

Book Review

*Travelers and utopians:**Jean de Lery, "History of a voyage to the land of Brazil, otherwise called America" (1578)*

What are we to make of a book that starts as a dreary scholarly account and ends up on a highly tensed note, with enraged, starving people that feed with rats and beautiful talking parrots?

In November 1556, when Jean de Lery embarks on a ship that will carry him to the newly discovered lands of Brazil, he is a man with a mission: spreading the Gospel to the quaint creatures inhabiting those islands and making an anthropological treatise that will fascinate Claude Levi-Strauss four centuries later. Lery, a Huguenot pastor, calls it a saint and heroic enterprise. In retrospect, he would admit he had seen prodigious things in the New World. Lery tells us he lived for almost a year among the Brazilian savages, having the chance to observe their fierce customs and practices. He is an instructed clergyman with the fervor of predicating the word of God, a traveler with a wandering lust and a good portraitist of nature.

The mission, we are told, is financed by the church of Geneve, and aims at widening the kingdom of God among a nation that was undisputedly ignorant of the true God.

The voyage is rough and sprinkled with unbelievable deeds for a modern mind. Lery warns his readers that "a celui qui a les armes au poing, et qui est le plus fort, l'emporte et donne la loi a son compagnon"¹. This is an outstanding evidence of the maritime laws of the time. What governs the sailors at sea is seemingly the unwritten law of survival. The Spaniards and the Portuguese have a clear policy: French travelers are usurpers and those encountered on sea are considered war enemies. Pillages are also approved and constitute a joyous enterprise

for the French. Lery seems somehow upset when the sailors, showing much cruelty, plunder a Portuguese caravel and leave the people aboard to starve: "ce beau chef d'oeuvre, fait au grand regret de plusieurs".

When his ship reaches the first islands, Lery's account instantly turns into an interesting piece of early modern ethnography. The inhabitants are completely naked, they paint and pierce their bodies and seem happy to exchange small things. Lery's savage people are similar with Columbus's Indians: they are "marvelously timorous"² and the language they speak is simply incomprehensible. Lery says that these people do not use money and have no conceptual understanding of it. The savages are awe-stricken at the sight of clothed women. It seems that the initial dominant emotion is wonder: "wonder is the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference"³. The landscape, the garments and pendants, their bizarre passions (athletics) and habits are all a source of marvel.

This fundamental difference is not transformed into condemnation and cultural arrogance. Lery has much respect for otherness and looks very tolerant. In this respect, he is a predecessor of Locke's letter concerning toleration.

From Lery's description, it results that the tribe of Tupinamba, where he found shelter, has a serene way of life; they have the same stature as Europeans and their bodies aren't hideous nor prodigious; they are usually not troubled by quarrels, envies, passions and

¹ Lery, *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Bresil*, online edition

² Greenblatt, Stephen, *Marvelous possessions. The wonder of the New World*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, p.65

³ op.cit., p.14

ambitions; their nakedness is not shameful and does not instigate fornication; they are embellished with all sorts of paints and feathers; as a fashion idiosyncrasy, women obstinately refuse to dress when the French offer them clothes. It is clear that the Tupinamba have a different criterion of beauty. Their custom is to gather every day to dance and rejoice. The Brazilians are not ungrateful and they hate taciturn and melancholic people.

Nevertheless, this is not an earthly paradise. The Tupinamba are cannibals: they kill and eat prisoners of war. Lery tells us that they are very vindictive, especially when they encounter the rival tribe, named Margaja. At some point in his narration, Lery deplors their heathen nature; albeit they are joyous, he thinks that the Tupinamba would be truly happy provided they knew the Creator of all things.

Machiavelli's Prince could not have left Lery untouched. The French pastor compares his writings with the cruelties of the atheist barbarians. The Tupinamba know no forgiveness. Their natural constitution is founded on one basic principle: eternal vengeance. It is this duality that still fascinates readers: their compassionate nature and humanity towards peers and neighbors, counterbalanced by the atrocity exhibition against enemies. They incessantly fight for honor and the glory of posterity.

Maybe the denizens of Tupi will never be awarded for their humanity and solidity of constitution, but how can you not praise their pungent sense of humor when you are told that they would start an embittered war against a stone they accidentally hit, biting and imprecating it?

Although they have no higher authority among them, they respect their elders and listen to their advice. Their dictum is: "to eat and avenge". Due to their primitiveness, we cannot speak of a gerontocratic society. The old men pronounce stirring discourses, being mere war catalyzers.

Despite the gory display of violence, Lery is convinced that brutality in strife-torn France outweighs Tupinamba's conduct (his targets are religious persecutions and inhumane moneylenders).

In the chapter concerning religion, Lery informs us that the savages do not worship any celestial or terrestrial gods and therefore they never pray. "A God that frightens us with thunders is of no worth", they say when Lery tells them about God's omnipotence and fearsome actions against sinners. Notwithstanding their godlessness, the Tupinamba believe in some sort of immortality of the soul, which is attainable after a "virtuous" life that consists in egregious retaliations and constant eating of their enemies. In Lery's view, the Brazilians are tormented by evil spirits. He thinks that they are guided by the spirit of Satan: "What Lery has seen in Brazil is nothing less than the active and literal manifestation of Satan, and like Bodin he insists that those who would make this manifestation as a delusion, imagination, or metaphor are 'atheist dogs'"⁴. I would take as an alternative the fact that cannibalism is an unbearable reality for the writer, who is forced to envisage a demoniac spirit more as a soothing religious justification. Lery is also swift in reprimanding European atheism which should be taught a good lesson by the "blinded" Brazilians, who despite their flaws are willing to admit a sort of transcendence.

To Lery's delight, these primitives have a rudimentary tradition of the Flood. The Tupinamba's heteroclitic mythologies are a pretext for Lery to think that the word of God has spread to the far-off corners of the world. In his sermons, Lery tries to convert the Tupinamba to the true knowledge of God, which will bring them the divine grace. He succeeds in having a sort of spontaneous conversion, which soon dissipates as the barbarians' flickering faith has a short memory.

⁴ op.cit., p.15-16

What these religious explorations show is that the wild, flamboyant Tupinamba is no catechumen. The Brazilians are no vagrant, disillusioned people. Albeit it aims at enlightening those poor people's souls, Lery's account is not the bewildering religious conquest we imagined.

In Hobbesian style, the author sums up Tupinamba's way of life: "c'est vie pour vie, oeil pour oeil, dent pour dent". Their state of nature draws his bitter remarks: "ce pauvre peuple, bel exemple de la nature corrompue de l'homme".

The Tupinamba are a good proof of the fact that godless people still have inscribed into them the principles of the natural law. Hugo Grotius, in his "De iure belli ac pacis" (1625), makes a separation between Christian law, which commands a higher virtue, and the more mundane natural right, which has simpler demands: to abstain from other's possession and return them. Our savage people have a Hobbesian impulse but it is more of an exception. Lery describes them as "living together in peace and mutual understanding". The Tupinamba love friends and confederates, and make Lery feel more secure than among the "disloyal and degenerate" French. It is important to mention that the colony is also a refuge for French Protestants, who were persecuted in their homelands.

What the text surreptitiously tells us is that the Other is equally a Self⁵. Greenblatt thinks that "this is the Utopian moment of travel: when you realize that what seems most unattainably marvelous, most desirable, is what you almost already have, what you could have-if you could only strip away the banality and corruption of the everyday-at home"⁶

If we alter Columbus's speech and ritual of possession, we could say that the Tupinamba

must not lose everything in order to receive everything.

The first great Western representation of otherness belongs to Herodotus. In his Histories, he makes such interesting portrayals of the savages that Plutarch would later call him "philobarbaros".

I think that at least two authors are indebted to Jean de Lery's voyage: Daniel Defoe and Denis Diderot.

Robinson Crusoe, stranded on the "Island of Despair" is as shocked as Lery at the sight of a cannibalistic feast. He calls this practice "a devilish corruption of the human being". Defoe adds a moral dimension when he artfully portrays Robinson's tribulations on the subject of punishment. After a strenuous monologue, Robinson concludes that he has no right to strike first as the cannibals did not injure him or endangered his life. It looks as if he applies the rules of civil law to some primitives that find themselves in the state of war. Robinson employs many contrivances to justify his punitive drive. When he finally acts out, he finds himself in self-defense and his shootings are by delegation. This is clearly a critique addressed to nations that for centuries enslave and enfranchise foreign lands. The Spanish conquest in America and their barbarous treatment of the natives is Defoe's primary target. In Friday, the other character in the novel, we can see the good side of the Tupinamba, the tamed, christened and civilized savage man.

If Daniel Defoe is reluctant to use force against primitives living in the natural anarchy, half a century later, Diderot, in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772) deploys an unreserved critique of the factitiousness of European religion and society, applying the perspective of the good savage. Diderot describes a conversation between an old Tahitian and Bougainville, an enlightened traveler and scientist. The antinomy between the good uncorrupted savage and the evil modern man is straightforward. The Tahitian, guided by his

⁵ Frédéric Tinguely. *Jean de Léry et les vestiges de la pensée analogique*, Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance, Tome LVII, n°1 (1995), pp.25-44, http://www.unige.ch/lettres/framo/articles/ft_bhr57.html

⁶ Greenblatt, op.cit., p.25

natural instinct, draws a virulent portrait of the Europeans: they are mere enslavers and usurpers, materialists and degraded beings hunting imaginary virtues, unwilling to understand and tolerate the mores of the savage man: “Nos moeurs sont plus sages et plus honnetes que les tiennes”, he adds. This is exactly why Lery was craving for an unsophisticated but harmonious life among the Tupinamba. In the second chapter of *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), Locke seems to articulate the same doubts that puzzled Lery: “I desire to know what kind of government that is, and how much better it is than the state of nature, where one man, commanding a multitude, has the liberty to be judge in his own case, and may do to all his subjects whatever he pleases, without the

least liberty to any one to question or control those who execute his pleasure and in whatsoever he doth, whether led by reason, mistake or passion, must be submitted to.

Much better it is in the state of nature, wherein men are not bound to submit to the unjust will of another. And if he that judges, judges amiss in his own, or any other case, he is answerable for it to the rest of mankind”⁷.

What seems to underlie the utopias and travelogues of the time is the desire to reform the bases of the civil rule by showing the good sides of the natural right. By placing himself on the scene, Lery’s hermeneutical endeavor is to show how unnatural rights have replaced natural rights in the modern society and to offer a possible solution by resorting to the benefits of alterity. (RAZVAN IONESCU)

⁷ Locke, John, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, 1690, online edition, Chapter. II, Sec. 13