stars seemed to be giving simultaneous signs of sadness. There was no longer the harmonious concert that the celestial spheres once enabled Scipio to hear in the abode of King Masinissa;² they only rendered sounds as lugubrious as the false drone of cathedral organs, or as discordant as the howls of various animals. Finally, some people even thought they could see in the region of the stars, something reminiscent of big crocodiles, writhing with horrible contortions. The scholars, it's true, didn't see anything prodigious in all that. With a stroke of the pen they explained all those phenomena, or denied them when they couldn't explain them, so they seemed quite tranquil. But the people, who did not have, as they did, the key to nature, were dying with fright at the sight of those marvels; they only perceived the most sinister presages in them. They lamented, wandered back and forth, and ran everywhere that their despair and fear drew them.

Yes, the valiant inhabitants of the Roman city,
For them, for their hearths, were worthy of pity
When, menaced by the blows of a powerful foe,

¹ As the author's flippant note suggests, the verse in the "epico-magical poem" is pure doggerel; in order to preserve the rhyme-scheme I have occasionally taken slight liberties with the wordage, while sticking as close to the meaning as the rhyme-starved English language permits.

² Masinissa, the first king of Numidia, fought a successful guerrilla campaign against Scipio Africanus during the Second Punic War in 208-207 B.C., but then switched sides and helped Scipio to invade Carthaginian territory, in exchange for Roman support for his precarious throne.

The chicken-run fasted, and a priest full of woe,
Testing pullets before the pious people's eyes,
Sadly declared that they were.....³

³ Perhaps “On the way to demise”? (The missing rhyme in the original is not obvious, but the implication is definitely that the chickens are in dire straits.)

Canto 2
The Narrative of Cape Horn.

What added to the consternation was a most extraordinary story that a frigate brought back on its return from Guyana. The captain had gone ashore in that country and, while hunting in a remote place, had perceived a poor cabin. He went in. He saw nothing but the remains of a skeleton lying on the ground, and beside it, a box in which he found this astonishing narrative written entirely in English. During his return journey to France he amused himself translating it into our language, and this is the translation that is being hawked in all the streets of Paris:

“I, John Looker, lieutenant of H.M.S. *Hopeful*, of Admiral Anson’s fleet,⁴ certify all the facts contained in the present narrative, and engage those who read it to be persuaded that it is not within the limits of our corporeal life that all our knowledge is contained.

“On 25 March 1740 at half past eleven in the evening, ready to go on watch, as the fleet passed through the strait of Tierra del Fuego, seeking, in spite of the most horrible of tempests, to double Cape Horn, I saw in the midst of the agitated waves something like a large mass of vapors, which was motionless in spite of the fury of the winds. It was dark brown in color, and an obscure light that emerged from its center in undulations rendered the mass somewhat transparent. After a few minutes, the mass was suddenly transformed into an edifice of vast extent, but so low in elevation that a tall man could have reached the summit with his arms.

“Scarcely had that edifice formed than it acquired a rotational movement. That enabled me to see that the whole exterior surface was circular; soon I could also see some way into the interior, for, the rotational movement still continuing, after the first turn an opening appeared in the wall in the form of an arched doorway, which allowed me to see the faint light from within more clearly.

“After the second turn, I saw a second doorway open beside the first, entirely similar; after that, every turn causing a new doorway to open, I could easily count the number; and the number of the doorways rose to eleven hundred, each at an equal distance from the next.

“When those doors had all formed, and the enclosure was thus pierced uniformly throughout its extent, the rotational movement ceased, and, as the edifice remained fixed, it was possible for me to see its interior distribution.

“The whole consisted of one huge room devoid of ornament, without any other furniture than a brown stool at the foot of each of the pilasters between the eleven hundred doors; which is to say that there were eleven hundred brown stools.

“I soon had the opportunity to determine the usage for which they were designed. In fact, a moment after the room was thus disposed, I saw advancing from all the points of the horizon a quantity of animals unknown to me, each of which was simultaneously winged, quadruped and reptilian. Their number was equal to that of the stools, and they each came to present themselves before one of the eleven hundred doors.

“Each of them was mounted by a man with wings of some kind on his shoulders and his head hidden beneath one of them, like birds when they sleep. Apart from the head that I could not see, the men seemed to me to be of normal stature.

“Each animal deposited its rider at the door before which it had stopped, and while depositing him, one cried: ‘The genius of the Falkland Isles’; another: ‘The genius of the Antarctic pole’; a third, ‘The genius of Kaffiria’; the others the genius of Benin, the genius of Cochinchina, the genius of Senegal, the genius of the Sea-Bed, the genius of New Zealand, the genius of Bas-Bretagne, the genius of California,

⁴ George Anson (1697-1762) was in command of a squadron of ships sent to attack Spanish possessions in South America at the beginning of the War of Jenkins’ Ear. After several misfortunes he reached Cape Horn late in the season and had to round it in terrible weather; only three ships, out of the six that remained to him, succeeded in rounding the cape, and he was then forced to sail round the world in order to get home again. There was no ship named *Hopeful* in the squadron.

the genius of Mount Kropak, the genius of Nottingham, the genius of Tenerife, and so on for the various parts of the world. But there were a few among them that I heard announced as the genius of the Moon, the genius of Sirius, the genius of the Sunspots, and the genius of Mercury.

“The last-named appeared to me to be more agile than the others, even though he was much stouter. What struck me too was that, as soon as each animal had deposited its rider and made its announcement, it dissolved into three parts, in accordance with the three regions to which they all seemed to belong, and disappeared from my sight. As soon as the riders had dismounted, they all went—without removing their heads from beneath their wings—to sit down on the brown stools to the left of the doors through which they entered, all being careful to hold both hands forwards and open; they were each dressed in a different manner, in accordance with the costumes of the various regions of the World.

Canto 3
*Continuation of the narrative of Cape Horn.
The President's speech.*

“When they were all in place, the one I had heard named as the genius of Mercury, the stoutest of them all, whom I saw agitating incessantly on his seat, was the first to remove his head from beneath his wing. He took a moment to pull himself together, as if he were emerging from a torpor, after which he began by parading his gaze over the entire assembly and focusing successively on the hands of all the genii; then he said, in a loud voice:

“Messieurs, independently of being the genius of the region of Mercury, as you are of the various regions of this universe, I am also the viceroy of the god of universal matter, and in that capacity, it is my right to preside over this assembly, which has been convened on his orders. In that same capacity, as viceroy of the god of universal matter, I have, on behalf of my master, personally placed in your hands, albeit invisibly, a natural sign that is the indication of your powers and the responsibility that is confided to you. That indication will assure me that you are in good form.”

“In fact, scarcely had he pronounced those words than all their hands, on which I had not previously perceived anything, seemed to me to be filled with various signs analogous to the various sciences that occupy the academies.

“When the President had concluded his examination he said: ‘Your hands have been rendered apt to fulfill your employment, so cease to maintain that inconvenient attitude; entire liberty is granted to you’—the hands of the genii then assumed a free attitude, although their heads were still beneath their wings—‘but as my titles are superior to yours, and as I do not bear the same marks as you, it is necessary that you can also recognize the validity of my powers; this is the sign I give you.’

“All the heads emerged from beneath the wings at the same moment. I saw a bright red crown tinted with the color of sulfur appear on the President’s head, but instead of the projections that normally surmount crowns, his was accompanied by all kinds of symbols like those attributed by scholars to the planets, the elements, mineral substances and various divinities of mythology; and all those ornaments appeared to be the same substance and color as the crown.

“When the genii saw the crown on the head of the individual who had spoken, they all got up simultaneously, bowed to him and sat down again.

“Then he continued his speech: ‘My dear colleagues, the god of matter wanting to consult us, who are, although spirits, his subjects, has summoned us from all the parts of the celestial and terrestrial universe in order to discuss the means of reaching the important goal he is proposing, and we have been chosen directly by him from all the enlightened classes of our various regions for a particular purpose. We are his intimates and the depositaries of his confidence; we have held our heads under our wings for a time as a sign of the entire submission that we owe to his will. Now let us do everything in our power to fulfill his aims; it is a matter of nothing less than coming to the aid of the English vessels that are in these parts, and defending them against the dangers that threaten them.

“When England took up arms to humiliate the proud house of Spain, which wanted to dispute the empire of the seas with her, she had a plan that extends beyond the present war and the expedition confided to Admiral Anson; she has the hope of one day attaining the house of France herself, from which that of Spain obtains its origin, and of exterminating entirely the French nation, the frivolous nation that dares to be her rival and is importunate by virtue of her prosperity and her proximity; she will not cease to harass her externally and interiorly. I announce to you that soon, at her instigation, the present King of France will summon to head his finances a minister incapable of repairing their disorder; they will be brought to a head by his poor administration.⁵ In addition, that minister will subject the means of

⁵ The next minister of finance to take that office after 1740 in France was Jean-Baptiste de Machault d’Arnouville, who found the state finances in a parlous state, but did what he could to repair them. On the other hand Étienne Charles de Loménie de Brienne, who was briefly finance minister in the run-up to the French Revolution, and his

subsistence to such depredation that the people will yield to all the fury that hunger inspires in them, and the court will be on the brink of its doom.

“However, that will be nothing compared with what awaits France in another epoch, details of which I do not have instructions to reveal to you. In any case, all that I know myself is that we are approaching the moment when the mold of time will be broken for the entire universe, while waiting for time itself to be broken; and it is with France that the fracture will commence.

“Now, as no greater blow can be struck against us than breaking the mold of time in which we frolic, and as our faithful friends the English are more closely bound to time than any other people, as witness the splenetic fashion in which they pay time the price of what they have received therefrom, it is essential that we support them with all our might in their enterprise against the Spaniards, since their success might have so many important consequences to the disadvantage of France. Besides which, for our honor, we have to avenge ourselves personally against those two nations, one of which burns without hesitation those who serve us, while the other mocks so loudly those who believe in our existence.

“The blood of the Indians that Spain has shed in floods assured her briefly of our help and assistance, but a man too celebrated in that nation has abandoned all those measures; he has become a kind of tutelary angel of the Spaniards, and he has made it very difficult for our sovereign to find a genius of confidence to summon in their territory, and we cannot promise ourselves anything against Spain if we do not succeed in enabling the English fleet to round Cape Horn.

“Know that it is Spain that, although long-dead, having had knowledge of this event by means of secrets we have been able to penetrate, is making the impetuous winds blow that desolate this region and oppose the progress of the fleet so constantly; she it is who has been able to procure so much ascendancy over the elements and render them so deadly to our plans that, without extraordinary means, we can never be confident of seeing them succeed.

“But you are not unaware that the one whose subjects we are is also provided with a great power; you know that our knowledge and enlightenment can greatly assist that power, already so redoubtable, and that we have, above all, the power to take whatever form we judge to be the most advantageous to the success of our enterprise.

“It is therefore a matter, at this urgent moment, of deliberating on the means that we shall employ to nullify the resistance that Spain and the winds are opposing to us. That is why the god of matter has ordered us to assemble here, in order that an expedient will result from the sum of our reflections, which might be useful to our plan. The session is open; impart your opinions to the assembly.’

successor Jacques Necker, were both considered incompetent and unpopular, and were blamed by some people for playing a large part in creating the conditions that led to the Revolution.