

Bougainville Against the Tide

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The late critic Hayden White said, and this was forty years ago, that “the theme of the Noble Savage may be one of the few historical topics about which there is nothing more to say.”¹ Indeed it is no groundbreaking news to say that eighteenth-century explorers of the Pacific were cloaked in an ideology that clouded their perceiving, or even their wish to perceive, newly found societies. The conquistadores of the sixteenth century sailed on a wind of ideology called the Sword and the Cross, and the voyagers of the eighteenth did so in a cloud of Rousseauism. The former ideology held that they, the savages, were benighted while Europeans carried the light and the truth; the latter ideology, that they in their pristine state had it right while civilized Europeans were hopelessly misled. Neither orthodoxy had much to do with the facts on the ground, and whether noble or ignoble, the native was largely a blank on which Europeans drew their homegrown fixations. Yet there is an important difference in the operative fields of these two intellectual schemes: the Christian right of conquest was a self-evident fixture of closed societies; whereas Rousseauism spread in a modernizing civilization that was at least able to recognize its modalities of thought as just that—systems that are subject to scrutiny. In such a disputative society it was at least possible to resent the impertinence of an ideology dictating what one should think and profess. Such a man who refused to profess was, after a fashion, the French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville. He was like everyone else the inmate of his time; but far-flung travels, in which he was uniquely experienced, also gave him a vantage point from which to gauge the hypnotic power of the ideas he shared with contemporaries—and among these ideas, the system of assumptions I describe as Rousseauism.

Bougainville's name is hard to disentangle from the exoticism that usurped his name, by way of Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772). Yet his rightful exploit is his circumnavigation of the globe from 1766 to 1769 and the remarkable account he made of it in his *Voyage around the World* of 1771. This account is extraordinary for many reasons, chief among which are the adventures and exotic locales described in it. But it is extraordinary also for the *intellectual* adventure therein. This adventure I would describe as that of navigating the parlous straits of double-think and contradiction—the contradiction that consists of having to advance a philosophical system that stands in contempt of one's own observations; or, more simply, of reconciling what one is supposed to have seen with what one did actually see. How Bougainville's observations collided with the orthodoxy, and how he presented this collision in his published *Voyage around the World* is the story I wish to consider here.

A brief sketch of Rousseauism, whose organizing idea is probably as old as the historical imagination. It is the idealizing mix of nostalgia and primitivism that envisions life to have begun in some garden of Eden, an orchard of the Hesperides, a Golden Age, or a state of nature that was all peace and prosperity until some moral cataclysm hurled humankind into recorded history.² Though philosophers, pagan and Christian, flirted with this mirage (there are traces of it in Plato, for example in *The Statesman*), it belonged mostly with myth and religion, it being understood that philosophy, as per Socrates, was in the business of demonstrating its claims and, as per Aristotle, of matching them with observation. Moreover, modern philosophy championed the humanist idea that human beings can and must reason their way to a better life. To lump all happiness and perfection in some fabled past when man had not yet learned to reason amounted to betraying philosophy's confident premise.

This betrayal is, one can fairly state, the doing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau used the language of philosophy to dignify the pessimistic myth of antediluvian human perfection. "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains:"³ this is not a thesis which he strove to explain, argue, illustrate, and prove; it is a first principle—to mean, not what logically comes first, as in ancient or medieval philosophy, but what Rousseau intuitively believed to be the starting point of the matter, his heartfelt conviction, the *idée fixe* from which every fact follows and to which every conclusion returns. This emotional, intuitive apriorism bred fateful habits of the pen in Rousseau, who had no equal in asserting truths for which his readers learned to expect no verification. "Nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state;"⁴ "Society and laws... irretrievably destroyed natural liberty:"⁵ these are ideas which, first emitted as hypotheses, have a knack of transforming into truths universally acknowledged within the course of a few sentences. Rousseau is so confident in the world-making power of philosophizing that he avows it openly. It is, he says, "within the province of philosophy...to establish facts" and "these things [i.e., the origin of society, the felicity of savage man, the progress of inequality, etc.] can be deduced from the nature of man by the light of reason alone."⁶ In other words, we know that primitive man was happy, hale, and free

because philosophic reason says so. This is the histrionic, though characteristically metaphysical position that reality can be deduced from theory. “Let us begin by laying all facts aside, as they do not affect the question,” begins Rousseau who, if he did not invent this metaphysical a-priorism, turned its characteristic disparagement of reality into a pessimistic dismissal of civilized existence.⁷

The three volumes of Rousseau that earned him fame, and did most to shape the exotic imagination that concerns us here are the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), which declared knowledge, technology, science, craft, commerce, books and libraries, theaters and cities, material affluence and art to have debased humankind, and made Europeans an especially unhappy, sickly, crabby, devious, and stunted branch of the human family. By Diderot’s report, the essay made a sensation “beyond all imagining” in Paris.⁸ Its author upped the antes four years later with the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality* (1754) which maintained that man’s malevolence and unhappiness wax in tandem with socialization: the more civilized we are, the more wretched we grow. Out of the thesis that knowledge corrupts and innocence dignifies, Rousseau forged a treatise of pedagogy, *Émile or On Education* (1762), which lays down “the incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right” and therefore charges the educator to withdraw the child from society, his family and relatives, and withhold from him the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of civilization for as long as possible.⁹

What is extraordinary about these theories is not that they were incredible (even Rousseau disavowed them even as, by the time of *Émile*, he appeared to profess them). The extraordinary part is their immense influence in the eighteenth century and the modern world at large. It is hard to overstate this influence. By the 1760s Rousseau was well on his way to confirm what Hippolyte Taine said about him later, which is that the eighteenth century belonged to him.¹⁰ The Jacobins of 1791 harkened to his gospel of corruptive luxury and natural equality; Napoleon was a passionate admirer, and generations of writers from Goethe, Kant, Herder, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Coleridge to Tolstoy declared themselves his votaries. Rousseauism enflamed romanticism and transformed entire disciplines from economics (Marx) to education (Dewey), psychology (Piaget), anthropology (Levi-Strauss, who called Rousseau the father of anthropology), sociology (Durkheim) and history (Foucault, for whom every step taken by Western civilization is a tightening of the noose of “systemic” oppression). Rousseau’s mania of emotional authenticity practically patented existentialism, and he seems to have done more to christianize social policy, now governed by virtuous empathy, than eighteen centuries of St. Paul.

At the time of Bougainville’s journey, in 1766, the Rousseauist blend of doubt and dismay for the civilized, and patronizing wonder for the primitive certainly was the tone struck by intellectual society.¹¹ It is, to take us back to our subject, the cultural haze that wrapped around Bougainville’s ships as they approached Tahiti in April 1768. Bougainville himself was a man of practical sense—a military commander, an admiral, an explorer with 400 hundred souls under his responsibility. But he was also a creature

of salon society, a man of words and ideas who had been schooled by d'Alembert in his youth, became a jurist, and cut a good figure at the salon of the Marquise de Pompadour (whose other protégés included d'Alembert and Diderot) where he conversed in the latest doctrines. We know from his travel journal and from the published *Voyage around the World* that his intellectual navigation followed a Rousseauist map, a map on which France and Europe were the lands of shame, guilt, hypocrisy, tyranny, foul blood, and superstition, while elsewhere, in the blue yonder, one found health, happiness, individual liberty, wisdom, and sexual innocence among men and women who had not partaken of the tree of knowledge called civilization. For the more detailed markings of this intellectual map, we need go no further than Diderot's famous *Supplement to Bougainville's "Voyage"* which, though written three years after Bougainville returned to France, is really a preamble, so well does it draw the intellectual horizon under which the voyage set sail.¹² Tahiti quickly became the fata morgana of this philosophic horizon. There, in the happy isles of the Pacific, were men and women who, Diderot assured his readers, "follow the pure instinct of nature," are "innocent and happy," "uphold the right of individuals," and possess "customs that are wiser and more decent than ours;" for ours indeed are "shackles" of "useless knowledge," "follies and vices," that tend to make others "as corrupt, as vile, as wretched as we are."¹³

The men of letters aboard Bougainville's ships, men who had been recommended by various scientific academies, and in one case by the encyclopédiste Buffon, travelled by the same intellectual compass. In fact, the writer Charles Fesche, the historian Louis-Antoine de Saint-Germain, and the botanist Philibert Commerson were all dyed-in-the-wool Rousseauists to whom it was self-evident that there is such a thing as natural man, and that he is superior in every moral way over civilized man. After three years at sea, three years over which only a man deprived of eyes and ears could have failed to notice that not all primitive people basked in bliss, Commerson returned with his conviction intact. Tahiti especially was a lightning rod for the enlightened. As he wrote in his *Postscriptum sur l'isle de la Nouvelle Cythère ou Tayti* (1769), Tahitian folks are "born essentially good, free from all bias, and follow without suspicion and without remorse the gentle impulse of an instinct that is always sure because it has not yet degenerated into reason."¹⁴ Tahiti, Commerson continued, is "the only place on earth where people live without vice, prejudice, need and disagreement." He rhapsodized on such philosophic figments as "their honest treatment of women who are in no way subjugated, their fraternity, their horror of spilling blood, and their hospitality to foreigners." The other intellectual on board, Charles Fesche, further praised Tahitians for their lack of religion, and for their "simple, soft, quiet life, free from all passions" which knew nothing of "the corruption of our morals."¹⁵ It's been said of these intellectuals (men of "philosophic attitude," as Diderot praised Bougainville) that they transformed the reality of Tahiti into a literary fiction.¹⁶ But in truth, the fiction antedated the encounter with real life and insured that the voyage made landfall on an island of the imagination. For these enlightened men it was as with

medieval scholastics: *credo ut intelligam*, I believe so I may understand, and most of what they understood indeed derived from the book.

Now, Bougainville too was an intellectual, and as such permeable to the fashionable ideas that surely sprinkled his mess-table talk, and with such men as Commerson, Fesche, and Saint-Germain on board, conversation must have been rich in Rousseauist *obiter dicta*. But the royal administration had not send Bougainville around the world to be an intellectual but a navigator, a surveyor, an ambassador, a collector of observations, a man of sharp perception and good practical judgment who could keep a straight record of the journey. This record, he kept in his captain's Journal which, generally matter-of-fact and empiric, takes no sentimental turn with the job of staying alive amid the incomprehensible and the unpredictable. There are passages in it that show Bougainville questioning the then fashionable anti-civilization pabulum, and mocking Mr. Rousseau's idealism and scolding his presumptions to tell navigators how to see the world. Noting the wretched life of Patagonian Indians, he remarks that if this is the wonderful state of nature that enthuses Rousseau, then he will gladly take civilization on any day.¹⁷ Elsewhere he scoffs at men of letters like Abbé Prevost who write confidently about sea voyages but have never seen a ship deck. It is safe to think that, having fought alongside Iroquois Indians some years before in Ontario, Bougainville knew that the *bon sauvage* lived only in the imagination of litterateurs.

Given this commonsense realism, however, we gauge something of the spell of group-think in noting that, especially during the nine days that his ships moored at Hitiaa Bay in Tahiti, Bougainville's Journal succumbs entirely to Rousseauist moonshine. Then Bougainville the *philosophe* then truly gets the better of Bougainville the navigator. Though this way of putting it isn't quite right: better to say that Bougainville erects a cognitive barrier between the navigator and the *philosophe*, so that nothing of what the former sees interferes with what the latter believes. Thus when the navigator chances on facts which the theory predicts do not exist, such as people who are primitive and despotic—despotic, that is, in spite of being primitive, or primitive and avaricious, or primitive and violent, he does not take his inner Rousseau to task. On one page, the philosopher insists that “these people breathe only rest and sensual pleasures” (63) and “the soil liberally grants them its fruits without any cultivation” (74); a page further, the navigator observes that they are otherwise “very industrious and would soon reach the level of European nations if we brought them our craft” (67)—a sentence that is a pit of heresies, like the idea that natural man works, is ambitious, and would not be diminished by European technology. Elsewhere the navigator notes that Tahitians keep slaves (64), which doesn't bother the theorist's conviction that Tahiti is the best of worlds. With his philosopher's hat, Bougainville declares that Tahitians “follow [the laws of nature] in peace and make up what may be the happiest society in the globe” and live in “the greatest amity” (72). Then the navigator notes that their “chief rules despotically”, cows his people with a mere glance, and enforces social ranks (64). The two facts cohabit with no apparent awareness of

contradicting each other. They are “the best people in the world,” and hardly know anything about property, we read in one page; “they are cleverest thieving scoundrels in the universe” (66), says another. Here they are the healthiest people alive (63); there they have smallpox (73). One of the functions of ideology is to disable the ability to contrast theory and fact, and so the oppositive conjunction “but” or “yet” doesn’t obtain between Bougainville’s contradictory remarks. Why industrious slavery on the isle of easy living? Why thieving if there is no property? Why despotic chieftaincy if easygoing universal friendship rules? These questions do not arise. The Journal braids together philosophic conviction and devastating contrary observation, yet the twain never do touch.²⁰

From the memoirs of other men on board we know that Bougainville’s two ships left Tahiti not a day too soon, that relations had soured dangerously between islanders and visitors. Yet Bougainville’s last entry sounds this note: “Farewell happy and wise people, may you always remain what you are. I shall never recall without a sense of delight the brief time I spent among you, and as long as I live, I shall celebrate the happy island of Cythera. It is the true Utopia” (74). Who was Bougainville trying to convince? Was he already honing the myth he knew would charm the salons? It beggars belief that Bougainville did not speak with his own staff, for example with his own surgeon François Vivez who, against Bougainville’s rose-dyed notion that Tahitians lived in peace and fellowship, observed that war was rampant among them, that female infanticide and human sacrifice were rife, and that the population lived under the tyranny of idolized despots—all of which are noted in Vivez’s journal. This leads us to suppose that, in his Tahitian chapter especially, Bougainville chose not to know. But since earlier entries of his journal show that he knew and resented the presumptions of Rousseauism, we may conclude that Bougainville knew that he did not want to know. “Lawyers and philosophers, come and see here all that your imagination has not been able even to dream up,” he prattles (72). In truth, there was no need to take the journey: the lawyers and *philosophes* had fully drawn up the map, and Bougainville understood he had to follow its directions.

Then Bougainville returned to France, and became the darling of the salons, the cynosure of aristocratic houses, and even regaled the King and Queen at Versailles with tales of Aphrodite’s playground, the island of love and laughter and plenty.²¹ Two years thereafter he leveraged his journal into a volume fit for general publication titled *Voyage around the World*. Though we might expect the *Voyage* to play down the contradictions, and play up the popular Rousseauist line, the opposite in fact happens: it is even more contradictory than the Journal, so glaringly indeed that we should even suppose Bougainville to want us notice and ponder the incongruities.

Its Tahitian chapter invites the reader to the expected set pieces—the happy state of nature, “the garden of Eden,” “the Elysian fields,” “the New Cythera,” “the peaceable life exempt from cares,” the “hospitality, ease, innocent joy, and every appearance of happiness,” the absence of “private hatred” and “personal property,” the “unquestioned sincerity” of Tahitians who “live continually immersed in pleasure.” We even meet the

old wise sachem who knows that the arrival of Europeans cannot but doom “those happy days which he and his people have spent in peace.” Indeed we find just about everything the theory predicted, and Bougainville shows himself fully possessed of the fact that the first law of publishing is to give readers what they are determined to receive. It is the aspect of Bougainville’s voyage which kowtows avant la lettre to the spirit of Diderot’s *Supplement*, and in the next decades inspired a cottage industry of Pollyannaish literature like Joséphine de Monbard’s *Lettres Tahitiennes* (1786), Jean-Charles de la Roche-Tilhac’s *Histoire des révolutions de Tahiti* (1782), Moutonnet-Clairfons’s *Les Isles fortunées* (1778), Taitbout’s *Essai sur l’île de Tahiti* (1779), Guillaume-André Baston’s *Narration d’Omai* (1790), Nicholas de la Dixmerie’s *Le Sauvage de Tahiti aux Français avec Envoi au philosophe ami des sauvages* (1770) Restif de la Bretonne’s *Dédale français* (1781), and Guillaume Grivel’s *Ile inconnue* (1783)—all writers who, though they had never gone so far as Cherbourg, were well equipped to speak philosophically about the felicities of Pacific islanders.

By an ironic twist of events, however, it is thanks to these authors, some of who took to their pen even before Bougainville wrote his account, that his *Voyage* takes the interesting turn I would now like to consider—a turn so jarring as to offer the confession of a mind newly disenthralled from an ideology.

In the foregoing I described Bougainville as a man who knew that he did not want to know. His return to France threw him in the company of people similarly skilled in the art of brushing off contrary evidence.²² Perhaps the spectacle of such willful ignorance led him to some soul-searching. In the event, this soul-searching causes his published chapter on Tahiti to break in two. The first half is boilerplate Rousseauism. The second half, as we shall see, pretty much demolishes the rosy picture drawn hitherto. What precipitates this sharp turnabout? It hinges on the proleptic introduction of “the Taiti-man”, the adventurous son of a Tahitian chief by the name of Aotourou who asked to sail with the white explorers and came with Bougainville to Paris. Bougainville takes a page out of his Tahitian observations to recount how Aotourou fared in the capital.

From the way Bougainville spared no expense for Aotourou’s comfort, and spent a third of his fortune to charter his passage back to Tahiti, we know that the navigator was fond of his Tahitian friend. He admired Aotourou’s intelligence, pride, boldness, and curiosity. And it is Aotourou’s reception by intellectuals, especially their polite incuriosity towards his person, which stirred Bougainville from his usual courtesy and, I would venture, brought him face to face with his own learned ignorance. “The desire of seeing him [Aotourou] has been very violent,” he notes; but equally virulent has been the “idle curiosity” of it all and the determination not to listen. Here Bougainville seems to have had in mind the example of Bricaire de la Dixmerie who, never having asked Aotourou for his opinion, made him the spokesman of the Rousseauist animadversion against civilized life in *Le Sauvage de Taiti aux Français* of 1770. The real Aotourou was intrigued and mystified and amused by European society; as ventriloquized by Dixmerie, he rants about how odious, corrupt, fallen, and unhappy

the white man is. This non-too-subtle silencing of the savage whose side one pretends to take irked Bougainville. He pauses his travel story to deplore people “who have never gone beyond the capital, have never examined anything, and being influenced by errors of all sorts, never cast an impartial eye upon any object, and yet claim to speak with magisterial severity, and without appeal.”²³ Bougainville, by the way, received the same treatment. He was entertained by persons who, he says, “honored me with questions” but turned on their heels the moment he answered them. It causes him to remark that “it is common in a capital to meet with people who ask questions, not from an impulse of curiosity, or from a desire of acquiring knowledge, but as magistrates who are readying their judgment. And whether they hear the answer or not does not prevent them from ruling on the matter.” We could say that on his return stay in Paris, Bougainville saw multiple manifestations of the art of keeping one’s mind infallibly made up. It led him to repent of his own discoursing on the Aotourou’s of the world without first consulting them.

But Bougainville did consult with Aotourou, and learned from him, and gauged something of the moral gulf between theorizing about the Other, which even under the best intentions produces an identikit, and listening to the Other. To his honor Bougainville sided with Aotourou, and it is at this juncture of his narrative, after the episode of the Tahiti-man in Paris, that he pens the string of observations that demolishes the Arcadian fairytale.

“I shall now give an account of what I have learnt in my conversations with him, concerning the customs of his country.” Thus Bougainville begins, and from then on nothing stops the truth commission. “I have mentioned above, that the inhabitants of Tahiti seemed to live in an enviable happiness. We took them to be almost equal in rank amongst themselves; or at least enjoying a liberty that was subject only to the laws established for their common happiness. I was mistaken.” This “I was mistaken” is both humble and defiant. Defiant because Bougainville couldn’t be mistaken on this point without dooming the fashionable consensus about the innate goodness of primitive man and the inveterate corruption of Europeans. His tone is unrelenting:

The distinction of ranks is very great at Taiti, and the disproportion very tyrannical. The kings and grandees have power of life and death over their servants and slaves, and I am inclined to believe, they have the same barbarous prerogative with regard to the common people, whom they call Tata-einou, vile men; so much is certain, that the victims for human sacrifices are taken from this class of people. Flesh and fish are reserved for the tables of the great; the commonalty live upon mere fruits and pulse.

Kings, grandees, petty sovereigns, servants, and slaves: this begins to sound like the ancien régime in loincloth, with human sacrifices thrown in. Which puts paid to the anti-clerical dream according to which Tahitians were natural deists, blissfully free of priests, rituals, and idols. “The priests have the highest authorities over them,” Bougainville says bluntly, and their world abounds in “divinities and genii.” What about superstition, which according to the theory festers only when civilization suppresses

natural wisdom? “As Aotourou made very intelligible to us, they positively believe that the sun and moon are inhabited,” records Bougainville. What about the famed mildness and beneficence of the children of nature?

They are almost constantly at war with the inhabitants of the neighboring isles [...]

They make war in a very cruel manner. According to Aotourou's information, they kill all the men and male children taken in battle; they strip the skins, with the beards from the chins, and carry them off as trophies.

Bougainville also recalls Aotourou's advice when they came across unknown Samoans farther to the West: slaughter every ugly, contemptible one of them. But wasn't Bougainville loath to leave the happy island of Cythera which, in his Journal, he vowed to celebrate to his dying day? Here is his farewell remark at the moment of weighing anchor: “Danger and alarms followed all our steps to the very last moments of our stay.” From which may be surmised that, once stocked in fresh food and water, the expedition was happy to repair to the relative calm of the high seas. But if not entirely happy and peaceful, then was there not something to salvage about the superior wisdom of natural man over the enfeebling arts and technologies of civilized man? In an episode, Bougainville recalls that a crewman fell deathly ill from a snake bite. Over the ministrations of the ship's surgeon, Aotourou informed the Europeans that in his country everyone who is thus bit dies of the wound. Bougainville continues:

The Taiti-man was surprised to see the sailor return to his work, four or five days after the accident had happened to him. When he examined the productions of our arts, and the various means by which they augment our faculties, and multiply our forces, this islander would often fall into an ecstatic fit, and blush for his own country, saying with grief, *aoucou Taiti, alas poor Taiti.*

If this is a European preening himself over the efficacy of his technology, there is no reason why it isn't also an intelligent Tahitian who understands the important gradation between efficient and less efficient knowledge. There exists a kind of knowledge that cures snake wounds and which, on balance, enhances wellbeing. We may suppose Aotourou's reaction to tell us that this was commonsense in Tahiti, even if Rousseauist Paris affected to deny it.

An ethnographer will congratulate Bougainville for his scientific integrity; a moralist will praise him for upholding the inconvenient truth. Yet the reader with a taste for coherence will wonder why Bougainville left his published *Voyage* in such conceptual disarray. One side of it plays a rococo recital of songs and scenes where “Venus is the goddess of hospitality” and the appearance of “ease, innocent joy, and happiness” greets the visitors everywhere they turn; the other side deals an unredacted refutation of the myth. I would like to venture some explanations for this glaring dissonance.

One reason is that Bougainville wasn't a systematic thinker, and that he wrote his *Voyage* mostly to entertain the forearmed curiosity of *saloniers*. Captain Cook's writings earned the interest of geographers and scientific societies; Bougainville's appealed to the men and women of letters who were consumers of general ideas, not complicated facts. By the time he sat down to write the *Voyage*, the Parisian scene was abuzz with

news and pamphlets about the happy isle of Tahiti, with which Bougainville wasn't inclined to polemicize. To argue in earnest was bad form among noblemen of his time—though the influence of Rousseau was to change that, and make the voicing of strong righteous positions a badge of *vertu*.

But there is perhaps also a moral edge to Bougainville's decision to leave his Tahitian narrative so achingly dissonant: it is as though he wanted posterity to notice the discrepancy. Here was, on the page, an intelligent man who said one thing while observing the opposite. The Enlightenment believed that true knowledge would dispel false belief. But Bougainville knew first-hand that philosophers love their theories more than the real world. From his own experience he understood that it is possible to know something, yet believe contrariwise. Kant famously defined the Enlightenment as the project of shaking the intellect from self-imposed immaturity. Bougainville may have guessed how much immaturity is craved even at the heart of the great clarification (*Aufklärung*). Certainly he felt the tug of conformity, and gauged how much the will to belong is stronger than the will to know. The power of belief is in fact the subject of his "Introduction" to the *Voyage*. There he confesses his vexation but also his resignation before the tide of Rousseauism. A passage, in particular, is worth quoting in full.

Lastly, I neither quote nor contradict anybody, and much less do I pretend to establish or to overthrow any hypothesis; and supposing that the great differences which I have remarked in the various countries where I have touched at, had not been able to prevent my embracing that spirit of system-making, so peculiar in our present age, and however so incompatible with true philosophy, how could I have expected that my whim, whatever appearance of probability I could give it, should meet with success in the world? I am a voyager and a seaman; that is, a liar and a stupid fellow, in the eyes of that class of indolent haughty writers, who in their closets reason in infinitum on the world and its inhabitants, and with an air of superiority, confine nature within the limits of their own invention. This way of proceeding appears very singular and inconceivable, on the part of persons who have observed nothing themselves, and only write and reason upon the observations which they have borrowed from those same travelers in whom they deny the faculty of seeing and thinking.

To paraphrase: I do not wish to antagonize anyone and their theory. My experience of the manifold world warns me against comprehensive top-down philosophic schemes; I have come across people and observed facts that roundly disprove prevalent philosophies; yet I have not constructed a countervailing system out of my observations. This would be fruitless. I am only a "stupid" seaman and even stupid seamen know better than to sail against the tide of armchair philosophy. In other words, Bougainville knew that the pea of a fact would not trouble the cushioned sleep of *encyclopédistes*—and he was right.

Nothing of what he did write, nothing about his observations of kingly privilege, human sacrifice, infanticide, religious tyranny, and atrocious warfare among Pacific islanders argued the intellectuals out of their conviction. His *Voyage* did not abate the

inky flood of tracts of which Diderot's *Supplement* is now the more famous, in which Tahiti stands as the land of "abundance and happiness" and a "spectacle of innocence and bliss."²⁵ Bougainville knew that his account would be supplemented out of existence, and so it was. There was indeed too much at stake in reading it *in toto*. It struck at the heart of the anti-civilization orthodoxy by suggesting that social stratification is primary, and possibly inherent in human life; that religion and a priesthood of some kind are integral to societies; that conflict dwells inside the human soul and breaks out with or without the meddling of "society." If Tahitian man is man in a state of nature, then man in a state of nature is not free, good, or content; and if man is not born good and free, then the removal of chains will not return him to a state of goodness, for society isn't the source of all ills.

This brings us to the posterity of Bougainville's *Voyage*. If he could not expect to be heard then, what of his chances now? For most of the nineteenth century and the better part of the twentieth, the *Voyage* remained well-nigh synonymous with what Diderot wanted us to glean from it. When early ethnography began criticizing the Arcadian myth, it blamed it squarely on the explorer. In his *Grands navigateurs du dix-huitième siècle* (1880), Jules Verne scolded Bougainville's naïve myth-making, as though the navigator hadn't written pages that shatter this purported naiveté.²⁶ A survey of twentieth-century readers of Bougainville also reveals relative lack of interest in the fact-bound side of the navigator. The cultural historian who recently writes that "Bougainville's published accounts of the island unashamedly painted it as paradise regained" is a typical sample of the Diderot-vetted version of Bougainville.²⁷ Some scholars concede that not everything was rose-dyed in Tahiti though in the end it is Bougainville's embellishing job that retains their attention, presumably because literary critics are more comfortable in the role of demystifying fictions.²⁸ The more myths, the more there is for a critic to undo. Other scholars acknowledge that Bougainville countered his own romanticism with observations on "the struggles of actual life," which somehow doesn't capture the serrated edge of cannibalism, slavery, war-mongering, and human sacrifice, and thereby misses the chance, which I have taken here, of pondering why Bougainville put his Rousseau and anti-Rousseau side by side.²⁹

To be sure, the selective reading of Bougainville answers changing imperatives. Back in the eighteenth century, the reason for overlooking his unromantic passages—for, as he put it, denying him "the faculty of seeing and thinking"—was to sign onto the Enlightenment agenda for social reform. You could not convince people to jettison religion, inherited customs, authority, competition, and hierarchies unless it was an axiomatic truth that man was happier without them. Hence the *bon sauvage*. In the post-colonial, Levi-Straussian twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the reason for overlooking Bougainville's de-mystifying passages is bundled in a Manichean idea of history that made it impolitic to say that victims of colonization lived in suffering and injustice of their own before Europeans imported their brand of harm. To suggest that the last of the Mohicans wasn't a paragon can be seen as legitimating the civilizing

mission, and this is no moral subtlety the scholar is inclined to juggle. To suggest that native populations may have benefited from contact with the West (as the descendants of Aotourou benefited from snake venom antidote) is to run the risk of guilt-by-association: since missionaries of the nineteenth century emphasized the depravity of Pacific islanders to justify Christianizing the islands, any frank depiction of pre-colonial life may be accused of playing the missionary trick. Safer it is to enlarge on the romantic Bougainville.³⁰

But of course Bougainville forces difficult questions. He is an example of ambivalence, a figure of both timidity and defiance. Timidity because he had no desire to antagonize a republic of letters that feted him for retailing a utopian Tahiti; defiance because he had his duty to truth, and truth in this instance wore a human face, that of his friend Aotourou to whom he, unlike the many who professed to speak on his behalf, listened. Bougainville's fault, if there must be one, is that he played both sides. He has been paying for this coyness by losing his name to exoticism. But this need not be the closing act. Equally can Bougainville's self-contradictory account tell us about the pressures that weigh on the supposedly liberated intellect in the supposedly post-religious, post-inquisitorial, enlightened age. Though it was not supposed to happen, the Enlightenment bred intellectual conformities—conformities that are perhaps more insidious for appearing to be the offspring of reason and demystification. Thinkers of Bougainville's era congratulated themselves for seeing through the veil of religion, customs, and authority. Seeing through the veil, however, can weave a veil of its own, which incites us to overlook or twist the facts that run counter to the theory (the theory, in the instance, that a just and happy society is necessarily one without religion, customs, and authority). Bougainville is of interest today not so much for what he got right or wrong about ancient Tahiti; he is of interest because he holds a mirror to intellectual life whose orthodoxies sometimes make our pen betray what our eye plainly sees.

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Notes

¹ Hayden White "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish in Tropics of Discourse," in *Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 183.

² See Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1935).

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* [1762] in *Political Writings* (New York: Norton, 1988), 85.

⁴ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* [1755] in *Political Writings*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid*, 34; 57.

⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

⁸ Rousseau, *The Confessions* (London: Norse, 1923), II, 32.

⁹ Rousseau, *Émile* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1966), 56.

¹⁰ Hippolyte Taine, *The Ancient Régime* (New York: Holt, 1891), 271.

¹¹ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), X, 152-170; 887-894.

¹² See Éric Vibart, *Tabiti: Naissance d'un paradis au siècle des Lumières* (Brussels: Complexe, 1987).

¹³ Denis Diderot, *Supplement to Bougainville's "Voyage"* [1772] in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1956), 187; 188; 196; 187.

¹⁴ Commerson, "Postscriptum sur l'isle de la Nouvelle Cythère ou Tayti" [1769] in Étienne Taillemite, *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1977), 506-10.

¹⁵ "The Journal of Fesche," in Bougainville, *The Pacific Journal*, 260; 263; 257.

¹⁶ Sonia Fassel "Le Mythe de Tahiti, ou comment une réalité devient une fiction," *Comité de documentation historique de la marine* (Vincennes, 1995), 211-32; and *Visions des îles: Du mythe à son exploration littéraire (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006); Serge Tcherkézoff, *Tabiti 1768: Jeunes filles en pleurs: La face cachée des premiers contacts et la naissance du mythe occidental* (Pape'ete: Au vent des îles, 2004), 114-235.

¹⁷ Louis Antoine de Bougainville *The Pacific Journal of Louis Antoine de Bougainville* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 2002), 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹ See Daniel Margueron, *Tabiti dans toute sa littérature* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), 49-57.

²⁰ See Elliott, 240.

²¹ On Bougainville's hour of fame, see contemporary descriptions like Louis de Bachaumont *Mémoires secrets* (London: John Adamson 1777), 244.

²² See Bougainville's own *Voyage around the World* and Anne Salmond, *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 115-18.

²³ Bougainville, *Voyage around the World*, trans. John Foster (London: Nourse, 1772). Accessed July 2018.

²⁴ Observations that Aotourou held the "ugly" islanders of other nations in "great contempt" are in Bougainville's *Voyage*; Aotourou's insistence that all be killed is recorded in Vivez's Journal in Bougainville, *The Pacific Journal*, 236.

²⁵ Taibout, *Essai sur l'isled'Otahiti et sur l'esprit et les moeurs de ses habitants* (Avignon, 1779), 51-52.

²⁶ Jules Verne *Les Grands navigateurs du dix-huitième siècle* [1880] (Arvensa Éditions, 2014), 111.

²⁷ Roy Porter, "The Exotic as Erotic: Captain Cook at Tahiti," in G. S. Rousseau and R. Porter, eds., *Exoticism in the Enlightenment* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1990), 119. See also Robert Nicole, *The Word, the Pen, and the Pistol: Literature and Power in Tahiti*. Albany: SUNY, 2001; Benoit Dillet, "Finitude before Finitude: The Case of Rousseau-Bougainville-Diderot," in Garth Lean, ed., *Travel and Representation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), pp. 83-101.

²⁸ For example, Éric Vibart, 1987.

²⁹ Andrew Martin, "The Enlightenment in Paradise: Bougainville, Tahiti, and the Duty of Desire," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Volume 41, Number 2, Winter 2008, pp. 203-216.

³⁰ A notable exception is anthropologist Nicholas Thomas' *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010).