

Lyric, Language, Culture¹

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One of the most striking changes in the critical scene in recent years is the decline in the importance of lyric poetry. Poetry was once central to literary experience and the consideration of the nature of lyric or of poetic language was once central to critical theory: for the Russian formalists and theorists such as Roman Jakobson who linked Russian formalism and French structuralism. This is no longer the case today; when literature is important for theory, it comes in the guise of narrative. Why should this be? The obvious answer might be that not enough people read poetry, but such empirical matters never stopped theory before. Who reads Lacan except theorists? The simple answer might be that in an age of critical demystification, poetry seems embarrassing. Theorists can make claims about the fundamental importance of fictional narrative to the construction of the individual subject, to desire and identity, to the imagined communities that are nations, and so on. It's harder to imagine making such claims about lyric. The blatantness of its rhetorical devices and the perverseness of lyric address — to birds, urns, flowers, or the dead — create discomfort for serious theorists. In his definition of performative language, “How to Do Things With Words”, the English philosopher J. L. Austin famously stipulates, “I must not be joking, for instance, or writing a poem.”² Poetry is set aside as non-serious, a parasitic or etiolated use of language. In “Passions: An Oblique Offering”, Jacques Derrida writes, “No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy”,³ but can we imagine claiming “No democracy without lyric”?

In fact, poetry has often been the abject of theory, to use a term from Julia Kristeva: what theory needs to reject, put beyond the pale, in order to constitute itself. Plato referred to the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy, for which he may be largely responsible, but in modern times one could start with the case of Marx, for whom

accession to the condition of theorist came with his rejection of the poetry he had written as a young man, even the burning of poems in progress. He becomes Marx by rejecting poetry. Two famous texts, the letter to his father of November 10, 1837, and the “Reflections of a young man on the choice of a profession”, set out the oppositions: in poetry everything real becomes hazy, and to gain clarity and seek foundations in the real, he must flamboyantly abandon poetry.⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin enables himself to call the novel fundamentally dialogical — comprising competing socially-marked discourses — by labeling poetry as monological and setting it aside without examination.⁵ A poem is supposedly monological, controlled from a single point of view and thus ultimately deluded or authoritarian.

This is one version of a general structural operation where an opposition between something like poetry and prose is set up and qualities that can then be linked with poetry can be eliminated from consideration by the abjecting of poetry. The object of theory thus gets constituted by the setting aside of lyric. The classic gesture in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* identifies poetry as self-conscious play with language, a refusal to use the “language-instrument” properly, i.e. as transparent signs. Setting aside poetry permits Sartre to focus on the problems of representing the world and bearing witness to it.

Roland Barthes’ first book, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, the beginning of a major trajectory for modern theory, was a rewriting of Sartre, a response that never actually mentions Sartre while arguing that, on the contrary, reflection on language in avant-garde literature has political significance. Reversing Sartre’s account of prose by linking its political valency to its experimentation with language, Barthes nevertheless preserves Sartre’s abjection of poetry. Prose experiments with language in radical, politically promising ways, but poetry attempts to transcend or destroy language and therefore can be ignored. These two opposed theorists join in attaching what they see as wrong attitudes to language to poetry so that this attitude and the dimensions of language and language use to which it responds can be eliminated from consideration.

Poetry is not central to theory these days, nor to literary education, at least not in the English and Francophone world. In US universities these days we get many students studying English or foreign literatures who claim that they don’t like poetry, or don’t get it, so they tend to enroll in courses that focus on the novel or on cultural studies. Since students tend to avoid poetry, as something unfamiliar and unfriendly, literature departments, in their quest to gain more students, make poetry less central to their programs. But if the study of poetry is no longer at the heart of literary study, that has dire consequences, for close attention to language and to artifice are no longer central, and thematic and ideological concerns encounter little resistance as they take over. And once themes are all that count, why not study movies and TV programs rather than literature, which requires reading, attention to language, rather than viewing or scanning?

What has happened in literary studies is paralleled by the developments in language

study that have vastly reduced the role played by the reading of literature. The communicative approach to language learning stresses real world exchanges; and the interactive view, seeing language as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of social relations, focusing on patterns of moves, acts, negotiation and interaction found in conversational exchanges, has little place for written texts emerging from what is seen as a marginal social practice. In the United States, the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, elaborated by a group representing the major foreign language teaching organizations in the context of federal education initiatives, scarcely mention literature, even though these are supposed to be broad compromise standards that allow divergent approaches. Standard 1.2., “Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics,” does mention comprehending “fairy tales, and other narratives based on familiar themes,” as an example, and, at a more advanced level, speaks of “understanding of the cultural nuances of meaning in written and spoken language as expressed by speakers and writers of the target language in formal and informal settings.”⁶ But the standards addressing culture make clearer the orientation of language teaching: standard 2.1 explains, “Cultural practices refer to patterns of behavior accepted by a society and deal with aspects of culture such as rites of passage, the use of forms of discourse, the social ‘pecking order,’ and the use of space,” — conventions in which things like literature are not included. Standard 2.2 concerning cultural products, declares “Products may be tangible (e.g., a painting, a piece of literature, a pair of chopsticks) or intangible (e.g., an oral tale, a dance, a sacred ritual, a system of education). Whatever the form of the product, its presence within the culture is required or justified by the underlying beliefs and values (perspectives) of that culture, and the cultural practices involve the use of that product.” In this perspective, chopsticks are a better choice than a piece of literature as a product that illustrates the widespread practices of a culture.

Now I am not proposing that we to revert to the old days, when foreign language students focused on literature: translating it and basically studying living languages the way same way one studied Latin, for example, but I do think something important is lost when the reading of poetry is eliminated from foreign language instruction, in the name of communication or social interaction. That is my subject here.

First of all, some of the most salient characteristics of lyrics, their brevity and memorability, are very relevant to the process of language learning. In a wonderful little aphoristic work, “Che cos’è la poesia?” [What is Poetry?], a text written in response to this question from an Italian journal, Jacques Derrida approaches poetry as what strives to be memorable, to live in memory: “Apprends-moi par coeur, dit le poème.” The poem addresses you — “je suis une dictée, prononce la poésie, apprends-moi par coeur, recopie, veille, et garde moi » [I am a dictation, says poetry. Learn me by heart, copy out, watch over and preserve me.]⁷ As memorable language, lyrics seek to be taken in, cathected — that is, emotionally invested, as a piece of otherness that can become part of you, available for responding to or thinking about experience —

not only, Derrida says, “ce qu’on apprend par coeur,” but “ce qui apprend le coeur.” [not only what one learns by heart but what teaches the heart]. Poetry in Western culture has taught us the heart, taught us what is the heart. La Rochefoucauld declared that no one would fall in love if they had not read about it, and certainly poems of tragic love, of impossible or disappointed passion, are central to our cultures. When we hear “Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche” [I can write the saddest verses tonight], we know they will be about the heart.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche
Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido
Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca
Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.
Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

[Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.
My sight tries to find her, as though to bring her closer
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.
Love is so short, forgetting is so long.]⁸

Lyrics offer memorable language, asking that we repeat them, and may help engage learners in or with a language: as the language invests them, inscribes its formulations in mechanical memory, learners may become invested in the language, in rhythms they repeat as they repeat poems. In the process of learning a mother tongue, speech rhythms come first, before semantics, and while one cannot reproduce for second language learners the situation of learning a first language, one may in some small part simulate the condition of the child with poetic rhythms, nursery rhymes, simple lyrics. Derek Attridge, a British critic and metrical theorist, notes that even young children who may have trouble with the pronunciation of words can easily get the meter right for English nursery rhymes. (It helps, of course, that nursery rhymes are isochronic, with a regular chanted beat.) “There is nothing remarkable, therefore, about a two-year-old chanting the following rhyme with perfect metrical placing of the syllables,”

Stár líght stár bríght,
The fírst stár I sée toníght,
I wísh I máy, I wísh I míght,
Háve the wísh I wísh toníght.

even though this requires “knowing” — I put the word in quotation marks — that each word in the first line takes a stress, whereas in the third line only every second word is stressed. It is upon this edifice of shared ability, a rhythmic competence, that is built the whole English poetic tradition. The four-by-four formation, four groups of four beats, is in English “the basis of most modern popular music, including rock and rap, of most folk, broadside, and industrial ballads from the middle ages to the 20th century, of most hymns, most nursery rhymes, and a great deal of printed poetry.”⁹

One can very early learn simple verses in a foreign language, even if some of the words and constructions remain opaque, and this lays a foundation for cultural competence that will extend beyond lyrics themselves to the tradition of song, including and rap and popular music — a topic to which I will return. One can easily learn simple verses that are far more significant accomplishments of the language than the bits of communicative or phatic dialogue that are central to the interactive approach: “Bonjour monsieur, comment allez-vous? Très bien merci, et vous? Ah, très bien, et votre mère, elle se porte toujours bien ? » One could instead recite:

<i>Les sanglots longs</i>	The long sobs
<i>Des violons</i>	Of the violins
<i>De l'automne</i>	Of Autumn
<i>Blessent mon cœur</i>	Wound my heart
<i>D'une langueur</i>	With a monotonous
<i>Monotone.</i> ¹⁰	Languor.

Less useful when encountering a Frenchman, perhaps, but perhaps more likely to get one interested in the language. Let me remark, parenthetically, on the cultural significance of Verlaine's poem, which is not only taken to exemplify the musicality of the French language but was used during World War II to signal to French resistance forces that the Normandy invasion was imminent: when transmitted on a BBC broadcast “Les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne” meant that the landing would come in two weeks, and then “blessent mon cœur d'une langueur monotone,” meant it would come in 48 hours. The combination of memorability and the primacy of sound makes these phrases a good code — words that could not get spoken accidentally by an announcer when talking about something else.

There are vast numbers of poems, less historically significant, with relatively simple vocabulary and syntax that might engage students' attention and seem sufficiently exotic that they would make attractive additions to their mental repertoire. I recall when I was learning German being quite taken by a little poem from Bertold Brecht's “Alfabet” of 1934.

Reicher Mann und armer Mann	Rich man and poor man
Standen da und sahn sich an.	Stood there and looked at each other
Und der Arme sagte bleich:	And the poor man blankly said :
Wäre ich nicht arm, wärst du nicht reich.	‘Were I not poor, you were not rich.’ ¹¹

This is memorable and pretty straightforward. It is also of interest in that it gives a learner recondite verb forms, the imperfect subjunctives *ich wäre* and *du wärst*, used for contrary fact conditionals. Even if one is a beginner with no interest in learning the imperfect subjunctive, a quatrain like this provides a really efficient way storing in memory versions of this strange tense in case one ever advances to it. It is neat to have something at once so simple and so complicated in one's head.

English is rich in simple poems that a relative beginner can successfully take in. For instance, Robert Frost's “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me stopping here
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near
 Between the woods and frozen lake
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
 To ask if there is some mistake.
 The only other sound's the sweep
 Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.¹²

“Stopping by Woods” wonderfully illustrates the stress patterns of English, which is an accentual language, and the four-by-four verse so common to its cultural products, but is also culturally significant in a different way. It is a poem that for North Americans offers an important mythical image — made especially attractive as the cold of winter is elided by “the sweep/ Of easy wind and downy flake,” a splendid line. This image of New England woods in the snow, with sleighs and a horse with bells on his harness is something few of us may have ever seen but many of us regard as quite normal, the imagined furniture of the world. The mythic association of snow with sleep and death is something not shared by all cultures, though more widespread is the contrast between the world of practical affairs, here interestingly represented by the horse said to think stopping in the woods is queer, and a silent natural world taken to be more elemental. Where does the human speaker most belong?

But I don't think that simple vocabulary and syntax is necessary for poems — after all, all over the world young people acquire a good deal of English by repeating the lyrics of pop songs, which may be obscure and complicated. (They can also be very simple, of course: “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah!”) Failure to understand them or even to identify the words exactly is historically no obstacle to pleasure and cathexis. In fact, successful language learners are those who develop a taste for new words, strange formulations, who can cope with not understanding everything but learn to repeat. I would love for students to experience the eerie fascination of the resonant but perplexing juxtapositions and odd vocabulary of poems like W. H. Auden's “The Fall of Rome,” which is almost nonsense verse, a series of disconnected images, vaguely decadent or sinister, but above all strange.

The Fall of Rome

The piers are pummeled by the waves;

In a lonely field the rain
 Lashes an abandoned train;
 Outlaws fill the mountain caves.
 Fantastic grow the evening gowns;
 Agents of the Fisc pursue
 Absconding tax-defaulters through
 The sewers of provincial towns.
 Private rites of magic send
 The temple prostitutes to sleep;
 All the literati keep
 An imaginary friend.
 Cerebrotonic¹³ Cato may
 Extol the Ancient Disciplines,
 But the muscle-bound Marines
 Mutiny for food and pay.
 Caesar's double bed is warm
 As an unimportant clerk
 Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK
 On a pink official form.
 Unendowed with wealth or pity,
 Little birds with scarlet legs,
 Sitting on their speckled eggs,
 Eye each flu-infested city.
 Altogether elsewhere, vast
 Herds of reindeer move across
 Miles and miles of golden moss,
 Silently and very fast.¹⁴

Here are weird images, like the little birds “unendowed with wealth or pity” (who would expect wealthy birds!). “Altogether elsewhere” is marvelous, and I would like students of English to recall reindeer moving “silently and very fast,” over “miles and miles of golden moss.” But it is hard to explain the appeal of these lines. There is a hint of the mathematical sublime, with the unmasterable natural image — vast herds, miles and miles of golden moss — where you might expect a reference to barbarian hordes, so that the indifference of those reindeer moving silently and very fast makes them an unmasterable reality, — the antithesis of decadence — evocative of a larger framework that makes civilization in its decline seem trivial and not just sinister. In cases like this I recall Wallace Stevens' dictum: “A poem must resist the intelligence, / Almost successfully.”¹⁵ That resistance helps produce the power and fascination of poetry.

It is hard to know how to balance the attractions of the puzzling and exotic, on the one hand, and that of the simpler yet highly resonant, on the other. My basic suggestion here is that the communicative or interactive approach to language learning is not

necessarily a winning one. Certainly in the United States, it has become harder to make a compelling argument to students on communicative grounds, claiming that “you need to take more years of French or German or Spanish in order to be able to communicate with people in that language.” The reluctant prospective student is likely to reply, “well, I was in France (or Costa Rica or Serbia) last year, and lots of the people I encountered spoke English, so that I didn’t have trouble getting along.” Now I recognize the asymmetry of the world linguistic situation: the communicational argument may be determinative for speakers of other languages who need to learn English, but it seems not to be working very well for English speakers. Nor is the interactive model an easy sell, since unless one attains really remarkable fluency, one will always be interacting awkwardly as a foreigner who does not have the intuitions and reactions of a native speaker. I would also mention that from the point of view of the interactions that are most likely to be important for young people — namely, encounters that might lead to an amorous relationship — a large dose of foreignness has never been an obstacle but has usually been an added attraction — the cute accent, the adorable linguistic mistakes, the need for assistance, the awkwardness that you can help to overcome — all are stimuli to amorous encounters and undercut the idea that the goal of interacting like a native is a necessary one. Increasingly, what seems necessary for sustained foreign language learning is an actual fascination with some aspect of the language, — I have spoken of “cathecting” the language — investing emotional energy in the language or becoming emotionally invested in it. This can come from films, from popular music — from anything that makes you want more of that language — but can also come from poetry. A line like “Dolce color d’oriental zaffiro...” from the beginning of Dante’s *Purgatorio* might spark a desire to learn Italian.

Lyric poems have the virtue of being short, so you can take the whole in quickly, all at once, can reread them, recite them, even learn them by heart, deliberately or by dint of rereading that will lead some of their lines to stick in your mind and make you want to learn the other lines. You don’t need to understand all the words — I knew that little quatrain of Brecht’s for years without worrying about the precise meaning of “bleich” — “Und der Arme sagte bleich.” [And the poor man says...]. Having learned it means “deathly pale” or “wan,” I ignore the meaning, since bleich is there for the rhyme. I am not greatly interested in studying Spanish phrase books to learn how to ask the way to the hospital or how to change money, but I would like to be able to recite

La princesa está triste.. Qué tendrá la princesa?
 Los suspiros se escapan de su boca de fresa,
 [The princess is sad. What ails the princess ?
 The sighs escape from her strawberry mouth]

without sounding as if I were speaking Italian with a lisp. But since Rubén Darío’s “Sonatina,” with its sentimental ending, is less to my tastes than the mystery of some other famous poems, something like Lorca’s “La Luna Asoma” is more likely to lure me into Spanish:

Cuando sale la luna
se pierden las campanas
y aparecen las sendas
impenetrables.

Cuando sale la luna,
el mar cubre la tierra
y el corazón se siente
isla en el infinito.

Nadie come naranjas
bajo la luna llena.
Es preciso comer,
fruta verde y helada.

Cuando sale la luna
de cien rostros iguales,
la moneda de plata
solloza en el bolsillo.¹⁶

[When the moon rises
The bells die away
And impenetrable
Paths come to the fore.

When the moon rises
Water covers land
And the heart feels itself
An island in infinity.

No one eats oranges
Under the full moon.
It is right to eat
Green, chilled fruit.

When the moon rises
With a hundred faces all the same,
Coins of silver
Start sobbing in the pocket.]

This is another poem that teaches the heart. Here, I am very taken by the confident positing of a cultural norm in the third stanza: it is right to eat “fruta verde y helada” rather than oranges when there is a full moon. I hope this is indeed the norm in some Hispanophone societies.

Especially important for me is the fact that poems initiate students into a different relation to language, where it not something supposedly transparent but manifestly opaque and haunting. They introduce the possibility of possession by language, fascination with it, as something to explore, to live with and live in. Poems are not an exchange of information but forms ritualistically available for repetition, musing, and indirect use in various contexts. Quoting a line or lines from a poem is not just an act

of communicating but also an act of situating oneself in a culture as one takes up its fragments. If lovers quote lines of poems or of songs to each other, it is not because the verses formulate the speaker's thought more precisely or aptly than the speaker him- or herself, but because these emotions or affects are thoroughly cultural — even to say “I love you” is something of a quotation — and lines from a poem or a song provide a cultural objectification, a participation in something larger than yourself, a process, a heritage.

It is important that lyrics are not just the expression of a poetic subject's personal affect — though poems often suggest that this is what they do:

Yo soy un hombre sincero
De donde crece la palma,
Y antes de morirme quiero
Echar mis versos del alma.¹⁷

José Martí's opening stanza evokes a poetry of the heart: “I am a sincere man / from where the palm tree grows;/ and before I die I want / to loose my verses from my heart.”

But this long poem by the Cuban poet and patriot is above all a communal statement, a work of rich cultural significance which evokes Cuban resistance to Spanish oppression and furnished words for Cuba's national song, “Guantanamera”. Indeed, the expressive theory of the lyric of the Romantic era seems increasingly inadequate, not even apt for the poems of the age to which it supposedly especially applied, and certainly not to others: the whole Petrarchan tradition, for example, is less one of expression of a personal emotion than an exploration of rhetorical possibilities of affect. And of course much 20th century verse sought explicitly to escape the expressive model. But neither should lyric be treated as the fictional imitation of a real-world speech act — the model which currently dominates lyric pedagogy in the US — in which we posit a speaker-character whose situation and motives for utterance readers are supposed to reconstruct. I could say more about the inadequacy of these models of lyric, which distract attention from everything that is most distinctive of lyric — ritualistic rhythms, formal structures, indirect address, intertextual relations — but fortunately, neither model need arise in the context of language teaching, where the lyric is above all a splendid, engaging instance of the language.

I mentioned earlier that many students today say they don't like poetry or are not interested in poetry, but since young children still respond eagerly to rhyme and rhythm, I think in teaching poetry we must have been doing something wrong to produce dislike, and I am inclined to blame interpretation — the presumption in schools and universities that what you are supposed to do with poems is not recite them or memorize them but interpret them, tease out meanings. We do not behave this way with pop songs — we might occasionally argue with a friend about what a line means but usually we argue about whether it is a good song or not — and people become connoisseurs of their music without spending any time on interpretation. Moreover,

students manifestly do respond to rap and other forms with intense verbal patterning, which might provide links back to lyrics of the poetic tradition. In songs, as in examples in linguistic exercises, language is determined by something other than the communicative intentions of a speaker — for instance, by rhyme as a generative device. Listening to Bob Dylan the other day, I imagined the linguistic exercise of trying to continue one of his songs, by continuing to repeat the rhyme. Consider “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” for instance. Many people know the most famous lines from this historic song: “You don’t need a weatherman / To know which way the wind blows.” Here are two sequences:

Look out kid
 Don’t matter what you did
 Walk on your tip toes
 Don’t try no doz
 Better stay away from those
 That carry around a fire hose
 [x] Keep a clean nose
 [x] Watch the plain clothes
 You don’t need a weather man
 To know which way the wind blows

and again

Look out kid
 They keep it all hid
 Better jump down a manhole
 Light yourself a candle
 Don’t wear sandals
 Try to avoid the scandals
 [x] Don’t wanna be a bum
 [x] You better chew gum
 The pump don’t work
 ’cause the vandals took the handles.¹⁸

The rhymed poem, as it turns on itself, bespeaks a strange order that surprises us, a manifestation of an order in and of language other than that of meaning, the manifestation of a system that is not that of human meanings. Rhyme as a device generating meanings gives a sense that all this fits together somehow, that there is a relation between the handles taken by vandals and abjuring your sandals and scandals. But above all this is language made memorable by the rhythms and poetic form.

The unexpected rise of rap, a form of heavily rhythmical language that relies on rhythm and imagery, and its enormous persisting popularity among the young of all social strata, suggests a hunger for rhythmic language that might find some satisfaction in lyric, if poems were conceived and presented differently. The fact that in rap rhythmic language could to some extent replace melodic language in the affections of the young seems to me a sign of the profound appeal of rhythmically-patterned language — and

perhaps a monitory lesson for modern poetry that in English at least, has frequently abandoned the more explicit forms of linguistic patterning, including meter and vigorous rhythm. A greater foregrounding of rhythm as central to lyric might enable the teaching of poetry to regain some of the ground lost in recent years and also might lead to a different sort of poetics. One could thus imagine an approach more connected with evaluation, which has not been central to literary studies recently: what works and what doesn't? What engages our attention, our *corps de jouissance* [ecstatic body] — to use Roland Barthes' term — and what does not?

But I have somewhat slighted the third term of my title, "culture". Of course, poems are culture, but for much language teaching today they are deemed less important culturally than chop sticks. I do think, though that in addition to their undoubted role in the culture of the past, they have in many cultures an important function in the present — in what even the most present-minded language teachers would regard as the culture. I have argued that poems are better than most things one might learn as way to cathect a foreign culture, to come to have some stake in it. But poems that become important to the national imaginary also convey something about the culture, as I mentioned when discussing "Stopping by Woods" and José Martí's "Yo son un hombre sincero." The case of Rubén Darío's "Sonatina" seems to me a very interesting one. I understand this is very resonant and evocative for many speakers of Spanish, who may have learned it by heart in school. To outsiders it seems sentimental: the beautiful princess trapped in a golden cage of her privilege, but who, the fairy godmother promises at the end, will be rescued by a knight who has conquered death. What it is about this poem that gives it an important cultural function?

La princesa está triste... ¿Qué tendrá la princesa?

Los suspiros se escapan de su boca de fresa,
que ha perdido la risa, que ha perdido el color.

La princesa está pálida en su silla de oro,
está mudo el teclado de su clave sonoro,
y en un vaso, olvidada, se desmaya una flor.¹⁹

[The princess is sad...What is wrong with the princess?
her sighs are escaping from her strawberry mouth,
which has lost all its laughter, which has lost all its color.
The princess is pale on her golden divan,
the keyboard is mute on her resonant harpsichord;
And a flower, forgotten, has swooned in a vase.]

More seductive than the fairy story of princess and knight may be the resonant images of aspiration to freedom:

¡Ay!, la pobre princesa de la boca de rosa
quiere ser golondrina, quiere ser mariposa,
tener alas ligeras, bajo el cielo volar;
ir al sol por la escala luminosa de un rayo,
saludar a los lirios con los versos de mayo

o perderse en el viento sobre el trueno del mar.
 [Alas! The poor princess with the rose-colored mouth
 Would rather a swallow or a butterfly be,
 And under the heavens would fly on light wings,
 Would rise to the sun on the luminous ladder of beams,
 Would greet every lily with the verse of May,
 Or be lost in the wind on the boom of the sea.]

The poem ends with the godmother's promise and the image of the prince who will come galloping to the rescue on his charger:

-«Calla, calla, princesa -dice el hada madrina-;
 en caballo, con alas, hacia acá se encamina,
 en el cinto la espada y en la mano el azor,
 el feliz caballero que te adora sin verte,
 y que llega de lejos, vencedor de la Muerte,
 a encenderte los labios con un beso de amor».
 [“Hush now, hush now princess.” Says the fairy god mother,
 “On a horse with great wings, he is coming for you,
 With a sword in his belt and a hawk on his arm,
 The goodly knight who adores you unseen,
 And who comes from afar, having overcome Death,
 To light up your lips with the kiss of true love.”] (Trans. Arcereda and Derusha.)

What is the cultural role of this myth of the kiss of the knight, conqueror of death? Or does the resonance of the poem depend less on this promised rescue than on the image of princess imprisoned in her privilege, wishing she could fly away as a golondrina or mariposa — with the poem itself as both a golden cage and an appeal to everything that lies beyond?

Let me in concluding consider a poem where I can say something about its cultural significance: Du Bellay's "Heureux qui comme Ulysse". This 16th century sonnet about nostalgia for one's native land has had a remarkable fortune in French culture, as it became one of the most frequently memorized poems in the French canon — an example of the way in which particular poems may quite unexpectedly take on a powerful cultural function.

Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage,
 Ou comme cestuy-là qui conquiert la toison,
 Et puis est retourné, plein d'usage et raison,
 Vivre entre ses parents le reste de son âge!
 [Happy the man who, journeying far and wide
 As Jason or Ulysses did, can then
 Turn homeward, seasoned in the ways of men,
 To live life out, among his own again!]
 Quand reverrai-je, hélas, de mon petit village
 Fumer la cheminée, et en quelle saison

Reverrai-je le clos de ma pauvre maison,
 Qui m'est une province, et beaucoup davantage?

[When shall I see the chimney-smoke divide
 The sky above my little town: ah, when
 Stroll the small gardens of that house again,
 Which is my realm and crown, and more beside?]

Plus me plaît le séjour qu'ont bâti mes aïeux,
 Que des palais Romains le front audacieux,
 Plus que le marbre dur me plaît l'ardoise fine.

[Better I love the plain, secluded home
 My fathers built, than bold façades of Rome;
 Slate pleases me as marble cannot do.]

Plus mon Loire gaulois, que le Tibre latin;
 Plus mon petit Liré, que le mont Palatin
 Et plus que l'air marin la douceur angevine.

[Better than Tiber's flood my quiet Loire,
 Those little hills than these, and dearer far,

Than great sea winds the zephyrs of Anjou.²⁰] (Trans. Richard Wilbur)

This is in effect a poem of choice of life as well as nostalgia. In a way that seems particularly characteristic of French culture, it performs the powerful ideological operation of presenting attachment to the nation and implicitly to the primacy of French culture as attachment to landscape, to the countryside, which is figured as home for even the most cosmopolitan — for Du Bellay, living in Rome, and for later generations of Parisians. As such, one critic writes, “it may well function as France’s most powerful political poem of all.”²¹ And it may help foreign students of French, who may have no idea what the landscape of Anjou looks like, to form similar if attenuated attachments, as their mental equipment incorporates the notion of that the modest French countryside is in principle preferable even to the proud Roman metropolis. *Penser ainsi, c’est devenir un peu français.* (To think in this way is to become a little bit French.)

I have sought to explain why I think the use of lyric can be a way of encouraging students of language to become invested in the language, not as a utilitarian tool but as rich verbal surroundings of real cultural weight. This will be possible, I think, only if we treat poems as we treat popular music, as something to be valued, repeated, imitated, but not necessarily interpreted. Educational and philosophical tradition, since Plato at least, distinguishes good memory from so-called bad memory, *Erinnerung* from *Gedächtnis*, the memory of understanding and assimilation from the memory of merely mechanical or rote repetition. On the one hand there is what you have made your own and can reformulate; on the other what you repeat, parrot-like, as something foreign that has become lodged in your mind, a piece of otherness. Novels belong on the side of *Erinnerung* — as writing you assimilate; if you remember a novel you recall, in your own words, as we say, what happens; but poems go with *Gedächtnis*: to

remember them at all is to remember some of their words, isolated phrases, perhaps, which stick in your memory, you don't know why. The power to lodge bits of their language in your mind, to invade and occupy it, is a salient feature of lyrics, a major aspect of their being. Poems seek to inscribe themselves in mechanical memory, ask to be learned by heart, taken in, introjected or housed as bits of alterity which can be repeated, considered, treasured or ironically cited.

I think students of every language need to have bits of language stick in their heads: learning a foreign language involves the mechanical storage of formulations that incarnate foreignness, and it is better, I would argue, for this to be memorable formulations of poems than scraps of dialogue about how to get to the Prado. Willy-nilly, pop songs will lodge in our students' minds; there ought to be some poems there as competition for song lyrics and instantiation of the resources of the languages in which we dwell.

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Notes

¹This paper began as a plenary lecture for a conference on the teaching of foreign languages and literature at the University of Costa Rica. I am grateful to Gilda Pacheco Acuña and her colleagues for the invitation and their hospitality.

²J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1954, p. 9

³Jacques Derrida "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1993, p. 28.

⁴Karl Marx, letter to his father of November 10, 1837: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1837-pre/letters/37_11_10.htm

⁵Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, Austin, U of Texas P, 1981.

⁶These standards are available at <http://www.actfl.org>

⁷Jacques Derrida, "Checos'è la poesia?" in *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, New York, Columbia UP, 1991, pp. 222-3.

⁸Pablo Neruda, Poema 20, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, trans W.S. Merwin, New York, Penguin Books, 2006.

⁹Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1995, pp. 43, 53-4.

¹⁰Paul Verlaine, "Chanson d'automne," *Oeuvres poétiques*, Paris, Garnier, 1969, p. 39.

¹¹Bertold Brecht, "Alfabet," in *Ein Kinderbuch*, Berlin, Kinderbuchverlag, 1965, p. 62.

¹²*The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Robert Latham, New York, Holt, 1969, p. 224.

¹³Of a shy and intellectual nature.

¹⁴W.H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, New York, Vintage, 2007, p. 188.

¹⁵Wallace Stevens, "Man Carrying Thing," *Collected Poems*, London, Faber, 1955, p. 350

¹⁶ Federico García Lorca, "Cuando sale la luna," *Canciones* (1924), Madrid, Alianza, 1982.

¹⁷ José Martí, "Yo son un hombre sincere," *Versos Sencillos* (1891), Houston, Arte Público Press, 1997.

¹⁸ [x] marks a silent beat. Bob Dylan, from *Bringing It All Back Home*, 1978. Lyrics at <http://www.bobdylan.com/us/songs/subterranean-homesick-blues>

¹⁹ Reuben Dario, *Selected Poems of Rubén Darío*, ed, Alberto Acereda, Lewisburg, Pa., Bucknell University Press, 2001, pp.118-123

²⁰ Joachim DuBellay, *Les Regrets et autres œuvres poétiques*, Geneva, Droz, 1966, p. 98.

²¹ Mary Lewis Shaw, *Cambridge Introduction to French Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, p. 111.

Bougainville Against the Tide

Didier Maleuvre

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).