

The Measure of All Things

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The search for the meter found more than the meter.

CHARACTERS

- PIERRE-FRANÇOIS-ANDRÉ-MÉCHAIN
- JEAN-BAPTISTE-JOSEPH DELAMBRE
- BARBE-THÉRÈSE MÉCHAIN

- THE FRENCH REVOLUTION/THE SPANIARDS/THE SAVANTS OF EUROPE/THE STARS
-- flexible crowd numbers. One of them will play NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

THE ACADEMY

DOUBLING: two will play DEZAUCHE and the BARON in Scenes 1 and 7; all will play the Exhumed Kings in Scene 3; one will play TRANCHOT in Scene 4

- TALLEYRAND
- CONDORCET
- LALANDE
- BORDA
- LAPLACE

Scene 1

September 20, 1804. Early morning. A sickroom in Castellón de la Plana, near Valencia, Spain.

PIERRE-FRANÇOIS-ANDRÉ-MÉCHAIN in the sickbed, propped up, sleeping. A.-M. DEZAUCHE is by his bedside, writing in a journal. BARON DE LA PUEBLA enters. DEZAUCHE rises.

DEZAUCHE

Baron --

BARON

Good morning.

DEZAUCHE

Morning, yes --

BARON

And?

DEZAUCHE

Not well, Baron -- not doing well --

BARON

No, I can see that. It seems this kind of fever either leaves you alone after it touches you or it rips you apart.

DEZAUCHE

I am not willing to guess.

BARON

But you're not a doctor, either, are you.

DEZAUCHE

Baron, I mean no disrespect, but I don't have to be a physician to see what's in front of me.

BARON

Proves nothing. Eyes -- not always reliable. Has he been bled?

DEZAUCHE

The leeches sing him thanks.

BARON

There's a distrust in your voice.

DEZAUCHE

I don't trust butchery.

BARON

So I've hired butchers?

DEZAUCHE

These "cures" -- bleeding, blistering -- like the Inquisition --

BARON

You're free to say whatever you want here, but I'd still be careful --

DEZAUCHE

I'm sorry -- it's been a long night.

BARON

For everybody.

(points to journal)
What are you --

DEZAUCHE
I'm cleaning up the calculations. Whether he
lives or dies --

BARON
The calculations will live on.

DEZAUCHE
Yes, always.

BARON
If they're right, that is.

DEZAUCHE
Why would you think --

BARON
Have you ever known anything humans have done
that has been done without mistakes?

DEZAUCHE
The triangulations have been very precise. He is
a very precise man --

BARON
But accurate?

DEZAUCHE
It's the same --

BARON
I can be very precise and still be dead wrong:
"I've cut the board twice now and it's still too
short."

DEZAUCHE
Not the time for mock[ery] --

BARON
On the other hand, for truth --

MÉCHAIN
My venerable host is right.

DEZAUCHE
Oh, good good -- you're awake -- don't speak --
you need to --

MÉCHAIN

Don't speak? -- don't speak? -- what've I got to lose? I've been not-speaking for days -- at last a clear moment -- I'm dying -- isn't that the truth?

BARON

All are dying, Pierre -- the only difference is the rates.

MÉCHAIN

Fast track for me. Slippery. Downhill. Don't speak -- don't speak --

Transition. MÉCHAIN throws off the covers, gets out of bed. The rest of the scene goes away.

MÉCHAIN

What a miserable way to end a life -- my life -- fevered and shitting myself in Spain -- and the doctors! Bleeding me, the Spanish fly blistering my neck. I'm French and dying in Spain. I've discovered eleven comets, and my eyes are crusted shut with rheum. I'm a scientist, priest of precision, and a mistake -- an error -- is killing me off.

MÉCHAIN changes out of his sick clothes into the uniform of the Academy of Sciences. As he does so, the FRENCH REVOLUTION enters, singing as much of "La Marseillaise" as they can get through.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

Allons enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.
Contre nous, de la tyrannie,
L'étendard sanglant est levé,
L'étendard sanglant est levé,
Entendez-vous, dans la compagne.
Mugir ces farouches soldats
Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras
Egorger vos fils,
vos compagne.

Aux armes citoyens!
Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons.

[Let us go, children of the fatherland
Our day of Glory has arrived.
Against us stands tyranny,
The bloody flag is raised,
The bloody flag is raised.
Do you hear in the countryside
The roar of these savage soldiers
They come right into our arms
To cut the throats of your sons,
your country.]

To arms, citizens!
Form up your battalions
Let us march, Let us march!
That their impure blood
Should water our fields]

As MÉCHAIN dresses, the FRENCH REVOLUTION circles as it sings, and it sings louder and louder and louder.

MÉCHAIN
(shouting)

Beginnings. Everything is marked by its beginnings -- hark the "beginnings" -- in songs and blood -- the perfection of mankind and the terrorism of perfection. Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité -- the ideal turning the world upside down with mankind perfecting itself right into the guillotine and Napoleon. Our progress -- our progressing madness.

Cacophony. Dressed, MÉCHAIN holds up a platinum bar, one meter in length. It shines. The FRENCH REVOLUTION falls silent. MÉCHAIN shows it around.

MÉCHAIN

Behold -- the measure of all things. Behold the meter. The meter. One ten-millionth of the arc that knifes through Dunkerque to Barcelona from the equator to the pole. Measured. Precise. Extracted out of Nature's equations. Made to link humanity in one shared measure, one shared thought. To get rid of greed and deception, grind away difference. The dream of re-planting the Garden of Eden on earth. Life without error. The Meter!

With effort, MÉCHAIN bends the bar. Then he swings the bar against the air, and a giant cathedral bell sounds. He continues to strike the air, and the bell rings out. MÉCHAIN throws the bar away as the bells continue to ring. The FRENCH REVOLUTION stares at it, then moves to encircle it.

MÉCHAIN

Beginnings. Everything is always scarred from its beginnings.

* * *

Scene 2

The FRENCH REVOLUTION scatters and begins the swirling CACOPHONY OF MEASURES. Each REVOLUTIONIST holds a physical measure of some sort, a multitude of different sizes: rulers, mugs, bushels, baskets, barrels, etc. As they swirl, they shout some of the names of the thousands of measures used in the Ancien Régime of France: dry, wet, length, weight. What matters most is the decibel level of the CACOPHONY.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

CLOTH	LENGTHS	WEIGHT	DRY MEASURE	WET MEASURE
Elle	Pied	Livre	Setier	Metrete
Pik	Pas	Pound	Medimno	Velte
Braccio	Brasse	Rottolo	Sac	Queue
Palmi	Ruthe		Rasiere	Quartaut
Canne	Codo		Boisseau	Barrique
Vara	Pouce		Tonneau	Viertel
Archine	Ligne		Quartiere	Pintgen
Rasi	Toise		Bichet	Millerole
			Anée	Escandeaux
			Emine	Baral
			Charge	Quarte

As the FRENCH REVOLUTION parades its measures, the SAVANTS gather: TALLEYRAND, CONDORCET, LALANDE, BORDA, LAPLACE. Joining them are MÉCHAIN and JEAN-BAPTISTE-JOSEPH DELAMBRE, but they stand apart, one on each side. They watch the rabble do its rabble-thing. Then, excluding MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE, the SAVANTS make a single gesture -- a clap, a snap of the fingers, a dance move -- and the FRENCH REVOLUTION falls silent, then melts away.

A meeting of the ACADEMY OF SCIENCES.

CONDORCET

You see the problem.

BORDA

And hear it. And smell it.

LALANDE

What problem?

BORDA

Lalande doesn't see a [problem] --

LALANDE

I'll ask it again -- shrug my shoulders to show my lack of [concern] --

BORDA

No need -- I heard you -- we all heard you --
it's always very hard not to hear you --

LALANDE

Good.

BORDA

You can do this --
(shrugs shoulders)
-- all you want, but that doesn't mean there
isn't a [problem] --

LALANDE

But, really, my friend --
(shrugs shoulders)
-- what's the problem?

BORDA shrugs his shoulders up and down repeatedly.

BORDA

What's the problem, what's the problem --

LALANDE imitates him to comic effect. For a moment they duel by
shrugging shoulders.

LALANDE

So what if the people measure things according to
the measures of their lives --

BORDA

No modern nation --

LALANDE

Is that the term of choice now, that what we are?

BORDA

Either we are modern --

LALANDE

Or what?

BORDA

Or we die.

LALANDE

So drastic!

CONDORCET

Lalande --

BORDA

The king still hangs around -- the king's dogs
still have claws and fangs --

LALANDE gnarls his fingers like claws. Even BORDA has to smile.

LALANDE

All right - all right -- so let's declare
ourselves "modern" --

LALANDE makes a "magic" gesture.

LALANDE

Or at least on the way to becoming so -- will
that do? --

LAPLACE

Can we move this [along] --

LALANDE

"Speed" is also modern --

LAPLACE

"Speed" means "you not being boring" --

LALANDE

So then let's assume the king will not linger
forever -- "speed" him away --

LAPLACE

His mind at work --

LALANDE

And I still don't see the problem. This whole
pissing contest about "proper weights and
measures" can be easily solved --

(to TALLEYRAND)

-- isn't that why you had him --

(indicating CONDORCET)

-- throw the best minds together like this?

BORDA

(murmuring)

More like scorpions in a bottle --

LALANDE

(to BORDA)

Ah, ah -- now, if you all just take my suggestion
--

TALLEYRAND

Why should we?

LALANDE

Because, Monsieur Talleyrand, our beloved
minister, it's the most efficient -- make the
rest of the country use the weights and measures
we use in Paris [to] --

TALLEYRAND
Efficient -- that's your argument --

LALANDE
It's "modern" --

(to BORDA)
-- isn't it -- efficiency --

TALLEYRAND
It's too small.

LAPLACE
It hath been spoken.

LALANDE
Too small? What's too [small] --

TALLEYRAND
Your "logic" -- it's too small -- too -- cramped
--

CONDORCET
The people need --

BORDA
The nation --

LAPLACE
(half-mocking)
The universe --

CONDORCET
The people need something bigger, grander --

LAPLACE
Oh yes --

LALANDE
And you know this [how] --

CONDORCET
Yes, something for a nation --

TALLEYRAND
The universe we'll tackle later --

LALANDE
But how? The people -- in whose name -- might we
want to listen to them -- a little --

LAPLACE
The people speak -- without end -- and spit and
mash their vowels -- they're called a mob for a
[reason] --

LALANDE
Oh my --

LAPLACE
What?

LALANDE
Oh my, oh my --

BORDA
What is it?

LALANDE
Laplace, our modern national universalist
physicist --

LAPLACE
Get on with [it] --

LALANDE
-- has had a revelation.

LAPLACE
What?!

LALANDE
The people are not like his zoo of well-mannered
planets and stars --

LAPLACE
Which at least obey simple [laws] --

LALANDE
-- but the people, our newly minted citizens --
our nationals -- fraternité! -- they don't
fol[low] --

LAPLACE
In fact, they do follow -- what are their
superstitions or faiths but a dirty physics --
crippled --

CONDORCET
Look, gentlemen --

BORDA
-- which is why he has us here --

LALANDE
We who are suffering selfless in the service of
the new world order --

BORDA
There is now a given chance --

LALANDE
At least admire the alliteration --

BORDA
(to TALLEYRAND)
Could you move this along?

LALANDE
-- everything we do being done for them -- which
means to them -- the mob, the rabble --

CONDORCET
(to LALANDE)
-- but can we --

LALANDE
It seems I have farted. Therefore, I'll stop.

CONDORCET
Yes --

LALANDE
I didn't really -- it was a figure of [speech] --

CONDORCET
I mean, you're right about the people --

LALANDE
I do try to keep my bowels updated --

LAPLACE
You said you would [stop] --

CONDORCET
Point taken --

LALANDE
(to LAPLACE)
Consider me stopped --

CONDORCET
But there are other considerations in play here.

LALANDE
Things only we savants can know --

LAPLACE
I have worked hard --

LALANDE
-- we specialized savants --

LAPLACE
-- to bring myself to [where] --

BORDA

Your bowels may gleam, but your sarcasm stinks.

LAPLACE

Look, enough --

LALANDE

(indicating TALLEYRAND)

He now has us fighting among ourselves to make us even sharper than the rapiers we already are!

TALLEYRAND

I can speak for myself.

LALANDE

Then I beg you to do so before there's unmetaphoric blood on the floor.

BORDA

He so loves the people --

LALANDE

Then tell me why my proposal to apply the measurements we use in Paris to everybody else everywhere else in France is such a bad idea.

TALLEYRAND

Because -- as I said -- it's too small. Too small-minded. Too convenient. Which is not something I would've expected from you.

LAPLACE

I do believe we are seeing something as rare as the lining up of the planets --

BORDA

He is made silent!

CONDORCET

So let me jump in while your vocal cords regroup. The Paris measures -- the idea of -- is that all we've come to after cutting the aristocrats out of the picture and even making the king dance to a separate tune? He's right -- too small.

BORDA

Too human.

LAPLACE

Too imperfect.

TALLEYRAND

Only the earth will do.

LALANDE
Only the earth will do what?

CONDORCET
As a measure.

LALANDE
Why?

TALLEYRAND
Things human beings decide come and go with the
human beings who decide them. No one decides the
earth.

CONDORCET
Fixed.

LALANDE
"Fixed" is a bull after you chop off its balls --

BORDA
Is that what happened [to you] --

LALANDE
I can't believe that --

LAPLACE
What is your problem? The earth belongs to
everyone, so why not [use] --

LALANDE
You talk about the earth like it's an angel --
fixed, unchanging -- talk about dirty
superstitions --

BORDA
Angels can't be measured --

LALANDE
And belonging to everyone? -- have you looked
into land deeds lately --

BORDA
Maybe we should use the length of your tongue --
except it won't stop wagging long enough --

LALANDE
I'll let you compute with my penis, which at my
age doesn't get that much [use] --

TALLEYRAND
(to CONDORCET)
I always thought these meetings were high-toned,
you know, atmospheric in their intellectual reach
--

CONDORCET

This makes the point: the earth doesn't argue,
insult, backstab, or piss on anybody's shoes --

LALANDE

I guess that rules out my cock setting the
measure of the universe -- damn!

Everyone falls silent. The FRENCH REVOLUTION begins seeping back onto
the stage, carrying its measures, infiltrating -- not a danger, at
least not yet.

TALLEYRAND

Now that we've been appraised of the length of
our esteemed Lalande's member --

LALANDE

Just make it up --

TALLEYRAND

-- I think we have all the information we need to
move on --

LALANDE

Just make up any damn number --

TALLEYRAND

This is what we are going to do, and so all of
you -- by choice, of course -- but you are also
expected to do your citizen's duty. This is a
new age -- for man --

LALANDE

And woman --

TALLEYRAND

And citizen -- we will re-shape everything, bring
the kingdom of God onto earth --

LAPLACE

Sans church and priest --

TALLEYRAND

Days, hours, minutes, weights, measures --
everything. Everything!

A globe descends, illuminated. Or is an cast as an image on a
backdrop.

CONDORCET

The very thing we stand on will become the very
thing that stands for everything that measures
us. One universal people -- one universal
standard --

LALANDE

Made by the Frogs for the Limeys and the Dagos
and the slant-eyes in the east -- that will go
over without a pro[test] --

CONDORCET takes a pointer or a laser pointer.

CONDORCET

I'm not listening to you -- the earth -- the
earth --

CONDORCET turns to the FRENCH REVOLUTION as he points out the earth
and sings his RHAPSODY TO SCIENCE. They stop to listen. There may
even be cheesy heroic music in the background.

CONDORCET

We will make the earth yours! Yours! You who
have never owned shall own! And science will
bring this abundance to you -- not religion, not
kings, but a modern science -- its logic a
scalpel to castrate the dead weight of history,
its rationality smoothing out your lives to make
your spirits more efficient -- a pound will be
the same pound everywhere, a pint a pint, all
exchange clear and honest --

CONDORCET grows increasingly ecstatic. The other SAVANTS, except for
LALANDE, rush into the crowd to take an instantaneous poll as
CONDORCET speaks -- possibly even with microphones.

CONDORCET

-- but no, those names will be not be good
enough! They stink of history! A new name,
clean, razor-edged, new-born -- the meter, yes!
From the Greeks, the first scientists -- the
meter -- to measure -- and it shall be taken from
the earth itself, which we, as scientists, will
measure for you! --

LAPLACE

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

Don't know -- don't know my numbers --

BORDA

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

Would destroy the fabric of ancient --

TALLEYRAND

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST
Anything that would allow me to get a little more
--

BORDA
What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST
"Meter" sounds like a part of a pig --

LAPLACE
What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST
I think a New Age of Man has dawned.

All the SAVANTS crowd around the last respondent and raise his or her hand high, as if that person had just won the final round of a fight.

OTHER FRENCH REVOLUTIONISTS
Hey, what about [me] --

SAVANTS
This is the one for whom we create the new world order! The rest of you can go --

CONDORCET finishes his RHAPSODY focused on that single person.

CONDORCET
Do not worry -- we know all of what you need and give it you as our duty! It is our promise to your future!

The tide of the FRENCH REVOLUTION ebbs again. CONDORCET comes back to earth post-coital.

LALANDE
Ah, yes, we savants always know best --

TALLEYRAND indicates for DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN to enter.

TALLEYRAND
We have bought ourselves some time. Gentlemen, I assume you all know Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Delambre and Pierre-François-André Méchain and their astronomical work.

LAPLACE
(to MÉCHAIN)
Comets, isn't it?

MÉCHAIN
Half a dozen so far, I think, but I think people find my navigation tables are far more useful.

BORDA
(to DELAMBRE)

And I hear your calculations are continually superb.

DELAMBRE
"Continually" is important -- there is always room for improvements.

TALLEYRAND
Good -- we are done with the customary congratulations -- are you both ready to take on the commission for the glory of France and the meter?

DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN turn away from the SAVANTS, who disappear. The globe becomes the Cassini map of France. They take off their jackets and roll up their sleeves as they pore over the map. They use measuring instruments -- calipers, compasses, rulers, etc.

DELAMBRE
France.

MÉCHAIN
We the French.

DELAMBRE
Citizen.

MÉCHAIN
The nation.

They look at each other.

DELAMBRE
All these changes --

MÉCHAIN
There are always changes --

DELAMBRE
Perhaps more difficult for you --

MÉCHAIN looks back at the map.

MÉCHAIN
Why?

DELAMBRE
You have more invested --

MÉCHAIN
I'm not ancient --

DELAMBRE

I only meant that with your seniority at the Academy --

MÉCHAIN

(points)

Cassini measured the meridian fifty years ago -- neither of us was born -- why do you think they want us to [measure] --

DELAMBRE

I didn't mean "ancient" --

MÉCHAIN

I'm also not a secret royalist -- hungering for Louis or whoever's ass is parked on the throne -- are you?

DELAMBRE

No, of course not --

MECHAIN

(peering at map)

Good -- it must be Cassini's tools -- they were not as precise --

DELAMBRE

It's just that --

MÉCHAIN

(to himself)

If we extend the meridian to Barcelona --

(to DELAMBRE)

Just that what? Give it out so that we don't waste any more time on this.

DELAMBRE

Maybe I speak out of my own fears, then --

MÉCHAIN

Why should doing new science make you afraid?

DELAMBRE

It's not doing the [science] --

MÉCHAIN

Then --

DELAMBRE

It's all the "not-science" around the science --

MÉCHAIN

(back to the maps)

All the "not-science" --

DELAMBRE

To go spending money to measure the world when that world is at war -- how do you explain that [to] --

MÉCHAIN

It's simple: leave the commission if you're afraid.

DELAMBRE

I didn't say I was afraid --

MÉCHAIN

You did say "fears."

DELAMBRE

"Apprehensions," then -- "reservations," if that is [better] --

MÉCHAIN

Call 'em what you want, I don't care. Who doesn't have them? But I won't drag my ass and machines and crew and reputation from Barcelona over the goddamn Pyrénées to meet my counterpart from the north at Rodez unless I know -- unless I am assured -- that my counterpart is ready to die to get the right numbers. Eh?

They study the maps.

MÉCHAIN

That was not harsh.

DELAMBRE

I was considering it your benchmark latitude measurement -- of me.

MÉCHAIN

If getting it right -- precise -- precise -- is not worth dying for, then what is?

They study the maps.

DELAMBRE

Dying for --

MÉCHAIN

Does that make a problem for you?

DELAMBRE

Perhaps just a matter of emphasis --

MÉCHAIN

Is there a problem with me?

DELAMBRE

Here's my emphasis -- I think getting it right is important because getting it right -- precise -- is worth living for. I. Like. Living. And I'm not afraid.

MÉCHAIN

You've said that already about your intrepid soul. As for your emphasis about "living" -- I have measured it as over-rated.

DELAMBRE

I want to say "How would your wife and family respond to that?" but I think, don't you, that it would be impolite to ask something so personal when we are, at this point, conjoined by the professional mode of being.

MÉCHAIN

Except that you just asked it.

DELAMBRE

Why, yes I did -- I can be so gauche sometimes -- one of the faults of living, I suppose.

They look at each other.

MÉCHAIN

What hot air is to the Montgolfiers' balloon?
You know --

MÉCHAIN makes a gesture of uplift.

MÉCHAIN

That is my Thérèse to me.

Just at this moment THÉRÈSE enters, pushing a cart with tea and biscuits.

THÉRÈSE

Even astronomers have bodies that must be refreshed --

THÉRÈSE hands out cups, takes one herself.

THÉRÈSE

Since they are not quite as celestial as they may think they are --

DELAMBRE

Madame Méchain --

THÉRÈSE

Though I am quite celestial, right?

(to DELAMBRE)

He tells me I am all the time, but sometimes he can forget. You must be Delambre.

DELAMBRE

I apologize for not --

THÉRÈSE

He actually likes you --

DELAMBRE

Really?

THÉRÈSE

Has followed your work in the Academy -- something about planets, right?

DELAMBRE

Not very [interesting] --

MÉCHAIN

He has mapped the transit of Mercury and the orbit of Uranus --

THÉRÈSE

That was it!

DELAMBRE

You heard about it?

THÉRÈSE

By reading about it.

MÉCHAIN

Now I'm trying to get him to focus on this world.

(hands back his cup)

That was a very welcome distraction. Are you done?

DELAMBRE slurps down his tea, hands back the cup.

THÉRÈSE

You've made him gulp it down like a fish. The taskmaster.

MÉCHAIN

It improves my digestion -- we have work to do.

DELAMBRE

It's fine --

THÉRÈSE

I hope you treat Cassini with more respect.

MÉCHAIN

He did the best that 1740 would let him do -- but
he could only do it --

THÉRÈSE

To within fifteen seconds --

DELAMBRE

You know this?

THÉRÈSE

I've studied Cassini's triangulations -- I've
seen his sextant --

MÉCHAIN

That sounds more dirty than it is --

THÉRÈSE

It needed a cleaning --

MÉCHAIN

We can do it to within one second -- if we can
get back to work.

THÉRÈSE

I am a good actress -- I take my cue and away I
go!

But THÉRÈSE does not move away. MÉCHAIN notices.

MÉCHAIN

What?

THÉRÈSE

Is this a proper way to treat a celestial body?

MÉCHAIN grabs a ball of string, cuts a length from it. He hands one
end to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

The problem with all triangulation is
determining, with exactitude --

MÉCHAIN gestures to THÉRÈSE to hold up a single finger, which she
does.

MÉCHAIN

-- the exact angles, which in turn requires
anchors placed --

MÉCHAIN moves her finger closer to her cheek, hooks the string around
it. He indicates to DELAMBRE to hold up a finger on his other hand,
which he does. MÉCHAIN hooks the string around that finger and hands
the second end to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

-- with clear lines of sight and level planes for calculation.

MÉCHAIN moves her finger back and forth, changing the angles of the triangle, until he gets it set "right," right next to her cheek.

MÉCHAIN

Ah, that looks fine, doesn't it?

DELAMBRE

I believe it is as close to perfect as is humanly possible.

MÉCHAIN

All that is left, then, is the calculation.

MÉCHAIN kisses THÉRÈSE on the cheek.

MÉCHAIN

From the angles the sides are determined --

THÉRÈSE

-- from the sides the length of the meridian --

MÉCHAIN

-- from the meridian the meter, and from the meter the new world order. Simple, simple, so simple.

THÉRÈSE pulls the string out of DELAMBRE's hands and wraps it around her own.

THÉRÈSE

And I will settle for something much less cosmic -- which, in fact, I have already been given and don't need to find. And, thus, I leave happy.

MÉCHAIN

Good -- now we can get down to the real business at hand --

(joking)

-- the business of men!

THÉRÈSE

While I, in all my maiden simplicity, keep hearth and home together and wash out the sweaty neckclothes.

They kiss. THÉRÈSE exits. MÉCHAIN watches her.

DELAMBRE

I see what you mean.

MÉCHAIN

(in jest)

I have no idea what you're talking about.

MÉCHAIN gestures for DELAMBRE to come to him.

MÉCHAIN

Let's review what Cassini did, shall we? Since I assume it'll be you following the meridian down from the north, apprehensions and lust for life and all included in your kit?

DELAMBRE

You have every reason to believe that about me.

MÉCHAIN

Are you married?

DELAMBRE

No.

MÉCHAIN tosses him the ball of string.

MÉCHAIN

You are now.

MÉCHAIN takes a piece of chalk, marks an "X" on the floor.

MÉCHAIN

Here is Delambre, at Evaux -- he takes in a little of the hot mineral baths there, but soon -
-

MÉCHAIN points into the distance.

MECHAIN

He needs to triangulate his way to Puy Violent before the spring and summer are over. What's the big problem?

DELAMBRE pushes in boxes, a chair, etc.

DELAMBRE

The Massif Central, of course.

MÉCHAIN

At least you know your geography.

DELAMBRE

And from Evaux, I have no clear line of sight --

MÉCHAIN

Because --

DELAMBRE

Well, for one --

DELAMBRE piles on another chair or a box.

DELAMBRE

I've got the Puy de Dôme in my face.

MÉCHAIN

So of course you give up, go back to the baths at Evaux to rest your weary savant ass --

DELAMBRE looks around, sees one of the tall ladders, pulls it to Evaux.

MÉCHAIN

-- and spend the rest, and the money, of the revolution --

DELAMBRE

You must have the wrong savant's ass in mind, my dear Méchain --

DELAMBRE climbs the ladder. MÉCHAIN tosses away the ball of string, picks up a length of rope.

DELAMBRE

-- because I'm the kind that pushes my weary savant's ass to new heights --

Holding onto one end, MÉCHAIN tosses DELAMBRE the rest of the rope. DELAMBRE catches it.

DELAMBRE

-- until I can spy the triple towers of the church at Herment --

MÉCHAIN grabs the other ladder, pulls it over, climbs it, holding onto the rope.

MÉCHAIN

And from there?

DELAMBRE

That makes you Bort-les-Orgues.

MÉCHAIN

But you've only got the one measurement, savant, one side of the triangle -- what next?

DELAMBRE hooks the rope around the top of the ladder, then tosses the rope to the ground. He climbs down, pulls in a third ladder and places it.

DELAMBRE

I go to Salers -- here we have Salers --

DELAMBRE grabs the rope.

DELAMBRE

-- so that I can then go climb Puy Violent -- you
can be me for the moment --

DELAMBRE tosses his rope up to MÉCHAIN, then grabs its length and
climbs the ladder at "Salers."

DELAMBRE

Pull it tight -- tight -- from there --

MÉCHAIN

Angle, angle, angle --

DELAMBRE

Savant already knows the length of at least one
side --

MÉCHAIN

Easy to calculate the length of the other two --

DELAMBRE

And any attached triangles --

MÉCHAIN

And so on until the world submits to the
calculations.

DELAMBRE

That's how this savant's unresting, but not
unhandsome, ass would do it.

MÉCHAIN climbs down his ladder.

MÉCHAIN

The sparking and sparkling cleanliness of logic.

MÉCHAIN picks up a glass of water and sips from it. DELAMBRE climbs
down, moves his ladder, joins him.

MÉCHAIN

But the earth is not made so [neatly] --

MÉCHAIN tosses the water onto DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

Heavy rains on Puy Violent --

MÉCHAIN refills the glass, tosses the contents on DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

Very heavy rains --

DELAMBRE, looking around, sees a dish of chalk powder. He grabs a pinchful and tosses it over MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE

Not to mention the haze and fog --

MÉCHAIN pushes a chair against DELAMBRE's shin.

MÉCHAIN

The aches and pains of the body --

DELAMBRE pushes it back, hard.

DELAMBRE

The curvature of the earth --

MÉCHAIN moves in close and does the trick of pointing to DELAMBRE's chest -- when DELAMBRE looks down, MÉCHAIN pops him in the nose.

MÉCHAIN

The refraction of light -- boop --

DELAMBRE grabs the bellows, blows air over MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE

The wrack of storms --

(makes thunder-and-lightning sounds)

Kerrrr -- shzzzz --

MÉCHAIN spins the Franklin electrostatic machine, adding in sparks and crackling.

MÉCHAIN

Kerrr -- shzzzz --

DELAMBRE grabs a leather strop and loops it over MÉCHAIN's head to go around his belly. He vibrates the strop so that it shakes MÉCHAIN's body.

DELAMBRE

MÉCHAIN spins inside the strop and pulls the ends of it out of DELAMBRE's hands. He snaps it at DELAMBRE, driving him back.

MÉCHAIN

Insect bites -- branches whacking you in the eye
--

DELAMBRE grabs a tray, fends off MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE

Rotten-toothed villagers who think you're the
devil come [to] --

MÉCHAIN

Taking a shit with nothing to clean yourself --

DELAMBRE

Hunger and thirst --

MÉCHAIN

Homesickness --

MÉCHAIN stops. DELAMBRE stops. They look at the triangle of rope
attached to the ladders.

MÉCHAIN

That's what they think, don't they? That the
numbers will solve everything, dissolve --

DELAMBRE

The world's ideal.

MÉCHAIN

As if numbers don't lie. As if people with
numbers don't lie.

MÉCHAIN throws the strop onto the table, takes a chair, straddles it
as he sits.

DELAMBRE

You're having second thoughts. Aren't you.

MÉCHAIN

Yes. And third thoughts. And beyond. All in
prime numbers.

Unseen by either of them, THÉRÈSE enters. She sits, watches, listens.

MÉCHAIN

What do you make of things these days?

DELAMBRE takes a chair, sits.

DELAMBRE

"Things" --

MÉCHAIN

Things --

DELAMBRE

"Things." Do you mean our mission -- the meter -
- all things that begin with "M" -- or "things,"
as "in general" -- [or]

MÉCHAIN

Don't bullshit --

DELAMBRE

I was [just] --

MÉCHAIN

You don't do it well, I don't take it well --

DELAMBRE

I apologize --

MÉCHAIN

The world -- the state of the world -- that we
have been commanded to transform into numbers --

DELAMBRE

That world --

MÉCHAIN

That world --

DELAMBRE

Ah, that world --

MÉCHAIN

I asked your thoughts --

DELAMBRE

My thoughts are beside the point.

MÉCHAIN

You don't joke well, and you don't lie well. I
know your history --

DELAMBRE

And I know yours --

MÉCHAIN

So then you know that the two of us have worked
very hard, up through poverty and chance and a
lot of shit --

DELAMBRE

With luck --

MÉCHAIN

-- to earn our way -- of course luck! -- don't
belittle what I'm saying -- and now -- these
"things" --

DELAMBRE says nothing.

MÉCHAIN

It's safe to talk here -- I can't vouch for
Paris, but in my own [house] --

Still DELAMBRE says nothing. MÉCHAIN starts to get out of his chair.

MÉCHAIN

Maybe I was wrong --

DELAMBRE

Don't -- sit --

MÉCHAIN

Only if you trust me when I [say] --

DELAMBRE

Please -- sit -- of course I trust you -- this is
not easy --

MÉCHAIN

But you feel --

DELAMBRE

I feel, yes, the threat --

DELAMBRE laughs.

MÉCHAIN

What?

DELAMBRE

It brings to my mind a circus -- no, this, this
is closer: clowns with knives --

MÉCHAIN

Murder in their eyes --

DELAMBRE

Bloody greasepaint --

MÉCHAIN

In today, out tomorrow -- out yesterday, in today
-- or liquidated --

DELAMBRE

I also think of Louis' menagerie --

MÉCHAIN

DELAMBRE

Don't get me started on my own list [of] --

MÉCHAIN gets out of his chair, acts out his next words.

MÉCHAIN

Clowns for you? This is my image -- a cleaning lady -- she wears the tri-color and comes into a room called King Louis and France and -- rag in one hand, broom in the other, pushing the water bucket along with her foot -- she is told to sweep it all away, erase every trace of everything old --

DELAMBRE

Swoosh-swish --

MÉCHAIN

-- and so we get the month named Brumaire instead of November and 100-minute hours and 400-degree circles --

DELAMBRE

Not to mention the always-there, never-going actors of war, famine, pestilence, and death --

MÉCHAIN jumps back into his chair and pulls back on it like a horse's reins.

MÉCHAIN

The four horsemen --
(sound of horse)
Eeeeeeeee -- apocalypse!

MÉCHAIN lets the chair slam down. He jumps up, goes to the ladders, pulls them so that the rope is tighter.

MÉCHAIN

This project -- this mission -- if we get it right -- if we really make something solid that outlasts the petty niggling -- the bloody thirst -- the -- unreliability -- of everything -- everyone -- else --

DELAMBRE

It would not be bad for an epitaph.

MÉCHAIN

From the one who wants to live! Something solid -- ideal --

DELAMBRE

You can be fierce when you want to be --

MÉCHAIN

Do you agree with me?

THÉRÈSE rises, enters the scene.

THÉRÈSE

Oh, he is so fierce! My gallant number-cruncher!

DELAMBRE rises. THÉRÈSE points to the triangle of rope.

THÉRÈSE

Did you reach Rodez with your triangles? And why is your shirt wet?

DELAMBRE

A fierce climb -- up Puy Violent.

THÉRÈSE

(to MÉCHAIN)

And you -- chalk --

MÉCHAIN

(rising)

Church towers at Herment -- very dusty --

THÉRÈSE moves the ladders so that the rope tightens even more.

THÉRÈSE

Can't say much for your observation platforms -- sloppy, sloppy -- those angles! -- better -- that cleaning lady you were gabbing about -- you need her along to keep your head out of the clouds and your numbers pin-sharp.

THÉRÈSE steps back, surveys her work.

THÉRÈSE

There -- the meter. The. Meter. Done.

THÉRÈSE turns to MÉCHAIN.

THÉRÈSE

Now you don't have to leave. Your wife. Your children -- does he? -- and leave us to the clowns --

MÉCHAIN

You were -- sitting -- there for that long.

THÉRÈSE

I know you -- I live in the world, I'm not wrapped in cotton --

MÉCHAIN

No you're [not] --

THÉRÈSE

-- you think I want you away with "things" as bone-crushing as they are right now?

DELAMBRE

I should leave --

THÉRÈSE

No -- no! -- all this has to be part of your calculations -- the Great Calculations! -- yours and his -- the figuring -- though, heavens forbid and the gods of rationality shiver, not anything the Academy would fold into its equations because such "things" -- my things -- are female and uterine and not up to the high masculine standards of The Number --

THÉRÈSE goes to the ladders and pushes them hard -- perhaps almost knocks them over.

THÉRÈSE

-- that cock of the walk -- the primality of the phallus as the big hard Number One fucking the --

MÉCHAIN

Thérèse --

THÉRÈSE

I see that shock has entered the room --

THÉRÈSE stops.

THÉRÈSE

You will kill yourself -- wipe yourself out -- for something you can't even hold in your hand -- excuse me --

THÉRÈSE exits.

DELAMBRE

There --

MÉCHAIN

Don't --

DELAMBRE

-- there are others who [could] --

MÉCHAIN

Fuck off --

DELAMBRE

Legendre, for instance --

MÉCHAIN

I said fuck [off] --

DELAMBRE

It's just that --

MÉCHAIN

I will fix things in my own goddamn house --

MÉCHAIN goes to the ladders, corrects them.

MÉCHAIN

I will fix --

DELAMBRE gives him a hand. MÉCHAIN pushes him away, finishes.

MÉCHAIN

No poetic crap about figuring "the heart" into the "calculation" --

DELAMBRE

Your family --

MÉCHAIN

None of that "the heart has its reasons" Pascal bull[shit] --

The two men fall silent.

MÉCHAIN

I need -- I need --

MÉCHAIN reviews the ladders.

MÉCHAIN

So, you have reached Rodez -- but you, the younger, have the easy part -- to me they give the Pyrénées -- from Bar-the-lon-a [with the lisp] north -- c'mon, don't wallow --

DELAMBRE

Obviously --

MÉCHAIN

Yes?

DELAMBRE

-- the higher altitudes go to the man with the altitudinous intellect --

MÉCHAIN

Ah-ha -- I love her, you know -- my family -- but there are --

DELAMBRE

The heart does have its reasons -- just admit it --

MÉCHAIN

Here's one: one ten-millionth of the distance
from equator to pole -- fixed -- for all people
for all time --

DELAMBRE

Well, then, let's go hunt down the meter.

* * *

Scene 3

September 1792: the main square of Saint-Denis, ancestral burial
grounds for French monarchs.

Upstage, as if in sarcophagi, stand five corpses of the French kings,
looking very much like corpses.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION gathers around DELAMBRE, who is surrounded by
various instrument cases and unsealed documents. The REVOLUTION is
armed and not in a good mood. [NOTE: FR stands for any member of the
crowd.]

FR

Who the fuck again did you say you were?

DELAMBRE

The National Convention has --

FR

Whose fucking conviction?

DELAMBRE

Convention -- actually, yours -- in your [name] -
-

FR

Not my fucking conviction --

DELAMBRE

Conven[tion]--

FR

And what the fuck did you say you were doing?

FR

With all this fucking equipment?

DELAMBRE

Measuring [the] --

FR

And that takes climbing up in the fucking towers?

FR

How do we know that you're not one of the fucking enemy --

DELAMBRE

As I said, I have pa[pers] --

FR

How do we know you're not --

FR

-- one of those fucking Prussian fucks --

FR

Who are fucking us up along the fucking border --

FR

Why aren't you fucking telling us what we want to know?

DELAMBRE

What do you want me to say? I mean, what the fuck do you want me to say?

FR

Explain yourself again.

FR

What again is all this shit?

DELAMBRE

Is your mayor ar[ound] --

FR

You talk to us -- he answers to us --

FR

So you have to talk to us --

FR

Because we are fucking citizens now --

FR

Citizens!

The FRENCH REVOLUTION roars its approval. DELAMBRE shrugs.

DELAMBRE

I'm here to measure the earth. That's right. It's called geodesy. These are the things I measure it with.

FR

And once more, why would anyone in their right or left fucking minds --

FR

Or up or down --

FR

-- want to do this?

FR

Right now, with the scumbag Prussians marching --

FR

To cut our balls off --

FR

-- and put the king back on the throne --

DELAMBRE

Please don't touch --

One of the people takes out what looks like a telescope.

FR

How do we know that you're not looking through this because the king has paid you?

ALL

Tell us what we fucking want to know!

DELAMBRE

(calmly)

I will fucking tell you something that you want to fucking know, even though you don't know you fucking want to know it yet.

This stumps the crowd for a moment. DELAMBRE walks up to the person holding the telescope and gently eases it from his hands.

DELAMBRE

I need this back from the citizen.

DELAMBRE replaces it in its case.

DELAMBRE

Who here has the balls to learn something new? Eh? Anyone? Who's been to Paris?

One raises his hand.

DELAMBRE

Ah, good. When you were there, did you have a pint of beer?

FR

I did.

FR

He sucked down more than one, the pig! I was with --

DELAMBRE

One is fine, one is all I need. Ever raise a pint here in Saint-Denis?

FR

Boy, he sucks it down just like --

FR

Shut the fuck up. Yeah, I do.

DELAMBRE

Same pint?

FR

Get more here in the fucking pint than in Paris.

DELAMBRE

But they're both pints. Am I right?

FR

Yeah -- so?

DELAMBRE

Let's say I wanted to trade you a pint of Saint-Denis bière de garde for a Paris pint of lager -- how would you do it so each of us would get a good deal? Huh? Ah, got your tongue.

(to crowd)

Any bakers around?

FR

Here.

DELAMBRE

Sell by the pound?

FR

'Course.

DELAMBRE

Iron-worker? You -- good.

(to crowd)

Whose pound is heavier -- baker or ironmonger? C'mon, you all know this.

FR

The smith's.

DELAMBRE

Right -- but they're both called pounds. How'd the baker's get lighter? I leave you to ponder that. Cloth-sellers?

A couple raise their hands.

DELAMBRE

Come here. How big is an aine?

One stretches out one of his arms.

FR

They got the iron bar stuck in the wall inside the basilica that shows it.

DELAMBRE tows the man out of the crowd.

DELAMBRE

In my father's shop, my father used one aine to buy wholesale --

(shortens the arm)

-- a shorter aine to sell retail, and in the village around Amiens --

(moves the arm around)

thirteen different aines -- one two three -- So let's say we want to sell cloth to each other -- I've got some great cambric, you have some excellent wool. But your Saint-Denis aine is different than my father's Amiens aine. What do you we do? What would you do?

(to the crowd)

What would be fair?

FR

I ain't going to Paris, so why [bother] --

DELAMBRE

But Paris is coming to you. Paris is coming to you -- the world is coming to you. And my job is to measure the world that, like it or not, is coming down your road. Look --

DELAMBRE wades into the crowd and pulls out enough people to make a circle.

DELAMBRE

Behold, the world!

FR

Fucking right, we are!

DELAMBRE

You, sir, are the north pole. Put a tri-color on his head -- excellent. You, madam, are at the equator. Another tri-color for the citizen! From one tri-color to the other -- from you to here -- something called the meridian, the French meridian -- it runs through Dunkerque --

FR

Where the hell is Dunkerque?

DELAMBRE

-- through Paris -- up north -- all the way down to Perpignan.

FR

Where the hell is --

DELAMBRE

South of here. I have been asked -- nay, I have been commanded -- by the National Convention in Paris -- by the Revolution! -- in your name! --

FR

Long live our fucking name!

DELAMBRE

-- to measure -- yes! -- this French meridian to get a number -- a special number -- a transforming number -- do you follow what I'm saying?

FR

Go on --

DELAMBRE

A number that will turn your pint and the Paris pint into the same pint, your pound and his pound into the same pound so that no matter where you go in France, we can do business and not get cheated, which you can't do because of -- so many --

Silence in the crowd.

FR

That's why you're fucking doing this?

DELAMBRE

I can see that you -- and you, and you -- so many of you -- you're going to go break your asses against the Prussians coming down from the north. Why? For what? For the king?

FR

Fuck that -- he's toast.

DELAMBRE

For the abbé or the lord up in the castle --

FR

We threw those fuckers to the pigs!

DELAMBRE

Then why? Why? For what?

FR

For the revolution, you asshole.

DELAMBRE

Exactly! For country, for patrie, for the nation, for being a citizen!--

FR

Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité -- all that shit!

DELAMBRE

And not just for you but for the whole world! This transforming number? This number that will turn that into this, not just for us but for all mankind -- a pound here will be the same pound in China, and then we can exchange everything -- beer, understanding, knowledge, peace, a length of your best wool. To the French meridian!

The REVOLUTION does not know what to make of this. Finally.

FR

You're saying that we will get all this from one fucking number?

FR

Must be some fucking amazing number.

DELAMBRE

It will be -- if you let me go find it.

The REVOLUTION thinks. Then.

FR

Let him go find his stupid fucking number. I got a better idea.

(upraised middle finger)

Louis, this your number -- a fuck to you and all your ancestors. We're gonna kill you, he knows that, so let's go kill all the fucking kings to make sure Louis's got company!

With a roar, the FRENCH REVOLUTION turns to the French kings upstage. As they do, DELAMBRE begins hauling off his equipment.

With the proper SOUND EFFECTS, the REVOLUTION pries open the coffins and drags the corpses forward and piles them up. DELAMBRE is working hard to be inconspicuous and efficient at the same time.

The REVOLUTION is none too gentle.

FR

(throws corpse down)

Here's Henry! Did you see the lead in those fucking coffins?

FR

Tons of it -- good Saint-Denis tons!

FR

(throws corpse down)

Pop goes the Sun King. What a fucking stench!

FR

Lead good for cannonballs.

FR

Here's Francois the first.

FR

Here's a coupla more -- who gives a fuck about names?

They set the corpses on fire. By now DELAMBRE has his equipment out of harm's way. The REVOLUTION is bathed in the greasy light of the end of French royalty. DELAMBRE watches them watching the fire. The SOUND of a guillotine, and a head wearing a crown comes rolling out.

* * *

Scene 4

MÉCHAIN in Barcelona, winter of 1793, on the roof of the Fontana de Oro. His right arm is in a sling, and physically he is in pain.

Evening, cold. Star-filled sky. TRANCHOT, his assistant, beats his arms to warm himself. There are several benches or stools around.

TRANCHOT

It won't be long now.

MÉCHAIN says nothing.

TRANCHOT

Though, to be honest, I don't know why you need more latitude measurements -- you've already got your numbers from Mont-Jouy, already sent them off to Paris -- we've been at this for two months already --

MÉCHAIN

Because, Tranchot, I have nothing else to do.

TRANCHOT

That isn't your fault.

MÉCHAIN

I know it's not my fault! I give all thanks to the glorious revolution --

TRANCHOT

Don't --

MÉCHAIN

-- in France for --

TRANCHOT

Yes, it's too bad that things of great pitch and moment --

MÉCHAIN

Slaughters, you mean --

TRANCHOT

-- couldn't wait until you fin[ished] --

MÉCHAIN

Tranchot, we are buried in Barcelona because no one in France can control France -- heads -- everywhere --

They fall into silence.

TRANCHOT

Let me at least bring out some mulled wine --

MÉCHAIN

You've read what I've read --

TRANCHOT

A "no" to the wine, then --

MÉCHAIN

Robespierre --

TRANCHOT

Let's not --

MÉCHAIN

-- a man to make any man sick to his stomach --

TRANCHOT

Enough, please?

They fall into silence, but TRANCHOT can't help himself.

TRANCHOT

The Revolution does have its enemies -- weasels
in the henhouse --

MÉCHAIN

You're right, it's certainly a barnyard --

TRANCHOT

Let's not -- let me get some [wine] --

MÉCHAIN

I don't want wine --

TRANCHOT

The Spanish wine is good --

MÉCHAIN

I don't want --

TRANCHOT

-- even if the Spaniards are bastards for
starting this [war] --

MÉCHAIN

(mocking)

"Spain started this war" --

TRANCHOT

They're afraid, they are, the Spanish, afraid,
that's why --

MÉCHAIN

Of butchers? In tricolor? Chopping off a king's
head -- such a brave act!

TRANCHOT

You would have spared him?

MÉCHAIN

It's being called the Terror --

TRANCHOT

I know what it's being called --

MÉCHAIN

I had no love for Louis -- for the claptrap --

TRANCHOT

But --

MÉCHAIN

He supported science -- that's all that matters
to me -- ever matters to me -- killing him got us
the Terror and this war us buried [here] -- so
huzzah!

TRANCHOT

And no warm wine.

They wait in the cold.

TRANCHOT

One other thing --

MÉCHAIN

What?

TRANCHOT

Your arm -- you really should rest it --

MÉCHAIN

The arm is what it is --

TRANCHOT

And that "it" is not much --

MÉCHAIN

That's not for you to say --

TRANCHOT

You can't even tighten the screws, can you? I
have to do it for you --

MÉCHAIN

If you're suffering, Tranchot, go to your wine --

TRANCHOT

-- and how precise do you think [that] --

MÉCHAIN

Stop blabbering, will you? It shows you don't
understand.

TRANCHOT

I understand cold, I understand pain --

MÉCHAIN

But not --

TRANCHOT

Not what? Not what?

MÉCHAIN

This -- this is the anchor of all of it --

TRANCHOT

Any first-year grunt at the Observatory can plot a latitude --

MÉCHAIN

But not like we can do it if we want to -- the most precise in 4000 years --

TRANCHOT

That's what's keeping [you] --

MÉCHAIN

Why wouldn't you want that?

TRANCHOT

It's not that I wouldn't --

MÉCHAIN

So what's the problem?

TRANCHOT

I don't see the "why" of doing it if the figures you got at Mont-Jouy are good enough --

MÉCHAIN

"Good enough" is not good enough for me.

TRANCHOT

Which makes me wonder if anything would be good [enough] --

MÉCHAIN

Maybe a new assistant --

TRANCHOT

Not a chance -- if nature is God's handiwork --

MÉCHAIN

Please --

TRANCHOT

-- it's pretty slapped-together -- jury-rigged -- just look at our bodies, you one-armed, clavicle-broken, and me with my aching joints --

MÉCHAIN

I'm fine --

TRANCHOT

Doubted -- so why do you think you can do any better than nature when maybe "better"'s not even a condition out there to be met? It's not like nature worries about being precise --

MÉCHAIN

I do -- it's what I do --

TRANCHOT

To the nth --

MÉCHAIN

-- it's what I am --

TRANCHOT

You can't be a "precise" -- you can't be an adject[ive] --

MÉCHAIN

And that's why you think good enough is good enough --

TRANCHOT

If what "works" works --

MÉCHAIN

That's not why we have intellect -- we have it to go one better, two better, a thousand better -- it's glorious -- we should get [ready] --

TRANCHOT

And my perfecting intellect reminds me that there is "good enough" mulled wine and chorizo downstairs -- at war with Spain, perhaps --

(mocking)

Hijos de puta! But, I admit, they have taken care [of us] --

MÉCHAIN

Here's why -- you want a "why"? Here's a "why."

TRANCHOT

Why?

MÉCHAIN

I miss my wife and children -- I miss -- my right arm is mashed from the accident -- my ribs, my collarbone -- military death in the mountains -- heads lopped off -- but then --

(points overhead)

Polaris and Thuban and Kochab and Mizar sliding along on their numbers -- why not give myself over? Give myself away?

TRANCHOT

Polaris and friends are cold -- "precise" is cold
--

MÉCHAIN

They rise -- indifferent and regular -- but I can
bring them home to me by their numbers -- I can
bring everything, eventually, home by the numbers
--

TRANCHOT

It's what you do -- it's what you are --

MÉCHAIN

Without family they're family --

TRANCHOT

And brother Polaris is rising and the wine will
have to wait --

MÉCHAIN

It will. Arm or no arm, I will not be replaced
on this mission, I will leave everybody with
nothing to question about what I've done --

Shift to MÉCHAIN in his workspace. His coat is off, his arm is out of
the sling, his body healed, his manner energized.

Around him hang large sheets of brown kraft paper covered in
calculations. A roll of kraft paper to one side, with what looks like
a squeeze bucket and a mop-sized paintbrush or calligraphy brush.

A cup of wine on a table.

MÉCHAIN

-- and it's come down to a simple matter --
simple, simpler, simplest -- comparing numbers to
numbers and extracting the answer --

MÉCHAIN drinks from the wine -- he now clearly loves the taste and the
act of drinking. He shakes out his body, like a fighter preparing to
get into the ring. He pulls down various papers as he speaks and
drinks.

MÉCHAIN

(pulls paper)

All right, I've got the latitude data from Mont-
Jouy -- I've already sent it to the king-killers
in Paris, so they know I've been working and
working hard and they can't bump me from the
mission --

(another paper)

The latitude data from the Fontana de Oro -- all-
hail to that bastard Tranchot for his help!

(another paper)

I know the distances between the two from our
triangulations -- all-hail again to the bastard -
-

MÉCHAIN arranges the large sheets of paper on the floor. He rolls out
a sheet of kraft paper, tears it off, slides the bucket and mop over.

MÉCHAIN

Now -- the dessert of it all, the pièce, the
coup. Delambre, up north -- you prick, you
already have your latitude done -- but it will
not be as precise as mine, it can never be as
precise as mine, because no one observes,
records, computes, understands like me --

MÉCHAIN swirls the mop in the bucket.

MÉCHAIN

The southern anchor of the meridian -- my
calculations -- my latitude -- with it, the
definitive French meridian --

MÉCHAIN squeezes out the liquid.

MÉCHAIN

From this, the definitive world meridian -- and
then the definitive meter -- no more
approximations, guesses, conjectures,
suppositions, lies anymore, the numbers will not
lie --

With the mop MÉCHAIN begins to set out his formulas. He is quite
fastidious about this, wetting and squeezing as needed, until he gets
to the answer. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN grabs the roll of kraft paper, rolls another length, rips it
off. He re-does the calculations with much less care. He freezes.
He stares.

MÉCHAIN does it a third time. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN

That can't --

MÉCHAIN drops the mop. He pulls out the previous sheets with the
figures on them, reviews them, looks at the other results of his
calculations.

MÉCHAIN

Wrong -- wrong -- but which? Which ones? Which
are wrong? Which are -- Mont-Jouy? The
Fontana? Maybe I've --

MÉCHAIN reviews the scroll of his calculations.

MÉCHAIN

-- put down -- the -- wrong -- the wrong --
they're not -- wrong --

MÉCHAIN speaks to the audience.

MÉCHAIN

It's really -- it's really a simple matter --
simple --

MÉCHAIN holds up one sheet.

MÉCHAIN

The latitude at Mont-Jouy --

MÉCHAIN holds up another sheet.

MÉCHAIN

The latitude -- at Fontana de Oro -- my arm
crushed -- I still did all the work --

MÉCHAIN holds up a third sheet.

MÉCHAIN

The triangulations -- Mont-Jouy here, Fontana
there, the lighthouse there to anchor the two --
simple -- one-point-one miles between the two --
a one-point-one mile arc -- really, it's tiny --
small --

MÉCHAIN returns to the roll of calculations.

MÉCHAIN

But but but but -- it can't --

MÉCHAIN turns back to the audience.

MÉCHAIN

Mont-Jouy -- 41 degrees, 21 minutes, 45-point-
one-zero seconds -- yes, I got it that fine --
Fontana -- 41 degrees, 22 minutes, 47-point-nine-
one seconds -- fine fine fine fine -- according
to the simple requirements of -- take one from
the other -- that's all it takes -- simple,
simple --

MÉCHAIN is stunned.

MÉCHAIN

3-point-2 seconds. Not 3-point-2 seconds to be
folded into 600-mile arc from Dunkerque to Mont-
Jouy -- that would be --

(figures)
One one-hundredth percent. Small, close to
nothing. Nothing. But over one-point-one miles
-- that's --

(figures)
Five-point-four percent -- I'm off by three or
four hundred feet -- which one is wrong? which
one has proven me wrong? Which one, which one,
which one, which one -- I've got to go back, I've
got to re-do --

THE SPANIARDS arrive, oozing in. They rough up MÉCHAIN and his
calculations.

MÉCHAIN
-- everything -- don't -- please -- and I've
already sent -- to Paris -- they'll use the Mont-
Jouy figures -- don't --

SPANIARD
The bastard Frog is still here --

MÉCHAIN
You have to, you have to let me go back -- check
over --

SPANIARD
Your goddamned revolutionary armies --

MÉCHAIN
I don't control the armies -- please --

SPANIARD
They want to make Catalonia a "sister republic" -
-

MÉCHAIN
Please -- please --

SPANIARD
Goddamn atheists trucking in their filth --

MÉCHAIN
Please -- just a little more time --

SPANIARD
It would be a smart thing for a smart man to get
his smart ass out of Spain while he's still got
his smarts in one piece in one place in his body
--

By this time, MÉCHAIN is in no position to argue.

MÉCHAIN
I'll go. I'll go!

THE SPANIARDS leave.

MÉCHAIN

I'll go -- where?

MÉCHAIN picks through his calculations, now trampled by THE SPANIARDS.

MÉCHAIN

It's all wrong -- it's all wrong -- the figures
they have in Paris -- the meter will be --

MÉCHAIN pulls the paper into himself, almost as if he were shrouding himself.

MÉCHAIN

The truth can eat your heart --

Several bursts of lightning and thunder. Smoke. Wind. The cries of ravens.

INTERMISSION

Scene 5

Several bursts of lightning and thunder. Smoke. Wind. Luminescent STARS float through the darkness [can be carried by actors on long poles]. Perhaps there is also a music of the spheres. MÉCHAIN appears, smeared with his calculations. He watches the STARS -- a moment of quiet fascination.

MÉCHAIN

I have given my life to digging out your truths.
And I now have no idea what that means, has
meant, will mean.

MÉCHAIN reaches upward and, in a pulling motion, draws the darkness over him. The STARS continue to move in their stately flotations.

* * *

Scene 6

BORDA, LALANDE, LAPLACE, DELAMBRE. NAPOLEON to one side. In the background, the SAVANTS OF EUROPE. During the scene, they dance a stately dance.

LAPLACE

Where the hell --
(a glance at NAPOLEON)
Where. Is. Méchain?

DELAMBRE

Carcassone, I think -- it's not [clear] --

LAPLACE
You don't know precisely?

DELAMBRE
It's not clear --

LAPLACE
You are supposed to --

DELAMBRE
His wife received a letter --

NAPOLEON clears his throat. LAPLACE looks worried. He waggles his fingers for the letter. DELAMBRE does not give him the letter.

LAPLACE
Give it to me.

DELAMBRE
It's quite pers[onal] --

LAPLACE
Do I need to remind you --

NAPOLEON clears his throat.

LAPLACE
Do I need to remind you?

DELAMBRE fishes the letter from his coat, hands it over.

DELAMBRE
It should be [read] --

LAPLACE
Don't tell me [how to] --

(skims)
Where the hell is he?

LALANDE
As usual, our Laplace is being broad-minded and courteous and respect[ful] --

LAPLACE
Shut up --

DELAMBRE
It should be read with some -- discretion --

LALANDE
Because he means, where is Méchain in some spiritual sense?

LAPLACE
I don't mean that at all.

LALANDE
Ah, well --

LAPLACE
I want to know his geography. Where the hell is Pradelles? What is this shit he writes?

BORDA
May I?

LAPLACE tosses the letter.

LAPLACE
Tell me again why we're paying [him] --

BORDA reads, exchanges a glance with DELAMBRE. LAPLACE indicates the SAVANTS OF EUROPE.

LAPLACE
I asked these gentlemen --

BORDA
Ever the self-promoter --
(to DELAMBRE)
This doesn't sound [good] --

LAPLACE
-- to come put their stamp on the meter --

SAVANTS
The International Fraternity of Science!

LAPLACE
(to BORDA)
And why not?

BORDA
If the meter is extracted from nature -- the French meridian standing in for all meridians! -- eh? -- who needs them to put a stamp on it as right?

NAPOLEAN clears his throat. LAPLACE fawns.

LAPLACE
My dear General -- I'm sorry --

NAPOLEAN
My dear instructor -- I'm not --

LAPLACE

Please meet the newest member of the Academy of Sciences -- a former pupil of mine, I might add -
- Napoleon Bonaparte.

BORDA, DELAMBRE, and LALANDE look at each other, then at LAPLACE.

LALANDE

What about Lenoir's candidacy?

SAVANTS

When The Money supports Science, Science must support The Money!

LAPLACE

(hissing)

His turn will come!

(to NAPOLEON)

What have you brought us back from Italy?

NAPOLEON

Other than Italy itself?

LAPLACE laughs over-hard. The others offer reluctant smiles.
NAPOLEON unfolds a large piece of paper and hands it to LAPLACE.

SAVANTS

Who will dare say this Emperor is naked?

LAPLACE

We have come to expect everything from you --

NAPOLEON

It's a new geometric proof --

LAPLACE

-- except a lesson in mathematics -- look at that!

LAPLACE hands the paper to BORDA, who glances at it and hands it on to the others.

NAPOLEON

I hope this proves the bona fides of Bonaparte.

LAPLACE

Very good!

(to the others)

Very good, don't you think --

DELAMBRE folds the paper and hands it back to BONAPARTE.

DELAMBRE

Your bona fides are quite in order, General.

SAVANTS

Sucking-up is the Better Part of Wisdom.

NAPOLEON

Delambre, right? And where is your cher maître these days?

DELAMBRE

General?

NAPOLEON

Méchain --

DELAMBRE

Ah --

NAPOLEON

-- the south to your north, the plumb line to your zenith --

DELAMBRE

He was forced to go through Italy to get back from Spain --

NAPOLEON

Roundabout --

BORDA

There was a war [going] --

LAPLACE

Méchain has stuck himself in Pradelles --

NAPOLEON

A little scut-town in the south, isn't it --

DELAMBRE

He's starting the southern triangles, to link up to what he did in Spain -- under great pressure, I might add --

BORDA

There was a war [going] --

LAPLACE

We know that!

SAVANTS

Savants can be so sauvage.

DELAMBRE

Méchain did his duty well, General, under [great] --

LAPLACE
As he should be expected [to] --

BORDA
There was a war going on --
(to LAPLACE)

-- ha! --

(to NAPOLEON)
-- which Monsieur Laplace luckily missed --

NAPOLEON
But you have already reached Rodez?

DELAMBRE
I had the easier part --

NAPOLEON
And you've gotten things ready to measure the
baseline, the northern [baseline] --

DELAMBRE
Near Melun, yes --

NAPOLEON
And your friend's southern baseline -- Perpignan
--

DELAMBRE
You are well-informed --

LAPLACE
He is Napoleon --

DELAMBRE
I have every faith Méchain will complete [the] --

NAPOLEON
Faith? Science and faith?

SAVANTS
The time has come. The time is now.

DELAMBRE
When it comes to friends, yes, faith, of course -
-

NAPOLEON
(to LAPLACE)
I want this conference done. I want it to run on
time. I want this Méchain to hand over every
scrap to him --

(indicates DELAMBRE)
-- like a doctor handing over a newborn -- and if
this doesn't happen, I will do away with what
needs doing away with. Understood, my teacher?

LAPLACE

As you always were, and are, clear and direct.

NAPOLEON

And I guess that that now makes me the teacher, eh?

LAPLACE

I am glad to be your pupil. We are all glad --

NAPOLEON turns and leaves, taking the SAVANTS OF EUROPE with him. LAPLACE gives DELAMBRE a warning look, follows. BORDA hands back MÉCHAIN's letter to DELAMBRE.

BORDA

"I must return to Barcelona"? What does --

DELAMBRE

An obsession, apparently --

BORDA

About?

DELAMBRE

About -- hmmm -- well, it seems --

BORDA

Spain has always been an infec[tion] --

DELAMBRE

His latitude measurements, at Barcelona --

BORDA

That letter -- it's embarrassing --

DELAMBRE

And you've never felt unsure?

BORDA

Not to the point of --

DELAMBRE

He thinks --

BORDA

It doesn't matter what he thinks. Or feels. Laplace didn't bring in General Cock-of-the-Walk there because he thought [it would] --

DELAMBRE

I understand --

MÉCHAIN appears.

BORDA

The knives are back -- and they'll be stuck in
backs [unless] -- and Méchain has no more
latitude -- Laplace has run him out of latitude -
- you are his keeper -- you are -- say no, but
you are. Appointed by fate. So much money, so
much time has been plunged into this -- you are
his keeper --

MÉCHAIN

Will you argue --

DELAMBRE

It's not me he needs --

MÉCHAIN

-- for me to return? Otherwise, shame --

BORDA

Then find --

MÉCHAIN

I will soon cease to exist --

BORDA

-- what he needs.

MÉCHAIN

Either I will soon recover the strength and
energy I should never have lost, or I will soon
cease to exist.

BORDA

I don't care if we get him back. I do, but I
don't -- what's a body? -- we need his data.
Right now, his numbers --

DELAMBRE

I will find what he needs.

BORDA

As you usually do with everything.

THÉRÈSE appears, wearing a shawl, carrying a small bag.

THÉRÈSE

You called?

BORDA

He called.

DELAMBRE

I called.

THÉRÈSE

I came.

BORDA

And I'm going.

BORDA leaves.

THÉRÈSE

May I?

DELAMBRE hands her the letter. MÉCHAIN brings her a chair, and she sits. MÉCHAIN sits on the floor and watches her.

THÉRÈSE

We have children -- sons -- the younger will
hardly remember -- six years he's been gone --

DELAMBRE

I wouldn't have asked you --

THÉRÈSE

I haven't said I'd go.

MÉCHAIN brings DELAMBRE a chair. DELAMBRE sits. The lights change.
STARS float overhead.

DELAMBRE

Of course -- I can't force you --

THÉRÈSE

Do you think I don't want to go?

DELAMBRE

I don't know what to think about a situation I
don't know anything about --

THÉRÈSE

Ever the calculator --

DELAMBRE

Sometimes I wish your husband --

THÉRÈSE

So do I. So do I. "Either I will soon recover
the strength and energy I should never have lost,
or I will soon cease to exist." It's -- somewhat
-- pathetic, isn't it.

DELAMBRE

Something gnaws at him --

THÉRÈSE

I've already sent him a letter. Telling him I am coming. Did you think -- I am not waiting around for a reply, which, knowing him, would be all about why I shouldn't --

DELAMBRE

I get letters sometimes ten pages long -- both sides -- in a very small hand -- if he worked as hard on his work as he does on --

THÉRÈSE holds up a hand to stop him. She turns to MÉCHAIN and speaks directly to him. DELAMBRE disappears. They walk together under the STARS.

THÉRÈSE

I have told him emphatically not to accommodate me by proposing a rendezvous in a town appropriate to a lady. I will not waste even a quarter-hour of his time, because he does not have the time to waste. I have told him that I will gladly meet him on the mountain-top, sleep in a tent or a stable, and live on cheese and milk; that with him, I will be content anywhere.

THÉRÈSE moves away from him.

THÉRÈSE

Six years. You haven't, in six years --

MÉCHAIN

Paris, I know, just down that road -- a week --

THÉRÈSE

A week away --

MÉCHAIN

I know --

THÉRÈSE

Six years, and you haven't --

MÉCHAIN

I know -- so they've sent the wife to collect the husband --

THÉRÈSE

None of them know --

MECHAIN

Just like them, to work against me [like] --

THÉRÈSE

Oh, yes, they're all against you --

MÉCHAIN

Delambre is going to do the southern baseline --
that's my baseline, mine to do --

THÉRÈSE

Except you aren't doing it. Except that you
aren't doing anything. The triangles. Their
measurements. The whole world in Paris waits for
you.

MÉCHAIN

And I hate the whole world! And Paris! All of
what's happened -- all of the --

THÉRÈSE

The what?

MÉCHAIN

The things I have seen -- suf[fered] --

THÉRÈSE

Suffered -- please!

MÉCHAIN

You don't know!

THÉRÈSE

You still have your head -- not like Condorcet or
Lavoisier -- not that much is going on in it at
the [moment] --

MÉCHAIN

Stop that!

THÉRÈSE

Maybe it should go -- it's not getting much [use]
--

MÉCHAIN

You don't know anything!

THÉRÈSE

And whose fault is that? Pray tell, my sweet
husband, whose fault is that for the last six
years?

MÉCHAIN

It's not mine!

The STARS move away from MÉCHAIN.

MÉCHAIN

No, don't go --

The STARS disappear.

MÉCHAIN
 Fault?

THÉRÈSE
 Fault.

MÉCHAIN
 Not mine, not [mine] -- they -- they are out to
 get me, you know, bury me -- Borda, Lalande,
 Laplace -- the savants! -- that Delambre --

THÉRÈSE
 I asked you whose fault.

MÉCHAIN
 Delambre --

THÉRÈSE
 Don't a[void] --

MÉCHAIN
 -- the darling --

THÉRÈSE
 Who gets his work in on time -- Husband? Whose
 f[ault] --

MÉCHAIN
 Stealing my thunder -- the baseline -- the
 southern base[line] -- whipping through his
 stations -- showing off! --

THÉRÈSE
 And whose fault --

MÉCHAIN
 Tranchot -- he's another one -- in Sp[ain] -- in
 Sp[ain] -- in Bar[celona] -- he sabo[taged] --

THÉRÈSE
 Tranchot is not your problem -- Delambre praises
 [him] --

MÉCHAIN
 See? See? Together, they are, like that! And
 darling Delambre didn't have to put up with
 Sp[ain] -- with Sp[ain] --

THÉRÈSE
 What?

MÉCHAIN
 With Sp[ain] -- with Sp[ain] -- aaahhh!

MÉCHAIN lets loose. THÉRÈSE motions for the STARS to appear, and they do. THÉRÈSE lays a light hand on MÉCHAIN. He notices the STARS. He calms himself. THÉRÈSE, her hand still on him, moves him, and together they move with the motions of the STARS.

THÉRÈSE

This is the only thing that has ever --

MÉCHAIN

Not the only -- but yes --

THÉRÈSE stops MÉCHAIN, turns him to face her.

THÉRÈSE

Fault. Say it.

MÉCHAIN

Sp --

THÉRÈSE

Say it.

MÉCHAIN

Sp --

THÉRÈSE

Say it.

MÉCHAIN

Spain.

THÉRÈSE

Spain. And?

MÉCHAIN turns to the audience.

MÉCHAIN

And I told her. Everything. The mistake I had made. The mistake that had made me.

MÉCHAIN turns back to THÉRÈSE. He pulls away from her.

THÉRÈSE

And that's it? The "thing"?

MÉCHAIN

It means the whole --

THÉRÈSE goes to her bag. She takes out a ball of string.

MÉCHAIN

What are you [doing] --

THÉRÈSE

This error in Barcelona -- who's to say it's your fault?

MÉCHAIN

Who else --

THÉRÈSE

Take this and listen to me. Don't -- stop whining! -- listen!

THÉRÈSE hands him one end of the string.

THÉRÈSE

The mistake could be in your instruments --

MÉCHAIN

Never never -- I kept them calibrated, always --

THÉRÈSE

Always? Every second? Did you take them to bed with you?

THÉRÈSE loops the string around a hook in the wall.

A hook descends from the fly-space. THÉRÈSE loops it around that hook, which pulls the string upward. She unrolls it as it rises until she comes back to MÉCHAIN.

MÉCHAIN

No -- who could keep it [every] --

THÉRÈSE

Hold it tight!

MÉCHAIN

I'm holding -- no one could --

THÉRÈSE

Or maybe this mistake -- if that's what it is --

MÉCHAIN

It is!

THÉRÈSE

I'm sure you think it is -- maybe it's coiled up in the formulas, or the correction tables, or the clock for the transit, or fly's shit in your eye, or the plumb line -- here, take this -- hold it -- or your pants were too tight that [night] --

THÉRÈSE hands him the ball of string.

MÉCHAIN

It's none of that -- don't be foolish --

THÉRÈSE
It's not me crying in my beer in the scurvy
French countryside --

THÉRÈSE gestures to the STARS.

THÉRÈSE
Go.

MÉCHAIN
No!

THÉRÈSE
Yes go.

MÉCHAIN
No!

THÉRÈSE
Go!

MÉCHAIN
No!

The STARS exit. The light of dawn appears. Birdsong.

THÉRÈSE
Darkness be gone, banished -- pfft.

MÉCHAIN
What have you [done] --

THÉRÈSE
All this on your shoulders, eh --

MÉCHAIN
You've taken --

THÉRÈSE
The measuring of the whole earth depending upon
the brains and soul and sure hands of Pierre-
François-André-Méchain -- hands that by the way
haven't touched me in -- but never mind -- we're
here to plead the case of Méchain -- Méchain --
without whom the world could not spin --

MÉCHAIN
Why am I holding --

THÉRÈSE
Hold it. The great Pierre-François-André-
Méchain, who gets thrown off the road by a pebble
in his shoe.

THÉRÈSE sights along one side of the triangle.

THÉRÈSE

Here is the poop, husband, the skinny, the
scuttlebutt --

THÉRÈSE plucks the string.

THÉRÈSE

If you don't finish your triangles --

THÉRÈSE cocks her ear to the string.

THÉRÈSE

Ah, the sound of the earth is an A --

THÉRÈSE plucks again.

THERESE

If you don't finish and hook up with Delambre
soon -- and I mean soon -- they will destroy you.

MÉCHAIN

They have always wanted [to] --

THÉRÈSE

Don't talk stupid, Méchain, really --

THÉRÈSE slaps his shoulders to flatten them.

THÉRÈSE

-- really -- that's your big manly shoulders
talking -- the proud savant grinding out Nature's
secrets --

THÉRÈSE moves around, observing and plucking the lines of the
triangle.

THERESE

-- your children live in the best house at the
Observatory -- another A -- and your government
salary per year -- more than anything a farmer
mucking around here makes in several -- yes, they
must truly truly hate you, Méchain -- triangular
harmony -- but their patience? thin, Méchain,
thin and getting thinner --

THÉRÈSE faces him directly.

THÉRÈSE

The savants from the other countries are already
here -- the conference on the meter has already
started -- and everyone waits, with his breath
bated, for Méchain -- my beloved Méchain --

THÉRÈSE touches his face.

THÉRÈSE

You know, you do, in a way, hold the world on your shoulders. And if you don't deliver the triangles and your numbers, they will send someone to finish it off, which will finish us off -- they don't chop heads off anymore, but they still do -- do you hear me?

MÉCHAIN

I hear that you're one of them.

THÉRÈSE
(tenderly)

No -- no my dear one --

MÉCHAIN

You want to steal --

THÉRÈSE

Your pain? Yes. I'll eat it all.

MÉCHAIN

And make me look like a fool -- "Barbe-Thérèse Méchain had to come pull her husband out of the shit-storm" -- I'm going to let go --

THÉRÈSE

No! No!

THÉRÈSE grabs the end of the strings just in time as MÉCHAIN walks away. The triangle is intact.

MÉCHAIN

You want a pain to eat? You are so ready to [eat] --

THÉRÈSE

Of course -- come [back] --

MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers, but the STARS do not return. It is now day.

MÉCHAIN

Shit! Shit! I want them back --

THÉRÈSE

What?

MÉCHAIN

My stars, the ones you trashed --

THÉRÈSE

They won't seek you until --

MÉCHAIN

See, another part of [the] --

THÉRÈSE

(indicating strings)

Keep these with [me] --

MÉCHAIN

The mistake is not just numbers -- in the figures -- it's in me, is me -- is the whole me! -- you don't -- my skin is pricked by what I didn't do in the proper [ways] -- inked, drenched in a tattoo that reads to the world "Méchain has fucked up -- "

THÉRÈSE

You are not the num[bers] --

MÉCHAIN

I am! That is my world! Not this new one -- the one built on all the heads -- the skulls -- it's so hard to be part of --

THÉRÈSE holds out one of the strings.

THÉRÈSE

I am tired -- please --

MÉCHAIN takes the string. They are close together.

THÉRÈSE

To be part of?

MÉCHAIN

It -- it levels everything, this new world, flattens the universe -- the stars my stars -- rrrrrrkkkkk! right into a -- commodity -- a new word with the young ones -- "economists" they name them[selves] -- and I feel flattened by all --

THÉRÈSE

You are far from --

MÉCHAIN

Creamed, squashed, rolling-pinned --

(makes a flattening gesture)

Pfft -- and these numbers I have -- will do --

THÉRÈSE

Even as you love doing the numbers.

MÉCHAIN

Even as I love doing the numbers that will kill
me -- and when they're wrong --

THÉRÈSE

Have you ever thought -- look at me -- have you
ever thought the earth may be wrong?

MÉCHAIN looks at THÉRÈSE, and for the first time he seems genuinely
stumped. THÉRÈSE takes advantage.

THERESE

Nature might be, well, lumpy? You know,
porridge? Glop glop. What numbers would be the
right numbers for the meridian of a bowl of
porridge?

MÉCHAIN

I -- I --

THERESE

"Perfect" may be perfectly off the mark --

MÉCHAIN

I -- can't -- I -- don't -- know --

THÉRÈSE

You do the best you can. Why should you think
can do better than that? Why do you think you
can do better than the two of us here?

THÉRÈSE plucks one of the triangle sides.

THÉRÈSE

Where does this go? You set the station up --
you know.

MÉCHAIN

Lumpy?

THÉRÈSE

(laughing)

Lumpy -- like us. At the end of this, what?

MECHAIN

Perfect not perfect -- I can't even begin --

THÉRÈSE

(impatient)

Where?

MÉCHAIN

That's Rodez.

THÉRÈSE

Rodez.

Along another side.

THÉRÈSE

And --

MÉCHAIN

Lagaste.

THÉRÈSE

And the other --

MÉCHAIN

Montredon.

THÉRÈSE hands MÉCHAIN her string. She takes a notebook out of her bag. She records the numbers.

THÉRÈSE

And so these angles are done.

THÉRÈSE rips out the page of the notebook. She takes the string-ends as she hands it to MÉCHAIN. He does nothing with it.

THÉRÈSE

Aren't you going [to] --

MÉCHAIN

Yes --

MÉCHAIN folds the paper and puts it in a pocket.

MÉCHAIN

There are more --

THÉRÈSE

Something had to get you started.

THÉRÈSE pulls the string off the hooks and out of his hands and rolls it back up.

THÉRÈSE

And so you can now finish them -- finish them, like that! And then we can [go] -- Méchain -- you'll finish them, right?

MÉCHAIN does not answer her.

THÉRÈSE

Méchain -- what is --

MÉCHAIN

Why should I?

THÉRÈSE

I thought we had --

MÉCHAIN

You thought we [had] -- if perfect is not perfect
-- "lumpy" -- God! -- then why?

THÉRÈSE stares at him in disbelief.

THÉRÈSE

What?

MÉCHAIN

Why? Why? What?

THÉRÈSE gathers her stuff.

THÉRÈSE

Nothing nothing --

MÉCHAIN

You thought porridge would --

THÉRÈSE

-- nothing nothing nothing --

MÉCHAIN

-- soothe the beast --

THÉRÈSE

I can't -- I can't --

MÉCHAIN

What you said only makes me more terrified --
stop --

THÉRÈSE

We have children --

MÉCHAIN

A world crushed to a thin paste --

THÉRÈSE

They have obviously lost --

MÉCHAIN

-- and without the rational bones underneath --

THÉRÈSE

-- one parent they don't need to lose two --

MÉCHAIN

That sense makes no sense --

THÉRÈSE

I have to leave --

MÉCHAIN

-- melts me to nothing -- dice, just dice --

THÉRÈSE

I can't compete with this other wife of yours --
your consort! -- crush her to you! -- let her
crush you, since you so [love] -- I have to leave
-- I have to leave you --

And THÉRÈSE does. She crosses paths with DELAMBRE, who is carrying a ladder. She goes to say something to DELAMBRE, cannot bring herself to say anything. She leaves.

MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE look at each other. MÉCHAIN turns away.

MÉCHAIN

Now they send in the savages.

DELAMBRE sets up the ladder, climbs it, sits on the top. MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers or claps his hands. Night comes on. MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers or claps his hands again. STARS come on but stand in a file upstage.

MÉCHAIN

Move!

The STARS do not move.

DELAMBRE

They're being lumpy.

MÉCHAIN

Shut up.

(to STARS)

Move!

The STARS do not move.

DELAMBRE

They won't.

MÉCHAIN

Why not?

DELAMBRE

Who knows?

MÉCHAIN

What are you doing here?

DELAMBRE

Waiting.

MÉCHAIN

You can wait until you die.

DELAMBRE

I work until I die. You're the one who's waiting. And dying.

MÉCHAIN turns his back on DELAMBRE. Two STARS step forward. One climbs up the ladder and hands DELAMBRE a bucket of sand. The other puts a box of some sort underneath to catch the sand.

DELAMBRE

But I also don't mind waiting. If what's waiting for is worth the wait.

DELAMBRE tips the bucket and pours out the sand. The pouring lasts 50 seconds. The SOUND is of falling sand but also of many other SOUNDS - not quite a music, not quite a cacophony. The light on the sand shifts with the SOUNDS.

MÉCHAIN

Well, it's not -- it's rotten -- go to Paris and get your glory --

DELAMBRE

It's our glory --

MÉCHAIN

Reproaches, disdain, contempt -- everyone knows -
- sending my wife --

DELAMBRE

We can only do this together --

MÉCHAIN

Laughingstock -- I'll stay in the mountains --

DELAMBRE

Your family --

MÉCHAIN

A burden to them -- a weight around their -- you think I don't have offers from --

DELAMBRE

It is running out --

MÉCHAIN

Stop --

DELAMBRE

Without you, no glory for either of us --

MÉCHAIN

Don't hold me respon[sible] --

DELAMBRE
Without your data, no meter --

MÉCHAIN
Aarrgghh --

DELAMBRE
Without you, the world moves on incomplete --

MÉCHAIN
It already is -- a knife in my [eye] --

DELAMBRE
I do not go back without you --

DELAMBRE finishes pouring.

DELAMBRE
It's that simple.

At the end of the pouring, the STARS take away the bucket and the sand. And they themselves disappear.

The two of them wait a minute in the semi-darkness.

DELAMBRE
The time is out. You have no place left to go.

MÉCHAIN
I have -- true.

DELAMBRE
Except Paris.

MÉCHAIN
True. True. And true.

DELAMBRE climbs down the ladder, comes to MÉCHAIN. Two DRESSERS come on with a change of vests and coats for each man. They re-dress.

DELAMBRE
They want your data. I want your data. They want you. It's time. It's your time.

MÉCHAIN
But not my choice.

DELAMBRE
You can't have everything.

MÉCHAIN settles into his clothes, turns to DELAMBRE

MÉCHAIN
Well, then --

* * *

Scene 7

Paris. Light. All the SAVANTS.

LAPLACE

All Paris -- all the world -- welcomes you both to the honors you both so richly deserve.

LALANDE

Make no mistake about it, you will get, both of you, what you deserve.

LAPLACE

Lalande's acid nature hasn't diluted in seven years.

LALANDE

Because vinegar excellently preserves this corpse of mine. And further because seven years hasn't done away with the stupidity of this whole --

BORDA

And now that we have your data --

(to LALANDE)

-- thank you, your eminence, for your vinaigrette

--

LALANDE

No good deed --

BORDA

(to MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE)

All written out --

(to MÉCHAIN)

-- and yours in such a neat hand --

LALANDE

-- will remain unpunished --

BORDA

-- in such compact and precise books -- what we have been waiting for --

(claps his hands)

-- we can get started!

The SAVANTS, except for LALANDE, pull notebooks and pencils out of their pockets and become THE GREAT CALCULATOR as they move in geometric patterns around the space. Then LALANDE, unable to resist, pulls out his notebook and calculates as well.

At times through the following conversation, the SAVANTS will stop, look at their calculations, scratch their heads in puzzlement, then continue their patterned walk.

DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN move among the SAVANTS. THÉRÈSE appears.

DELAMBRE

You're looking well --

MÉCHAIN

Everyone has been -- kind --

DELAMBRE

Yes -- I noticed --

MÉCHAIN

What?

DELAMBRE

It's a small thing, I'm sure --

MÉCHAIN

Then say it.

DELAMBRE

That you only turned in summaries of your measurements --

MÉCHAIN

I did -- so?

DELAMBRE

Turned out in a nice hand, I might [add] --

MÉCHAIN

Is neatness also a crime now against the Revolution?

DELAMBRE

No, neatness is not a [crime] --

MÉCHAIN

The summaries are all they need.

DELAMBRE

For them, yes -- perhaps -- but --

MÉCHAIN

What?

DELAMBRE

I'll need your original notes --

MÉCHAIN

You'll need? Why?

DELAMBRE

And your original logbooks --

MÉCHAIN

And I'll say again, why?

DELAMBRE

Because I have been asked to write the official record of the expedition.

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

MÉCHAIN

Really. Who asked you to do that?

(to THÉRÈSE)

Do you see how they all work against [me] --

THÉRÈSE

No I don't.

MÉCHAIN

Really?

(to DELAMBRE)

Who asked --

DELAMBRE

The Academy of Sciences, of course -- the Bureau of Longitudes -- the government, which did pay [for] --

MÉCHAIN

Why you? Why not me? Come on, answer me.

DELAMBRE

It's not really neces[sary] --

MÉCHAIN

Why not me? Why not us together?

DELAMBRE

It's not important --

MÉCHAIN

I asked you "Why you?" and why won't you tell me?

DELAMBRE

Even if I write it, it is our work, joint discovery --

THÉRÈSE

Let it [go] --

MÉCHAIN

(to THÉRÈSE)

You are a thief -- a ball-breaker --

DELAMBRE and THÉRÈSE are stunned at this. MÉCHAIN does not notice.

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

MÉCHAIN

(to DELAMBRE)

You are junior to me in the Academy -- junior --
I have ten more years in the Academy than you --

DELAMBRE

(indicating SAVANTS)

Perhaps we should join --

MÉCHAIN

I want to know whose ass you kissed --

DELAMBRE

This is not --

THÉRÈSE

Let it [go] --

MÉCHAIN

Tell me! Who pulled his pants down --

DELAMBRE

I really don't want [to] --

THÉRÈSE

(to MÉCHAIN)

Can't you see he's [trying] --

MÉCHAIN

Tell me!

THÉRÈSE

Tell him, if that's what he --

MÉCHAIN

Me!

DELAMBRE

(to THÉRÈSE)

This is not the place [to] --

THÉRÈSE

If it's what he [wants] --

MÉCHAIN

To me!

DELAMBRE

I surveyed -- I surveyed over two-thirds of the
triangles -- I laid down both baselines --

MÉCHAIN

You stole -- you tricked -- you forced --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

DELAMBRE

No -- no -- and I'm afraid I need to make this clear even if I really don't want to because I still respect --

THÉRÈSE

Don't waste your breath on courtesy --

MÉCHAIN

(to THÉRÈSE)

Who can trust --

DELAMBRE

If I stole anything, I stole you.

MÉCHAIN

Stole from [me] --

DELAMBRE

No, stole you -- it took me fifty days to pry you out of your funk --

THÉRÈSE

I tried for five weeks and got shit [for] --

MÉCHAIN points first at DELAMBRE, then THÉRÈSE, then back and forth between them.

MÉCHAIN

Ah -- ah --

DELAMBRE

Fifty days while you measured this --

MÉCHAIN

The two of you --

DELAMBRE

-- and fretted about that and dithered and grouched and snarled and bitched --

THÉRÈSE

You're only seeing this now? The great logician?

MÉCHAIN

The two of you -- against me --

(points to SAVANTS)

And all of them --

DELAMBRE

What would you expect?

MÉCHAIN

Respect!

DELAMBRE

From their perspective, they have a melancholic genius holed up in the Montagnes Noires gripping something they need -- death-grip -- his letters sometimes ten pages of self-pity after self-pity -- he may even be completely dissolved --

THÉRÈSE

In short, they couldn't respect a nut-case --

DELAMBRE

Please --

THÉRÈSE

I respect him, I don't have to be nice to him --

DELAMBRE

Just --

THÉRÈSE

Go on --

DELAMBRE

So, of course, yes -- the two of us, the others -
- all to steal you from yourself --

MÉCHAIN

And steal my work -- steal my work --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

DELAMBRE

Your work? What makes you think --

MÉCHAIN

I did it, it belongs to [me] --

DELAMBRE

Let's make clear between us what should've been clear to you from the start --

THÉRÈSE

Dawn comes late to the mountaintop --

DELAMBRE

-- whatever you have stashed away in those logbooks of yours, the ones you won't turn over to me or anyone else -- it's not yours -- it belongs to France, it belongs to the people, it belongs to the Revolution -- you get to hold it in trust and that's all -- and as Permanent Secretary of the Academy --

MÉCHAIN

Perm[anent] --

DELAMBRE

Yes.

MÉCHAIN

When did that hap[pen] -- when did --

DELAMBRE

You refuse to come to the Academy meetings, you miss out on --

MÉCHAIN

Napolean --

DELAMBRE

By his hand --

MÉCHAIN

So he dropped his [pants] --

DELAMBRE

Listen to me --

MÉCHAIN

Stuck out his arse --

DELAMBRE

Listen to me -- your work? In a sense, one that you have no choice about saying "yes" or "no" to, your work belongs to the Permanent Secretary of the Academy of Sciences --

MÉCHAIN

To you.

DELAMBRE

To me.

MÉCHAIN

The general's boy has done so well for himself.

DELAMBRE

As has the melancholic genius -- as unreliable and irritating as you've been, they have taken care of you -- director of the national Observatory, which you deserve -- living on the grounds, with your family, in Cassini's apartments -- do we understand each other?

MÉCHAIN

Of course you'll have them.

DELAMBRE

Have what? Yes?

MÉCHAIN

The logbooks.

DELAMBRE

And any notes.

MÉCHAIN

(to THÉRÈSE)

Why can't you see --

DELAMBRE

I'm glad to hear [that] --

MÉCHAIN

When I get them arranged --

DELAMBRE

They aren't already --

MÉCHAIN

You'll get what you want -- you don't need to question my methods, question me!

(to THÉRÈSE)

Why can't you see --

THÉRÈSE

What I see saddens me.

MÉCHAIN

Always undercut, always --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures.

SAVANTS

Hmmm.

MÉCHAIN

What? What?

The SAVANTS ignore him.

MÉCHAIN

What?

They gather in the center, muttering, checking each other. MÉCHAIN drifts toward them, his whole body crouched in fear.

Out of the pack erupts BORDA, notebook in hand, trailed by the other SAVANTS. He beelines to MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE.

BORDA

What is this shit?

MÉCHAIN

Barcelona, wasn't it.

BORDA

Barce[lona] -- what are you talking about?

MÉCHAIN

Nothing -- no[thing] --

BORDA

I want to know why --

LALANDE

Monsieur Borda has had a shock!

SAVANTS

We want to know [why] --

DELAMBRE

Monsieur Borda, what do you want [to know] --

BORDA

Either the numbers are all wrong -- all crap --

MÉCHAIN

The numbers are [fine] --

DELAMBRE

Yes, they are, so --

LAPLACE

(smiling)

You weren't supposed to discover something completely new, is what Monsieur Borda is [trying] --

BORDA

Why are you smiling?

(to LALANDE)

And you?

LALANDE
It's not completely new but --

LAPLACE
It's new enough for "new" -- and good for a smile
--

LALANDE
Agreed.

MÉCHAIN
What --

BORDA
It's a disaster!

LALANDE
Most new things are, at least to you.

DELAMBRE
Could you please let us in on the joke, or the
disaster, depending on which [of you] --

LAPLACE
The extra latitudes we had you measure --

BORDA
Dunkerque, Paris --

LAPLACE
Evau, Carcassone --

MÉCHAIN
Barcelona --

BORDA
And Barcelona --

LAPLACE
We had suspicions.

LALANDE
Devious bastards, they were.

BORDA
Careful bastards --

(to MÉCHAIN)
Boscovich.

MÉCHAIN
From Ragusa, the Jesuit.

BORDA
And? C'mon --

MÉCHAIN

He measured the meridian through the Papal States. I have his report at the Observatory.

DELAMBRE

I own it, too.

BORDA

And? C'mon, both of you -- what did he suggest?

MÉCHAIN

That the meridian through Rome did not --

DELAMBRE

-- did not match the meridian through Paris --

LALANDE

(laughing)

Absurd, right? A meridian is a meridian, right?

LAPLACE

(overlapping)

-- is a meridian -- right?

LALANDE

From the equator to the pole --

LALANDE makes irregular arcs with his hands.

LALANDE

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE look at each other and realize. They smile and laugh.

LALANDE

Ah --

MÉCHAIN

No.

LALANDE

See?

DELAMBRE

No.

LALANDE

See?

MÉCHAIN

No.

(to BORDA)

You must have found --

BORDA
Lumpy -- the goddamn earth is lumpy!

At the word "lumpy," MÉCHAIN and THÉRÈSE exchange a look and a smile.

THÉRÈSE
(mouthing the words)
What did I tell you?

BORDA stamps his foot several times.

BORDA
Like a squash.

MÉCHAIN
Like porridge.

BORDA
Boscovich -- Christ!

BORDA makes irregular arcs with his hand.

BORDA
From Barcelona to Carcassone -- a fucking broken-
spined mule -- from Carcassone to Evaux --

LALANDE
A fucking -- tree branch --

LAPLACE
From Evaux to Paris -- the broken fucking teeth
of a peasant --

MÉCHAIN
From Paris to Dunkerque -- a fucking arthritic
crone!

LALANDE
I love this disaster!

BORDA
Shut up! Shut up -- I need to think --

MÉCHAIN joins THÉRÈSE, tries to kiss her -- she refuses. He moves
back to the group.

BORDA
If we don't own a smooth meridian through France,
a nice clean simple arc -- why do things always
have [to be] -- if what we have's as lumpy as
plaster! -- we can't make the meter. Can we?
Can we?

MÉCHAIN

I have a --

BORDA

(ignoring him)

A meter can't be one ten-millionth of a gourd, of shit! And if we don't get the meter -- if we can't [get] --

LAPLACE

Trying breathing in between --

MÉCHAIN

I have a solu[tion] --

BORDA

(ignoring him)

-- then it's seven goddamned wasted years and a betrayal of -- I can't even --

(indicating SAVANTS)

-- and in front of -- France will be --

LALANDE

We can go back to my original proposal -- use the Paris measurements and --

(snaps fingers)

-- it's done --

BORDA

If you don't shut up, I'll use your ugly corpse for a ruler --

LALANDE

This is great fun!

MÉCHAIN

I have a solution --

BORDA

(to MÉCHAIN)

It's not you I have to talk to.

(to DELAMBRE)

You're the Permanent Secretary -- the general takes such a shine to you -- what've you got to say to our illustrious International Commission? What the fuck should our illustrious International Commission do now?

BORDA is so agitated that he cannot even wait for DELAMBRE's answer but must pace to work off his agitation. DELAMBRE examines everyone before he speaks.

DELAMBRE

You won't like it, but here it is: fake it.

BORDA

What?

DELAMBRE

Not all meridians are equal -- I'm sorry -- well, not that sorry -- that Monsieur Méchain and I found what we found, but -- well -- what can I say -- the earth is what it is.

BORDA

Fake it?

DELAMBRE

Did I say "fake"?

BORDA

You said --

DELAMBRE

Slip of the tongue -- I meant "interpret." What we savants can do so well.

LAPLACE

Interpret what?

DELAMBRE

Our data aren't the only data lying around. There's Cassini's work from 1740 --

BORDA

Which your whole mission was supposed to make more precise!

DELAMBRE

Which it did.

BORDA

Yes, but [still] --

DELAMBRE

So don't shoot the messenger -- in any case, we also have numbers from Peru and Lapland --

BORDA

Fifty years old!

DELAMBRE

To an earth million of years old -- pfft. My point is this: you -- we -- this illustrious gathered "we" -- can have consistency -- Keep to the data! Always the data! --

(DELAMBRE laughs)

-- or we can have believability.

DELAMBRE lets this thought sink in.

DELAMBRE

Look --

DELAMBRE unbuttons his vest.

DELAMBRE

I am investigating my vest.

DELAMBRE re-buttons his vest -- but one hole off, so that it's buttoned wrong.

DELAMBRE

I can be very deliberate and very strict in my buttoning -- set my fingers just so -- like I was setting my sextant or plumb line -- move the buttons through with a calculated push -- like writing my numbers down in a clear hand -- in short, be conscientious, clear, careful, preeeecise -- and yet, for all my concise precision --

DELAMBRE's vest-buttons are one hole off. He shows this off to everyone.

DELAMBRE

Now --

DELAMBRE goes to another SAVANT, unbuttons and mis-rebuttons his vest.

DELAMBRE

If we all have -- stand still -- if we all have our buttons misarranged in the same way --

LAPLACE

If the error is systematic --

DELAMBRE

To put it in a scientific lingo --

(he finishes)

-- there we go -- then no problem --

BORDA

A shared mistake --

LALANDE

Devoutly believed in --

BORDA

-- is no mistake.

DELAMBRE stands next to the misbuttoned SAVANT.

DELAMBRE

And here we have Castor and Pollux -- our beliefs about the way the earth should be shaped, our beliefs neat, precise, and --

DELAMBRE pulls another SAVANT next to him, with the vest properly buttoned.

DELAMBRE

Oh my deity, look! New information? What shall we do?

DELAMBRE looks back and forth between the two, eyes agog.

DELAMBRE

If am who I say I am, I have to follow it -- bitch and moan, maybe, at having to change -- but -- ready?

DELAMBRE and the SAVANT re-button their vests -- make a race out of it.

DELAMBRE

Hah! And so it goes. Except, except -- if I am honest with myself -- if I am energized by knowing -- I notice that his buttons and my buttons, though now supposedly arranged by truth, are not the same -- his meridian, so to speak, has a different slant to it than mine --

LALANDE

(sing-song)

Lump-didi-dump-didi-lump-lump-lump --

DELAMBRE

Lumpiness --

LALANDE

Lumpy --

DELAMBRE

-- and if my mission is to measure the perfect "vest-button arrangement," the Platonic ideal that spawns other Platonic ideals, like, say, the meter -- I am up shit's creek, am I not? What do I do? What do I do?

LAPLACE

Aren't we lying?

DELAMBRE

And I'll answer with a question. How well are the government's efforts going to prepare the people, the glorious people, our touchstone and beacon --

BORDA

You don't have to [mock] --

DELAMBRE

-- to eat, sleep, and breathe our revolutionary meter? And you don't have to answer -- I already know.

LALANDE

They hate the fucking thing --

DELAMBRE

An excellent scientific formulation. And I would even add that our celebrated science-loving general will not be entirely gifted with affection for the meter if it makes his subjects unhappy. So. What do we do?

LAPLACE

I can smell what's coming up --

DELAMBRE

Always a good nose, Monsieur Laplace, for wine and possibility. This is what we do: we make-believe -- excuse me again, we "interpret." We take all our vests, we mix them in, we look over the results, we say to ourselves, "Well, one set says this -- lumpy lumpy lumpy -- but this other set says this, and if we use some from there and some from there, then this new set just feels right, righter -- more like the vest we need." Not perfect, not precise, but what is perfect and precise anyway? -- just the fever-dreams of stuffed-shirt intellectuals like us. Do we need a meter?

BORDA

We need a meter.

DELAMBRE

Then let's make the meter we need, supported by the numbers we need to support it. The most precise point we'll be able to argue is that our meter isn't wrong. So says the Permanent Secretary, this April of 1799.

BORDA ponders this. The SAVANTS ponder this.

BORDA

Sometimes to serve the people, one must resolve to give them only that knowledge that will serve them well.

DELAMBRE

You could say it like that.

BORDA
(to others)

Come here.

The SAVANTS huddle and discuss. From them comes the SOUNDS of metal being cut and shaped.

MÉCHAIN
I have a solution.

DELAMBRE
To what?

MÉCHAIN
You can't honestly believe this fig leaf will --

DELAMBRE
It's not a fig leaf -- it's how science gets made.

MÉCHAIN
No it's [not] --

DELAMBRE
For all intents and purposes, this meter is the proper meter.

MÉCHAIN
But the numbers --

DELAMBRE
Are just numbers.

MÉCHAIN
But they're the wrong --

DELAMBRE
Numbers are just num[bers] --

From the SAVANTS comes forward the meter bar, which BORDA holds aloft. SOUNDS of fanfare and celebration.

BORDA
June 22, 1799, we present this platinum bar to the French legislative assemblies so that the people's representatives can consecrate by man's law what nature has rendered through its own law.

With great fanfare, whoops and hollers, the SAVANTS march off with the meter bar held high.

MÉCHAIN
Believe me, I know about wrong numbers.

DELAMBRE

Really.

MÉCHAIN

I mean, in general --

THÉRÈSE

He knows.

MÉCHAIN

-- how they can -- you know, "lumpy" -- but the solution is to get better numbers!

DELAMBRE

And that's the solution you want to talk to me [about] --

THÉRÈSE

Don't you dare.

MÉCHAIN

(to THÉRÈSE)

I have to.

DELAMBRE

Before you say anything --

MÉCHAIN

I am not --

DELAMBRE

Don't be rash --

MÉCHAIN

-- going to wait --

DELAMBRE

You have to consider --

THÉRÈSE

He won't --

MÉCHAIN

Extend the meridian past Barcelona -- extend the meridian past Barcelona --

DELAMBRE

What, into the Mediterranean?

MÉCHAIN

To the Balearic Islands.

DELAMBRE

You just spent seven years --

THÉRÈSE

He's trying to kill himself.

MÉCHAIN

Put the southern latitude on an island, and you don't get distortion from the mountains.

DELAMBRE

True, but --

(to THÉRÈSE)

Can't you --

MÉCHAIN

Extending it -- listen to me -- don't pay any attention to [her] -- extending it would bring it to the 45th parallel --

DELAMBRE

Go back to the Observatory, continue your excellent work there as Director --

MÉCHAIN

The 45th parallel! Makes it easier to extrapolate the partial arc through France --

DELAMBRE

You are the nation's senior astronomer --

MÉCHAIN

Listen to [me] --

DELAMBRE

Go find more comets -- enjoy your family --

(to THÉRÈSE)

Take him --

MÉCHAIN

We can extrapolate it to a true quarter meridian -- cleaner, more exact -- don't look to her for --
- we can do away with all this "interpretation" nonsense -- vest buttons! --

THÉRÈSE rises.

THÉRÈSE

I am not needed. For anything.

THÉRÈSE leaves.

DELAMBRE

Don't be a fool. I agree, it'd be a good mission to do, but give it to someone younger --

MÉCHAIN

You can talk to the general, get him to approve -
-

DELAMBRE

He's not my employee.

MÉCHAIN

Tell him that -- that the mission would -- cement the "intimate union" -- yes, that -- between France and Spain. Having peace on the islands would keep the sea lanes open for France, against Britain --

DELAMBRE

And when did you put "military strategy" on your résumé?

MÉCHAIN

That's the "interpretation" he wants to hear, so give it to him --

DELAMBRE

At the risk of being boring and dull through repetition, you have a family, you have important work to do, your body is not a young body anymore -- did I mention that you have a family? Who has just left you?

MÉCHAIN

I need to do this! I need -- for France --

DELAMBRE

Not for a moment --

MÉCHAIN

For my own peace of mind!

DELAMBRE

Why would this give you peace when seven years of the same kind of work has done exactly the opposite? I have watched you since we finished keep feeding your soul, bit by bit, to whatever demon ate at you for fifty days in the mountains --

MÉCHAIN

That's none of your busi[ness] --

DELAMBRE

-- for five weeks when your wife came to find you, for more days and years than I care to, or can, count -- praise, prizes, gratefulness -- none of this soothes you a bit, not one bit --

MÉCHAIN

I have to prove --

DELAMBRE

What is left for you to prove?

MÉCHAIN

That I can lay out my own goddamn triangles --

DELAMBRE

No one's ever doubted --

MECHAIN

I don't need Tranchot or Thérèse -- I don't need my wife to come save me -- and I don't need you -
- I can do an arc better than the great Delambre!
Triangles 120 miles long, across uncharted terrain, island to mainland -- that would be a reputation worth fighting to get!

DELAMBRE

And your current reputation -- praise, prizes, gratefulness -- none of that -- ?

MÉCHAIN

None of that!

DELAMBRE

It still feeds.

MÉCHAIN

Will you talk to Napoleon? Will you talk to --

DELAMBRE

Yes.

MÉCHAIN

Tell him it'll be great science -- he'll like that -- did you know my son went with him to Egypt, to do surveys while the general had his ass handed to him -- mention that to him -- my son, not about his ass -- this challenge will bring France glory -- put that in, too -- yes, good, that will all be good for the general to feed his ego on --

DELAMBRE

And not only his ego.

MÉCHAIN

It is always so easy for you, so easy, the gentle-tempered Delambre, the cloth-seller's son with the soul of a humanist --

DELAMBRE

And I have never seen you happy.

MÉCHAIN

Your conscience is so clear --

DELAMBRE

I did twice as much work on the meridian as you did and never once felt any despair -- the mission was there, I was here -- I kept them several healthy triangulations away from each other -- it's just a game, anyways -- life has been good -- but you have your demon -- I'll make the general say "yes" -- and so it goes --

DELAMBRE leaves. THÉRÈSE enters. The scene is set as at the top of the play. DEZAUCHE and the BARON sit by the bed.

THÉRÈSE

If you die --

MÉCHAIN

I am not going to die.

THÉRÈSE

Then let me be more exact, since you so much treasure the exact: after you're done killing yourself --

MÉCHAIN

I am not --

THÉRÈSE holds up a mirror to MÉCHAIN's face.

THÉRÈSE

Look -- look -- and tell me again --

THÉRÈSE throws the mirror down, stomps on it.

MECHAIN

Not your face at all -- something else -- presses from behind -- ugly and toxic --

THÉRÈSE grinds her heel into the glass.

THÉRÈSE

My eyes will melt if I look any more --

MÉCHAIN

Look at me --

THÉRÈSE

I can't -- I won't --

MÉCHAIN

Then fine! Fine! Just turn into another one who gives up on me, abandons me!

THÉRÈSE

Yes, of course, that's who you are now -- my husband would never say that --

MÉCHAIN

Look at [me] --

THÉRÈSE

-- but this -- thing -- speaks -- no don't touch!
-- after you're done killing yourself, you'll stay buried wherever you drop -- don't! -- if it's here, then I'll stuff your mouth with French dirt -- if there -- I won't bring you back --

THÉRÈSE pulls out a cloth and blindfolds herself.

THÉRÈSE

Done.

THÉRÈSE wanders away. MÉCHAIN stoops down, picks up a piece of broken mirror. He puts it in his mouth and eats it.

MÉCHAIN

The demon's appetite [swells] --

A ladder appears. MÉCHAIN takes out his own cloth, folds the glass shards in it. He climbs the ladder. He blindfolds himself with the broken glass. He looks right, he looks center, he looks left, he looks center, he looks right -- all with increasing frustration. DEZAUCHE and the BARON walk up behind him. With a sudden collapse, he falls into their arms, and they bring him to the bed.

DEZAUCHE

Baron --

BARON

Good morning.

DEZAUCHE

Morning, yes --

BARON

And?

DEZAUCHE

Not well, Baron -- not doing well --

BARON

No, I can see that. It seems this kind of fever either leaves you alone after it touches you or it rips you apart.

DEZAUCHE

I am not willing to guess.

BARON

But you're not a doctor, either, are you.

DEZAUCHE

Baron, I mean no disrespect, but I don't have to be a physician to see what's in front of me.

BARON

Proves nothing. Eyes -- not always reliable. Has he been bled?

DEZAUCHE

The leeches sing him thanks.

BARON

There's a distrust in your voice.

DEZAUCHE

I don't trust butchery.

BARON

So I've hired butchers?

DEZAUCHE

These "cures" -- bleeding, blistering -- like the Inquisition --

BARON

You're free to say whatever you want here, but I'd still be careful --

DEZAUCHE

I'm sorry -- it's been a long night.

BARON

For everybody.

(points to journal)

What are you --

DEZAUCHE

I'm cleaning up the calculations. Whether he lives or dies --

BARON

The calculations will live on.

DEZAUCHE

Yes, always.

BARON

If they're right, that is.

DEZAUCHE

Why would you think --

BARON

Have you ever known anything humans have done that has been done without mistakes?

DEZAUCHE

The triangulations have been very precise. He is a very precise man --

BARON

But accurate?

DEZAUCHE

It's the same --

BARON

I can be very precise and still be dead wrong: "I've cut the board twice now and it's still too short."

DEZAUCHE

Not the time for mock[ery] --

BARON

On the other hand, for truth --

MÉCHAIN

My venerable host is right.

DEZAUCHE

Oh, good good -- you're awake -- don't speak -- you need to --

MÉCHAIN

Don't speak? -- don't speak? -- what've I got to lose? I've been not-speaking for days -- at last a clear moment -- I'm dying -- isn't that the truth?

BARON

All are dying, Pierre -- the only difference is the rates.

MÉCHAIN

Fast track for me. Slippery. Downhill. What a miserable way to end a life -- fevered and shitting myself in Spain --

Sickroom goes to dark. DELAMBRE steps forward. He carries three heavy leather-bound volumes. He drops them to the floor, stands on them.

DELAMBRE

My final report: Base du système métrique. Two thousand pages. A real best seller.

MÉCHAIN joins him.

DELAMBRE

I held nothing back, including how you shaved the Barcelona numbers, how you hid the deception behind those beautiful hand-written summaries you gave to the Commission.

DELAMBRE steps down, invites MÉCHAIN to stand on the books, which he does.

DELAMBRE

I also "interpreted" the fudge as a good example of how a working scientist continues to seek out perfection in the midst of the flawed and the futile.

MÉCHAIN

Nice save.

DELAMBRE

What do you see from up there?

MÉCHAIN

Nothing I want to continue seeing.

MÉCHAIN steps down. They face one another, then hold each other as dance partners.

DELAMBRE & MÉCHAIN

The Scientists dance the dance of Science.

MÉCHAIN

And a-one, and a-two, and --

They begin their dance in very formal patterns -- rigorous and exact and, in its own way, beautiful. As they move, they can ad lib statements. As the dance goes on, it becomes increasingly less exact, more fluid, beautiful in another way. And they laugh.