

Remapping the World in Eighteenth-Century French and English Travel Books

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One of the great European rivalries in the eighteenth century was the mastery of the seas. Across the century, economic, political and scientific stakes pit two great powers against each other – France and Great Britain. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the French and English monarchies organised ten or so maritime expeditions around the world, primarily to the Pacific Ocean, an area of the globe that was previously largely unknown. To offer some quick examples, let us quote John Byron's voyage in 1764-1766 (to Chile and Patagonia), Philip Carteret and Samuel Wallis's (1766-1769) to Papua New Guinea and Tahiti, George Vancouver's (1791-1792) to New Zealand, Hawaii and the northwest coast of America, and Antoine Bruny d'Entrecasteaux's (1791-1793) to Tasmania, Australia and New Caledonia.

However, today I shall put an emphasis on five other voyages, due to the exceptional impact that they had, and because at least two of these expeditions involved the participation of the most prestigious scientific societies of the time, namely, the Royal Society in Great Britain and the Académie des Sciences in France. I will refer to Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's journey around the world between 1766 and 1769, during which he was able to discover Tahiti (following Samuel Wallis), then the Samoa Islands and the New Hebrides with two ships, *L'Etoile* and *La Boudeuse*; James Cook's three expeditions, between 1768 and 1779, to Tahiti, New Zealand, the southeast coast of Australia, Alaska and Hawaii; and finally, Jean-François de Lapérouse's voyage, the last of the great French maritime expeditions during the Enlightenment, which took place between 1785 and 1788 and which ended with the tragic shipwreck of the two expedition boats, *La Boussole* and *L'Astrolabe*, on the reefs of Vanikoro, an island off the coast of New Guinea.¹ If Lapérouse's account of the journey reached us, despite the shipwreck of the two boats and the death of the crew, it is because Lapérouse, in accordance with what had been asked of him as leader of the expedition, regularly sent memoirs, drawings and maps, at each port of call, to the naval minister, the Maréchal de Castries. Lapérouse's *Voyage autour du monde* ('Voyage around the world') was published in 1797 by order of the French Directoire. It was Admiral Milet-Mureau who was charged with the task of 'stitching together' the pages of the logbook in order to produce a coherent publication.²

¹ On the conditions of navigation during the Enlightenment, see Alain Cabantous, *Les citoyens du large : les identités maritimes en France*, Paris, Aubier, 1995 and *La vergue et les fers : mutins et déserteurs dans la marine de l'ancienne France : XVIIIe - XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, Tallandier, 1984; see also "L'Atlantique", *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, N°33, 2001. See also Andries Lise, « Le voyage de Lapérouse dans la mer du Japon », *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, N°43, 2011, pp.557-576 and « Lapérouse et la poétique du journal de bord », *Le Livre du monde et le Monde des livres. Mélanges en l'honneur de François Moureau*, Feireyrolles Gérard et Versini Laurent éd., Presses de l'université de la Sorbonne, 2012, p.535-550.

² The *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde* consists of four volumes of around 1400 pages, of which the first volume includes the long and detailed « Mémoire du roi, pour servir d'instruction particulière au sieur de La Pérouse ». Volumes II and III correspond with the voyage itself. See *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde*, published in accordance with the decree on 22 April 1791, and edited by M. L. A. Milet-Mureau, Paris, Imprimerie de la République, an V (1797), 4 volumes and an Atlas.

On his return, Bougainville published in 1771 his *Voyage autour du monde*³, which focused primarily on his stay in Tahiti. It was a bestselling success which gave rise, in Europe, to the myth of Tahiti. As for James Cook's three voyages, they were the subject of official accounts sponsored by the Admiralty: using the navigators' logbooks, John Hawkesworth, an English writer and journalist, wrote *An account of the voyages undertaken by the order of His present Majesty for making discoveries in the southern hemisphere* which was published in 1773⁴; Cook's second voyage *A voyage towards the South Pole and round the world: Performed in His Majesty's ships the Resolution and Adventure, in the years 1772, 1773, 1774 and 1775*, appeared in 1777, and *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean: Undertaken, by the Command of His Majesty, for making Discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere*, begun by Cook and completed by James King, was published in 1784.⁵ It was John Douglas, Canon of Windsor and Saint Paul's, who was tasked with writing up these last two voyages; he drew inspiration from Cook's logbook, rendering it much more faithfully than Hawkesworth did. Indeed, Hawkesworth's adaption of Cook's first voyage had been strongly criticised at the time of its publication for the liberties he had taken with the original text.

The work that I am presenting today is based on the logbooks of these three navigators⁶ (good critical publications have been published lately) and on the published accounts of their travels, but we must bear in mind that only Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde* was written entirely by the explorer himself.

I. Voyages around the world

Bougainville, Cook and Lapérouse were not philosophers or literary writers; they were leaders and men of action. James Cook, son of a smallholding farmer from Yorkshire, wrote modestly in his logbook: 'I have given the best account of things in my power. I have neither had an education, nor have I acquired abilities for writing. I have been almost constantly at sea from my youth and have draged myself [...] through all the Stations, from a Prentice Boy to a Commander.'⁷ They belonged,

³ Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde*, Paris, Nyon, 1771, 3 volumes.

⁴ *An Account of the voyages undertaken by the order of His present Majesty for making discoveries in the Southern hemisphere and successively performed by commodore Byron, captain Wallis, captain Carteret and captain Cook*, by John Hawkesworth, London, W. Strahan, 1773, 3 volumes.

⁵ *A voyage towards the South Pole and round the world: Performed in His Majesty's ships the Resolution and Adventure, in the years 1772, 1773, 1774 and 1775*, London, W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1777, 2 volumes; *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, undertaken for making discoveries in the Northern hemisphere, to determine the position of the West side of North America and the practicability of a Northern passage to Europe, performed under the direction of captains Cook, Clerke and Gore, in His Majesty's ships the "Resolution" and "Discovery"*, London, G. Nicol, 1784, 3 volumes.

⁶ There are several academic publications on the logbooks of the three navigators: *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde 1766-1769*. Navigation journals established and commented on by Etienne Taillemite, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1977, 2 volumes; *The journals of captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery*. Edited from the original manuscripts by J. C. Beaglehole. Reproduced by permission of the Hakluyt Society, Milwood, N.Y., Kraus Reprint, 1988, 8 volumes and a portfolio; *Le voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*. Original accounts and documents presented by John Dunmore and Maurice de Brossard, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1985, 2 volumes.

⁷ *The journals of captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery*. Edited from the original manuscripts by J. C. Beaglehole. Volume II, Part 1, p.2. Rewritten General introduction, *A voyage towards the South Pole and round the world*, London, W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1777, second edition, volume I, p. XXXVI.

however, to a new generation of sharp-minded, ‘learned officers’ who had been chosen for both their skills as navigators and their capacity to advance the scientific knowledge of their time. Furthermore, Count Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and Count François de Lapérouse, both from old aristocratic families, had each received an excellent education. They were nurtured by Enlightenment thought; they read philosophical works, such as the two *Discours* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750) and the *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité* (1755) which they cited in their logbooks. Lapérouse had also read *L’Histoire des Deux Indes* by l’abbé Raynal, to which he referred several times; his on-board book collection included Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, and at the time of his departure, he received *L’Histoire naturelle de l’homme* from the elderly Buffon himself who, as he handed him the work, declared : ‘M. de Lapérouse, discovering thus where matters stand on the knowledge acquired in natural history, will easily extend its boundaries, each time he finds the opportunity’.⁸

Indeed, for men of the Enlightenment, discovering the world was the human adventure *par excellence*. Thus the three navigators, in the official instructions, were asked not only to establish maps of the coastlines of the unknown territories and to calculate longitudes and wind direction, but also to elaborate an anthropological discourse, that might interrogate the customs of the people encountered. James Cook’s first voyage on board *Endeavour* (1768-1771) was the ‘first large scientific maritime expedition in whose promotion the Royal Society played a major role. Partly for this reason, the Pacific, although the last great Ocean to be explored by Europeans, was, curiously enough, the first large region beyond Europe that modern scientific method came fully to grip with.’⁹ Indeed, it was in part to counter the immense prestige that England gained following Captain Cook’s three voyages that King Louis XVI decided to organise, in secret, Lapérouse’s expedition. This voyage was to last four years. It was the longest expedition ever undertaken and certainly the most ambitious. Henceforth, the rivalry between France and England took a different shape, manifesting itself in competing voyages of discovery, while political and economic competition remained present in the background.

For each of the three expeditions, scientists accompanied the navigators, astronomers and naturalists such as Joseph Banks who took part in James Cook’s first voyage on board *Endeavour*, but also draughtsmen and artists who drew up maps of the coastlines and bore witness via images of the flora, fauna and people they encountered. The artists Alexander Buchan and Sydney Parkinson, recruited by Joseph Banks, accompanied Cook on *Endeavour*. For Cook’s second and third voyages, the Admiralty chose the painters William Hodges and John Webber. In preparing the official accounts of the second and third voyages, the quality of the illustrations had been a priority: special paper was acquired from Paris, and twenty-five engravers were employed, some of whom were very well known and expensive.¹⁰ During Lapérouse’s expedition, the drawings sent throughout the journey were

Preface to *A voyage towards the South Pole and round the world*, London, W.Strahan and T.Cadell, 1777

⁸ Catherine Gaziello, *L’expédition de Lapérouse (1785-1788), réplique française aux voyages de Cook*, Paris, La Documentation française, 1983, p.63.

⁹ Bernard Smith, *European vision and the South Pacific*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985, p.2.

¹⁰ See Jocelyn Anderson, “Elegant engravings of the Pacific : illustrations of James Cook’s expeditions in British Eighteenth Century Magazines”, *British Art Studies*, issue 7, 2017.

principally completed by Gaspard Duché de Vancy and the naval officer François-Michel Blondela. However, we must note that apart from some sea charts and some drawings of the boats, there were no illustrations in Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde*. Bougainville's expedition had, in truth, a less directly scientific dimension than Cook's and Lapérouse's. All of these sketches, drawn 'in the field' over the course of the journeys, went through several stages on the navigators' return: they inspired paintings and exhibitions, were made into engravings that illustrated official publications and, in England, were copied abundantly by magazines such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* which contributed significantly in disseminating to the general public the discoveries made during James Cook's voyages. Over the course of my presentation, I will show some of the engravings that illustrated Cook's three voyages, published in 1773 and 1784, as well as several that appeared in the Atlas in Lapérouse's *Voyage autour du monde* ('Voyage around the world'), published in 1797.

The 'Official Instructions' asked Bougainville, Cook and Lapérouse to complete multiple scientific tasks, but also to discover new lands to conquer.¹¹ They also insisted that the people they met should be treated with respect. James Cook was 'to endeavour by all proper means to cultivate a friendship with the Natives, presenting them with such Trifles as may be acceptable to them, [...] and showing them every kind of civility and regard'. In the same way, the King's Memorandum, addressing Lapérouse, requested him to act "with great kindness and humanity towards the different peoples that he will visit during the course of his voyage"¹² and added, referring to both the ships' crew and the people they encountered: 'His Majesty would consider it one of the greatest successes of the expedition, were it to end without it costing a single man's life.'¹³

At the time of Lapérouse's expedition (1785-1788), the Académie des sciences and the Société royale de médecine were each requested to write a report which was given to Lapérouse at the point of his departure.¹⁴ The two memorandums invited the navigator to observe and describe the societies he encountered, disregarding his own society and prejudices, and to put together a comprehensive catalogue of knowledge in all disciplines, based on the distinction between true and false, between modern science and the geographic legends of the past: 'We are not talking here about giants or dwarfs or men with tails because these supposed deviations of nature have only ever been sighted by travellers with fevered imaginations', so we read in the 'Memorandum of the Royal Society of Medicine'. The demands of the two memorandums were numerous and they expressed the immense intellectual expectations that the voyage represented. For example, the 'Memorandum of the Royal Society of Medicine' asked Lapérouse to study the conditions of childbirth and breastfeeding, the skin colour of the civilisations encountered, their life expectancy, their diets, the most common illnesses and even the types of poison used in the tips of their arrows!

As for the King's Memorandum, annotated by King Louis XVI himself, who had closely followed the preparations for the expedition, it requested Lapérouse to 'gather natural curiosities,

¹¹ On the evolution of the conditions of discovery voyages, see Bourguet Marie-Noëlle, Licoppe Christian and Sibum H.Otto ed., *Instruments, travel and science : itineraries of precision from the seventeenth to the twentieth century*, London ; New York : Routledge, 2002.

¹² *Voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, Volume I, p.38.

¹³ *Idem*, p.38.

¹⁴ These accounts follow the Mémoire du roi in *Le voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*. Original accounts and documents presented by John Dunmore and Maurice de Brossard Volume I.

from land and sea; he will classify them in order, and will draw up, for each type, a comprehensive catalogue, in which he will mention the locations where they were found. In the same way, he will collect and classify the clothing, weapons, ornaments, furniture, tools, musical instruments and possessions used by the various people he will visit, and each object will be given a label, and a number corresponding to its entry in the catalogue. He will ask the draughtsmen to draw all views of the land and notable sites, portraits of the characteristics of the different countries, their dress, their ceremonies, their games, their buildings.’¹⁵

The influence of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* is crucial here. Indeed, we can consider the publication of the various volumes of the *Encyclopédie* between 1751 and 1772 as a genuine milestone which marks an important step in the history of travel books.¹⁶ By giving mankind a central place in the organisation of the world, the *Encyclopédie* inaugurates a break with previous forms of knowledge. Moreover, due to the attention the *Encyclopédie* granted to techniques, due also to the 11 volumes of plates depicting various human activities, it suddenly became necessary that the science of Man took an interest in material culture. As Michèle Duchet suggests, there is a before and an after to the *Encyclopédie* in the epistemological discourse of the Enlightenment. “It was also the moment when a certain form of historical consciousness was conceptualized”, as Céline Spector writes in “Les Lumières avant les Lumières”, which was, in a sense, the prelude to the philosophy of history and which would allow Kant to theorise the Enlightenment not only by its own motto (*Sapere aude*) but also by its reflexivity.’¹⁷ In this process of reflexivity, the concept of civilisation is fundamental, where mankind is understood in its universality and differences. From the study of languages to travel writing, from medicine to natural history, the science of man establishes itself as a central notion in the tree of knowledge, with the term ‘anthropology’ appearing in 1787 in a work by Alexandre César de Chavannes entitled *Anthropologie ou science générale de l’homme*.

II. Anthropological Investigation

Inscribed within these new modes of thinking, the ‘Official Instructions’ thus attach great importance to anthropological investigation. However, the three navigators responded to the demand in different ways. Bougainville, for example, focused his travel writing, the *Voyage autour du monde* on the nine days he spent in Tahiti. Far from being a rigorous study, his description of the island is one of a veritable, earthly paradise where the women are beautiful and offer themselves to the travellers with total moral freedom, where the fruits of the earth are shared by all in an agrarian communitarianism which effaces all social distinctions. As Bougainville wrote in his logbook, when leaving the island ‘Legislators and philosophers, come and see here the realisation of what your imagination could not even dream of. Goodbye, happy and wise people, remain always as you are. I shall always remember with great delight the brief time that I have spent among you, and, as long as

¹⁵ *Le voyage de Lapérouse, 1785-1788*, Volume I, p.36.

¹⁶ See Michèle Duchet, *Avant et après l’Encyclopédie*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1971.

¹⁷ Céline Spector, “Les Lumières avant les Lumières”, in *Les Lumières : un héritage et une mission. Mélanges offerts à Jean Mondot*. Texts collected and presented by Gilbert Merlio and Nicole Pelletier, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2012, pp.53-66.

I shall live, I will celebrate the happy island of Cythera. It is the true Utopia.’¹⁸

In James Cook’s account, the vision of Tahiti is entirely different. In his logbook, he evoked Bougainville’s *Voyage autour du monde*, which he had probably read in its English translation, published one year after the French edition: ‘[Bougainville] is very much mistaken when he says, P.25, that “every one gathers fruit from the first tree he meets with. » [...] He likewise seems to think there is no personal property among them. So far from it being so, that I must doubt if their is a fruit tree on the whole island that is not the property of some individual in it. [...] These are not the only Mistakes M. Bougainville has committed in his account of the Customs of these people nor can I See how it could be otherwise, a stay of ten days was by no means sufficient for such a task. The love of truth alone obliges me to mention these things and not with a view of finding fault with Mr Bougainville’s Book, on the Contrary I think it the most usefull as well as entertaining Voyage through these Seas yet published¹⁹.’ Useful and entertaining but full of errors – such is Cook’s verdict on Bougainville’s book.

As for the supposed sexual freedom of Tahitian women, Cook believed that ‘This is done merely for the lucre of gain’²⁰ – the men offering up the women in order to obtain iron tools – and he added: ‘On the whole a stranger who visits England might with equal justice draw the Characters of the women there, from those which he might meet with on board the Ships in one of the Naval Ports, or in the Purlieu of Covent Garden and Drury lane ²¹.’ Lapérouse did not go to Tahiti and we will never know what he would have thought of the charms, real or imaginary, of the ladies of this island, but it is likely that he would have spoken about them like a philosopher.

Unlike Bougainville whose vision of Tahitian society was more poetic than realistic, Cook described the Tahitians with the precision of an ethnologist. He measured bodies and monuments, observed the social hierarchies, described the clothing, habitat, tools and artefacts employed by the local people, the tattooing techniques and what the tattoos represented: ‘Some have ill designed figures of men birds or dogs, the women generally have this figure Z simply on ever[y] joint of their figures and toes, the men have it like wise, and both have other defferent figures such as circles crescents &c which they have on their Arms and legs²².’ These descriptions were supplemented by numerous engravings. See **engraving 1**.



engraving 1

Nevertheless, however rigorous it might have been, the

¹⁸ *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde 1766-1769*. Navigation journals established and commented on by Etienne Taillemite, Volume I, p.328.

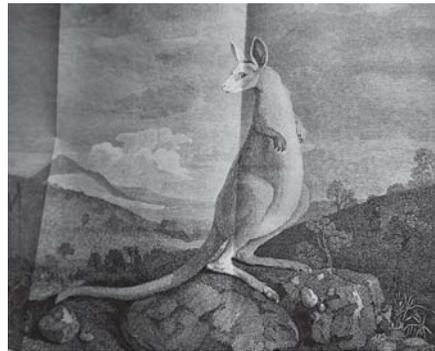
¹⁹ *The journals of captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery, op.cit.*, volume II, Part 1, p.235.

²⁰ *The journals of captain James Cook, op.cit.*, volume I, Part 1, p.128.

²¹ *The journals of captain James Cook, op.cit.*, volume II, Part 1, p.239.

²² *The journals of captain James Cook, op.cit.*, volume I, Part 1, p.125.

field research led by James Cook reached its limits when describing the most extreme strangeness, such as a kangaroo, encountered for the first time on the coast of Australia, in April 1770. For this animal which ‘bears no sort of resemblance to any European animal I ever saw’, Cook resorted to the known and familiar in order to describe the unfamiliar. But in doing so, he produced a veritable chimera: ‘It was of a light mouse colour and the full size of a greyhound. It jumped like a hare or a deer’ and a little later on : ‘It is said to bear much resemblance to the Gerbua excepting in size. It is called by the natives kangooroo.’²³ See engraving 2.



engraving 2

As a careful reader of the *Encyclopédie*, Lapérouse was also interested in techniques and crafts. He examined tools and utensils, clothing and housing, and asked the artists accompanying the expedition to make drawings of them for pedagogical purposes. He also carried out comparisons of artefacts and their uses: thus the little baskets made from bark found on the Manchurian coast were ‘entirely like those of the Canadian Indians’.²⁴ But when tasked with comparing the people, Lapérouse left this quest to the philosophers and said with a tinge of irony: ‘In my capacity as a traveller I report back the facts and assign the differences, many others would reduce facts into systems’²⁵

Exchanges

During encounters with alien tribes, the navigators’ account started with the description of exchanging objects. These exchanges were designed to demonstrate the good will and absence of hostile intentions on both sides. Indeed, the ships arrived loaded with presents: tools, necklaces and pearls of coloured glass, but also seeds, fruit trees and animals. During his second voyage, James Cook left in Tahiti and in the neighbouring islands chickens, geese, ducks, a horse and a mare, a bull and a cow. As for Lapérouse’s ships, *La Boussole* and *L’Astrolabe*, they too were carrying, like Noah’s Ark, all sorts of useful vegetables, seeds, potatoes, ‘seedlings of fruit trees – even rosebushes and lilac – and pairs of animals to produce livestock’²⁶ intended to introduce the native people to the products of the agricultural and farming practices used in Europe. In this approach, philanthropy and well-understood commercial interests were clearly not conflicting.

Once the initial contact was established, and if the people were not hostile, the three navigators sought out intermediaries, or ‘informants’ as modern anthropologists would call them. Aotourou, whom Bougainville met in Tahiti, would accompany him back to France during the return voyage. He was the one who explained to Bougainville during this voyage how Tahitian society really functioned. Thanks to his testimony, the *Voyage autour du monde* offers a much more precise account of life on the island than the logbook that celebrated its idyllic charm: ‘I was wrong, the distinction

²³ *The journals of captain James Cook*, volume III, part 4, p.351.

²⁴ *Le voyage de Lapérouse, 1785-1788*, Volume II, p.311.

²⁵ *Idem*, p.387.

²⁶ *Le voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, Volume I, p.9.

between ranks is strongly marked in Tahiti, and the disproportion is cruel. Kings and noblemen have right to life and death of their servants', Bougainville wrote in the *Voyage autour du monde*.²⁷ Likewise, James Cook met Tupia in Tahiti during his first voyage, and Omai in Raiatea (another Polynesian island), during his second voyage. Omai boarded *Adventure* and arrived in London in 1774. He remained there for two years, was presented to King George III and was admired for his wit and elegance. **See Reynolds' picture, engraving 3.**

It was Tupia who explained to Cook the true meaning of an artefact discovered in Tahiti, 'An Effigy or Figure of a Man made of Basket and covered with White and Black feathers placed in such order as to represent the colour of their Hair and Skins when Tattow'd or painted.' While James Cook originally thought it was a sort of puppet, akin to those found in English Punch and Judy shows for children, he wrote in his logbook 'Tupia informs us this is a representation of one of the second rank of Eatuas or Gods, called Mauwi, who inhabited the Earth upon the Creation of Man'.²⁸ Moreover, it was Tupia, with his great nautical knowledge, language and diplomacy skills, who helped Cook to explore Polynesia. Aboard *Endeavour*, he served as his guide and probably helped him discover New Zealand. He also acted as an interpreter when they met the ferocious Maoris.

Because of these remarkable men and the friendship and trust that were woven between them and the navigators, a dialogue between civilisations became possible. Thanks to them, the logbooks developed a particular attention to rituals, to music, to religion and to the languages of the native people. Bougainville and Cook were able to develop the first lexicons of the Tahitian language and, in Lapérouse's case, the first lexicon of the Ainu language. In fact, during the journey that took him as far as the coast of Japan and Kamchatka, Lapérouse met the Ainu people on the island of Sakhalin. The climax of this meeting was when Lapérouse asked the inhabitants of Sakhalin to draw their island in the sand on the beach: 'we succeeded at last in getting them to understand that we wanted them to draw their country, and the Manchurians'; then, one of the old men stood up and with the end of his pike drew the coast of Tartary to the West, running more or less North and South ; to the East, opposite and in the same direction, he drew his island [...] To the South of his island, he had left a strait, showing that this was the way for our ships.' Seeing that 'the figures traced in the sand were fading', another islander 'took one of our pencils with some paper. On it he drew his island, which he named Tchoka. [...] He then drew Manchuria and, to our great surprise, he added



engraving 3

²⁷ Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde*. Critical edition by Michel Bideaux and Sonia Faessel, Paris, PUPS, 2001, p.230.

²⁸ *The journals of captain James Cook, op.cit*, Volume I, Part 1, p.135.

to it the Segalien river (the Amur river), whose name the islanders pronounced in the same way as us.’²⁹ James Cook and Lapérouse had thus fulfilled one of the missions they were set: to advance the understanding of the geography of the world in a realm that was until then obscure, at the same time as describing alien populations. As Lapérouse wrote in his journal: ‘The only objective of modern navigators, in describing the customs of new populations, is to complete the history of mankind.’³⁰

III. “Savagery” and civilisation

The alterity of cultures was nonetheless a difficult concept for the three navigators to grasp. In a strange and incomprehensible world where landmarks were lost, each one of them tried to establish links with their own familiar universe. Similar to James Cook who compared a kangaroo with a deer, or a Tahitian artefact with a puppet from an English children’s puppet show, Lapérouse wrote about the dances from Kamchatka that ‘they can only be compared to the convulsive dances of the famous St Médard grave’³¹ and said of the isbas that ‘they have exactly the same shape as our peasants’ cottages.’³² How could it be otherwise? It was only through their own culture that European navigators could perceive the reality of the savage world.

During the Renaissance, the discovery of the American continent by the Spanish and the Portuguese allowed for the strangeness of the encounter to be arranged into an antagonistic system based on the distinction between the forces of Good and Evil, God and the Devil: the ‘oddities’ of the Aztecs, notably human sacrifices, appeared as clear manifestations of infernal forces. But this interpretation no longer worked in the 18th century. As Chantal Grell and Christian Michel declare, ‘The effort that accompanied the questioning of theological traditions undertaken by Enlightenment thinkers led them to rethink and rewrite, with the knowledge at their disposal, a history of origins which could replace the story of Genesis.’³³ A first framework for interpretation consisted thus in positioning the newly-discovered worlds into a history of the origins of humanity. In the wake of the publication in 1724 of Lafitau’s work, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, the idea of a parallelism between American “savagery” and ancient primitivism established itself in people’s minds. Then they sought amongst Indian tribes the image of societies in their early stages; finally, they invited them to testify in support of a hypothetical ‘natural state’ linked to the latent theme of a golden age. Thus, natural history, as well as the voyagers’ description of the alterity of these civilisations, contributed to the destruction of the biblical story of Genesis.

The myth of origins significantly informs Rousseau’s thinking, particularly in the two Discours, the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750) and the *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité* (1755), which evokes a first age of humanity, even if only as theoretical construct. Linked to this myth of origins, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work, is the image of the ‘noble savage’ not yet corrupted by progress in the sciences and arts, an image which might lead one to think nostalgically

²⁹ *Le Voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, Volume II, p.325.

³⁰ *Le Voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, Volume II, p.124.

³¹ *Idem*, p.101. Convulsionnaires of Saint Médard was a group of 18th century French Christians, noted for their fervent ecstasies.

³² *Idem*, p.101.

³³ See *Primitivisme et mythes des origines dans la France des Lumières 1680-1820*. Collected text by Chantal Grell and Christian Michel, Paris, PUPS, 1989, p.11.

that this purity of the first ages, unlike our civilisation, corresponds to a period of happiness, lost to us for good. Likewise Diderot wrote in 1772 in the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*: 'Otahitians touch on the origin of the world and Europeans touch on its old age'.³⁴

We find in Bougainville's or even James Cook's logbooks this same theme, transformed into a sort of happy reverie. For Bougainville, the Tahitians live in a golden age that resembles that of the ancient republics of Athens and Rome: 'The head of this district took us to his home where we all sat on the ground, they brought us fruits, water, dried fish and we ate a golden age meal with the people who are still in this fortunate era'³⁵ and, in reference to Australia, Cook wrote: 'We see this country in the pure state of nature [...]. From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happy than we Europeans. (...) They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition.'³⁶

However, with Lapérouse, the discourse takes a sharp change in direction. Twenty years separate the writing of Bougainville's and Lapérouse's logbooks. It is normal that, during this lapse of time, political events as much as philosophical ideas exerted an influence on the navigators' discourses. Lapérouse no longer believes in the paradise of islands whose inhabitants lived in a state of pure nature. Refuting the theses of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lapérouse also casts into doubt the myth of the noble savage: '[Philosophers] write their books next to their fireplaces and I have been travelling for thirty years. I am witness to the injustices, to the deceit of these people that we have depicted as so good, because they are very close to Nature'³⁷ and he adds: 'It is impossible to penetrate the woods that the hands of civilised men have never pruned: to cross plains filled with stones, rocks, and inundated with impassable swamps, to socialize with men living in the wilderness, because they are barbaric, mean and deceitful.'³⁸ For Lapérouse, nature is not intrinsically good, but savage and hostile, a pessimistic vision which also applies to human nature. In an ironic allusion to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he concludes: 'Despite the academies who honour the paradoxes of philosophers, the near-savage man is a much meaner being than the wolves and tigers of the forests.'

Although Lapérouse challenges the greed of the conquest displayed by the Spanish and the Portuguese during the Renaissance, and repeatedly questions, in his logbook, the right of the Europeans to colonise lands that don't belong to them, he is, at the same time, convinced of European civilisation's cultural superiority and of its universal value. He thinks that his mission, as an Enlightenment navigator, is to acculturate the 'savages' for the purpose of their wellbeing and happiness. Refusing to take refuge in the nostalgia of a paradise lost since the first ages of humanity, he defends the historical progress of civilisation and the hierarchy of races. For example, he writes in his logbook, '[The navigation of modern travellers] must complete the knowledge of the Earth, and the Enlightenment that we seek to spread has the sole aim of making happier the islanders that we have encountered, since we have increased their means of subsistence. We would consider the extreme trials of

³⁴ Denis Diderot, *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. Text edited by Michel Delon, Paris, Gallimard, Folio Classique, 2002, p.37. [1772]

³⁵ *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde, op.cit.*, Volume I, p.316.

³⁶ *The journals of captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery*, Volume I, part 2, p.397 and p.399.

³⁷ *Le Voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, Volume II, p.147.

³⁸ *Idem*, p.147.

this expedition worth it, if we had been able to wipe out the use of human sacrifices, which is almost widespread among the islanders of the South Sea’³⁹. Following Buffon, he also believes that ‘the origin of the Bitchys, the Orotchys, and the other Tartarians from the seafront to the North coast of the Segalien, is shared with the Kamchadals, the Kuriaques and the sorts of men who, like the Laplanders and the Samoyeds, are to the human race what their stunted birch and fir-trees are to more southern forest trees.’⁴⁰ As Michèle Duchet suggests in *Anthropologie et histoire au Siècle des Lumières*, ‘For better or for worst, philosophical thought takes charge of the violence committed against the ‘savage man’, in the name of a superiority in which he participates: it may well maintain that all men are brothers, it cannot defend itself from a eurocentrism, which finds in the idea of progress its greatest alibi.’⁴¹

From beautiful nature to the sublime

In this last section of my presentation, I shall try to show, in the travellers’ accounts, the links between aesthetics and anthropological thought. My hypothesis is that, from the theme of savage beauty, a new aesthetic ideal progressively materialises and sometimes challenges the idea of the superiority of European civilisation. In its description of Tahiti, Bougainville’s *Voyage autour du monde* develops further the classical aesthetic models in which Beauty is based on order and harmony. Bougainville makes many references to authors of Antiquity as well as to 18th-century literature and painting. The fact that he baptises Tahiti ‘New Cythera’ – while the English travellers call it ‘George’s Island’ in the name of their King – is indeed revealing: it is simultaneously a reference to the painting by Watteau, ‘Pilgrimage to Cythera’ and to classical mythology which considers Cythera to be the birthplace of Aphrodite. A little later on, Bougainville alludes to Boucher’s painting: ‘An Indian lying under a tree offered us the patch of grass that he was sat on, leant towards us and, with a tender air, to the chords of three-holed flute that another Indian blew into with his nose, slowly sung us an undoubtedly Anacreontic song; a charming scene worthy of Boucher’s paintbrush.’⁴² See engraving 4.

The effect produced by engravings 5 and 6, ‘A view of snug corner cove in Prince William Sound’ (Cook’s second voyage, to Alaska) and ‘Lapérouse’s ships in Le Port aux Français’ is an entirely different one. (It is true that they depict different climates and different latitudes). Just as Lapérouse’s logbook reveals new philosophical issues about Nature and the noble savages, we



engraving 4

³⁹ Idem, Volume II, p.101.

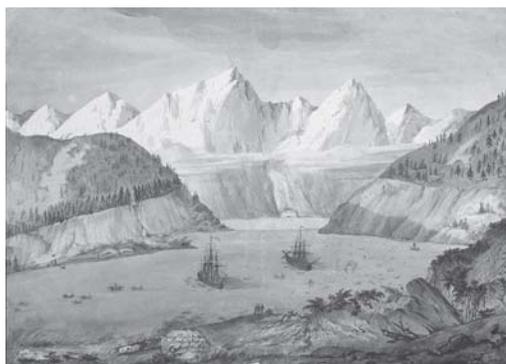
⁴⁰ *Le Voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, Volume II, p.367.

⁴¹ Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au Siècle des Lumières*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1995, p.240.

⁴² *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde, op.cit.*, Volume I, p.316.



engraving 5



engraving 6

witness here an aesthetic turning point which develops during the second half of the 18th century in the wake of the *picturesque* movement and which accentuates the Sublime as opposed to Beauty. Emphasis is placed on the wildness and immensity of the landscape, as well as on the spectacular quality of nature, marked by excessiveness and horror. We are far from the idyllic landscapes described by Bougainville in Tahiti or later by Bernardin de Saint Pierre in *Paul et Virginie*. The solitude and silence, the desolation of landscapes not made for mankind are also characteristic of the new aesthetic conceptions that Edmund Burke defines in *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* published in 1757: ‘When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience.’⁴³ Here, for example, is how Lapérouse describes the moment when *La Boussole* and *L’Astrolabe* land in the Port des Français: ‘We had already visited the bottom

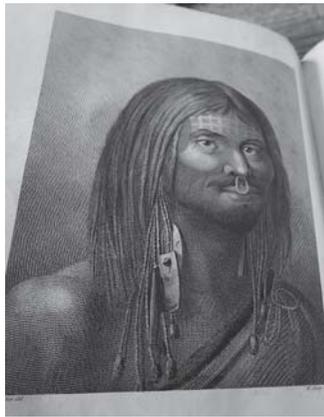
of the bay, which is perhaps the most extraordinary place on earth. Picture a basin of water, of immeasurable depth in the middle, boarded vertically by mountains of an excessive height, covered in snow [...] I have never seen any puff of wind wrinkle the surface of the water, which is only disturbed by the fall of huge pieces of ice breaking out from five glaciers, and making a sound which reverberates far away in the mountains. The air is so sonorous, and the silence so profound, that the simple voice of a man can be heard half a league away, as well as the sound of seabirds, which have left their eggs in the hollows of the rocks.’⁴⁴

Corresponding with this new aesthetic is, I think, the representation of human beings in their radical strangeness. See **engravings 7 and 8** which come from the printed account of Cook’s second and third voyages, published in 1784⁴⁵ and **engraving 1** from his first voyage (1773). The savage

⁴³ *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin Of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Part One, sect.VII, “On the Sublime”.

⁴⁴ *Le Voyage de Lapérouse 1785-1788*, volume II, p.123 and p.125.

⁴⁵ *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, undertaken for making discoveries in the Northern hemisphere, to determine the position of the West side of North America and the practicability of a Northern passage to Europe, performed under the direction of captains Cook, Clerke and Gore, in His Majesty's ships the "Resolution" and "Discovery"*, London, G. Nicol, 1784, 3 volumes.



engraving 7



engraving 8

beauty of these faces connects with the sublime in nature because, obviously, it moves away from the criteria of classical Beauty and taste. But like the sublime in nature, these faces may appear as noble, splendid or terrifying, for danger and pain are part of what they are meant to show. They also symbolize the power of Art in its infinite fancy. For Hawkesworth, who adapted Cook's first voyage, tattoos are to be ranked alongside deformity, disorder and the diabolical, despite the skill of their execution: 'We could not but be disgusted with the horrid deformity which these stains and furrows produced in the « human face divine ».'⁴⁶ On the contrary, James Cook, in his logbook, refrains from moral judgement and insists on the artistic quality of tattooed faces: 'Many of the old and some of the middle aged men have their faces mark'd or tallow'd with black. (...) The figures they mostly use are spirals drawn and connected together with great nicety and judgment.'⁴⁷ But it is in the reprinting, in 1776, of the *l'Histoire des deux Indes*, in a passage that was probably written by Diderot, that the tattoos and body markings find their most profound interpretation: 'We have often observed this. Public customs gave birth to the first tribes. They used distinctive marks in order to bond and recognise one another. The squashed nose, the flattened head, pierced ears, paintings, burns, hair: these are the uniforms of the savage world.'⁴⁸ Here, strangeness disappears and becomes a sign of recognition. In place of the incomprehensible variety of behaviours, in place of ugliness and bodily deformity, appears a universal rule for human beings: we are all social animals. Here the radical strangeness of so-called primitive societies meets Mankind in its universality, according to the philosophical ideal of the Enlightenment. It is no longer a question of a hierarchy of races: the sublime beauty of bodies in their disorder, differences, absence of harmony and variation merges into the common notion of human nature.

From Bougainville to James Cook and Lapérouse, we can measure the importance of an ethnological discourse which unfurls in the second half of the 18th century. The analysis of the three

⁴⁶ *An account of the Voyages undertaken by the order of his present Majesty*, volume III, p.452-453.

⁴⁷ Volume I, part 2, p.278-279.

⁴⁸ Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes*, La Haye, 1776, Volume I, Book 2, Chapter 36.

navigators' logbooks highlights the ambiguity and complexity of their accounts which are situated between autobiography, scientific report and travel writing. The accounts equally bear witness to the evolution of aesthetic concepts, from the classical ideal of beautiful nature to the consideration of primitivism and the sublime, which also applies to variations in human behaviour.

Did the transformation in the perception of the universe, thanks to these voyages, contribute to opening up a new field of anthropological discourse and aesthetic sensibility? It seems to me that it did. One of the effects of the development of natural history and of the diffusion of travel accounts in the 18th century might reside in its contribution to the emergence of a sensibility towards natural phenomena which evokes the infiniteness of nature and the place of mankind in this immensity. In Diderot's *Encyclopédie* we read: 'If we banish man or the thinking, contemplative being from the surface of the earth, this pathetic and sublime spectacle of nature is no more than a sad and silent scene. The universe is mute, the silence and the night take possession of it.' However, when we compare Diderot's and Laperouse's discourses, or Bougainville's and James Cook's accounts, ambiguity remains, faced with alterity and the difficulty of considering mankind both in its diversity and in its universality, without recourse to the hierarchisation of cultures.

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