

Denis Diderot, *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* (1772), Part II

He was the father of a large family. On the arrival of the Europeans, he looked disdainfully at them, showing neither astonishment, fear, nor curiosity. They accosted him. He turned his back on them and retired into his hut. His silence and his anxiety revealed his thoughts only too well. He lamented within himself over the happy days of his country, now forever eclipsed. On the departure of Bougainville, when the inhabitants rushed in a crowd to the beach, clinging to his clothing, embracing his companions in their arms and weeping, the old man came forward with a stern air and said:

"Weep, poor folk of Tahiti, weep! Would that this were the arrival and not the departure of these ambitious and wicked men. One day you will know them better. One day they will return, holding in one hand the piece of wood you see attached to this man's belt, and in the other the blade which hangs from that man's side. They will return to throw you into chains, to cut your throats, or to subject you to their extravagance and vices. One day you will serve under them, as corrupted, as vile, as loathsome as they are. I have but one consolation: My life is drawing to its close, and I shall not live to see the calamity I foretell. O Tahitiens, my friends, there is one method which might save you from your tragic future. But I would rather die than advise it. Let them go their way and live."

Then, addressing Bougainville, he continued: "And you, chief of these brigands who obey you, quickly take your vessel from our shore. We are innocent, we are happy; and you can only spoil our happiness. We follow the pure instincts of nature; you have tried to efface its imprint from our souls. Here all things belong to all men. You have preached to us some strange distinction between 'mine' and 'thine'. Our daughters and our wives are common to us all. You have shared this privilege with us, and you have lighted previously unknown passions in them. They have lost their reason in your arms. You have become ferocious in theirs. They have come to hate each other. You have slaughtered each other for them, and they have returned to us stained with your blood.

"We are a free people; and now you have planted in our country the title deeds of our future slavery. You are neither god nor demon. Who are you then to make slaves? Orou! You who understands the language of these men, tell us all as you have told me, what they have written on this metal blade: 'This country is ours.' This country is yours?! And why? Because you have set foot there? If a Tahitien landed one day on your shores, and scratched on one of your rocks or on the bark of one of your trees, 'This country belongs to the people of Tahiti,' what would you think?

"You are the strongest! And what of that? When someone took one of those contemptible trifles with which your vessel is filled, you cried out and were revenged. Yet at that moment you were plotting in the depths of your heart the theft of a whole country. You are not a slave. You would suffer death rather than become one, yet you would enslave us. Do you think the Tahitian does not know how to defend his liberty and die? The Tahitian you want to seize like a wild animal is your brother. You are both children of nature. What right do you have over him that he does not have over you? When you came, did we rush upon you? Did we pillage your ship? Did we seize you and expose you to the arrows of our enemies? Did we yoke you to our animals to toil in the

fields? No. We respected our likeness in you. Leave us to our ways. They are wiser and more honorable than yours. We have no wish to barter what you call our ignorance for your useless knowledge. We possess all that is necessary and good for us. Do we deserve contempt because we have not known how to fabricate for ourselves superfluous wants? When we are hungry we have enough to eat; when we are cold the means to clothe ourselves. You have entered our huts. What, in your opinion, is lacking? You may pursue for as long as you want what you call the comforts of life; but allow sensible people to stop when by continuing their painful labor they will gain but imaginary good. If thou persuadest us to cross the narrow limit of necessity, when shall we stop working? What time will be left over for enjoying ourselves? We have reduced to the smallest possible the sum of our annual and daily toil, because to us nothing seems better than repose. Go back to your own country to trouble and torment yourself as much as you will. Trouble us neither with your artificial needs, nor your imaginary virtues. Look at these men: how straight, healthy, and robust they are! Look at these women: how straight, healthy, fresh and fair they are. Take this bow. It is mine. Call one, two, three, or four of your friends to help you try to bend it. I can bend it myself alone. I plough the earth. I climb the mountain. I pierce the forest. I can run a league on the plain in less than an hour. Your young companions would be hard put to follow me, and I am more than ninety years old.

"Woe to this island! Woe to all Tahitians present and to all who will come after them from the way you first visited us! We only know one illness to which all men, animals, and plants have been condemned - old age; but you have brought us another; you have infected our blood. Perhaps it will be necessary to exterminate our daughters, our wives, our children, those who have approached your men, with our own hands.

"Our fields will be soaked with the foul blood which has passed from your veins into ours; or else our children, condemned to nourish and perpetuate the evil you have given to their fathers and mothers, will transmit it for ever to their descendants. Villains! You will be guilty either of the ravages of disease that will follow the fatal embraces of your people, or of the murders which we shall commit to stop the spread of the poison.

"You speak of crimes! Do you know any more enormous than your own? What is your punishment for him who kills his neighbour? Death by sword. And what for the coward who poisons him? Death by fire. Compare your crime to his, and tell us, poisoner of nations, what punishment you deserve? A moment ago the young Tahitian maiden abandoned herself to the transports and embraces of the Tahitian boy; she waited impatiently until her mother, authorized by her having reached the age of marriage, raised her veil and bared her breast. She was proud to excite the desires and to attract the amorous glances of unknown men, of relatives, of her brother. Without dread and without shame, she accepted, between the dances, in our presence, in the midst of a circle of innocent Tahitians, to the sound of flutes, the caresses of the one to whom her young heart and the secret voice of her senses urged her. The idea of crime and the peril of disease came with you. Our pleasures, once so sweet, are now accompanied by remorse and terror. That man in black, next to you, who listens to me, has spoken to our boys. I know not what he has said to our girls. But our boys hesitate; our girls blush. Plunge if you will into the dark forest with the perverse partner of your pleasures, but allow the good and simple Tahitians to reproduce without shame, under the open sky, in the full light of day. What finer and more noble sentiment could you find to replace the one we have breathed into them and which

animates their lives? They think that the moment to enrich the nation and the family with a new citizen has arrived, and they glory in it. They eat to live and grow; they grow to multiply; they find in that nothing vicious or shameful.

"Listen to the continuation of your crimes. You had scarcely appeared among our people when they became thieves. You had scarcely landed on our soil when it reeked with blood. The Tahitian who ran to meet you, who received you crying 'Taio! friend, friend,' you killed. And why did you slay him? Because he had been seduced by the glitter of your little serpents' eggs. He gave you of his fruits; he offered you his wife and daughter; he ceded you his hut. Yet you killed him for a handful of beads which he had taken without asking. And the people? At the sound of your deadly firearms, terror seized them and they fled to the mountains. But be assured that they would not have waited long to descend again, that you would all have perished, but for me. Ah! why did I calm them, why did I hold them back, why do I restrain them even now? I do not know; for you deserve no pity; for you have a ferocious soul which has never felt it. You have wandered, you and yours, everywhere on our island. You have been respected; you have enjoyed everything; you have found neither barrier nor refusal in your way; you have been invited in, you have sat, and all the abundance of our country was laid out before you. When you desired young girls, their mothers presented them all to you, except those who had not yet had the privilege of unveiling their faces and breasts. You have possessed the tender victim of the duties of hospitality; flowers and leaves were heaped up for you and her; musicians sounded their instruments; nothing has spoiled the sweetness, nor hindered the freedom of her caresses or yours. They have sung the hymn exhorting you to be a man, and our child to be a woman, a woman yielding and voluptuous. There was dancing round your bed, and it was when you came from the arms of this woman, after feeling on her breast the sweetest rapture, that you killed her brother, friend, or father.

"You have done worse still. Look over there - Do you see that enclosure bristling with arms? These arms which had menaced only your enemies are now turned against our own children. See the wretched companions of our pleasures. See their sadness, the grief of their fathers and the despair of their mothers. They are condemned to die, either by our hands or by the diseases you have given them.

"Away now, unless your cruel eyes revel in the spectacle of death. Go now, go; and may the guilty seas which spared you on your voyage here absolve themselves and avenge us, by engulfing you before your return.

"And you, oh people of Tahiti! Return to your huts, all of you, and let these unworthy strangers as they leave hear only the roar of the wave and see only the foam of its fury whitening a deserted shore."

He had scarcely finished before the crowd of people had disappeared. A vast silence reigned over all the island, and only the shrill whistling of the wind and the dull sound of the breakers along the shore could be heard. One might have thought that air and the sea, conscious of the voice of an old man, were moved to obey him.