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Once ashore, I ambled along the Avenida Rio Branco, where once the Tupinambá villages stood; in my pocket was that breviary of the anthropologist, Jean de Léry. He had arrived in Rio three hundred and seventy-eight years previously, almost to the day.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Tristes Tropiques, recounting his arrival in Rio de Janeiro in 1934.

Jean de Léry’s History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil has not been made widely known in the English-speaking world, but those who turn their attention to French literature of New World exploration in the sixteenth century encounter it almost at once, with surprise and gratitude. For his vivid and subtle ethnography of the Tupinambá Indians and his minute description of the marvelous abundance of their natural setting provide one of the most detailed and engaging of the reports we have of how the New World looked while it was indeed still new; and it is rendered by a generous-minded, acutely observant man with a storyteller’s gift.

The early chapters of the book are an account of an outbound sixteenth-century Atlantic crossing: the marvels and the terrors of riding over the “abyss of water that is the Western Sea.” The encounters with the whales, porpoises, flying fish are recounted not only with wonder and delight but also with a zoological precision that gives a foretaste of the richness of the ethnography to follow. The tale is interwoven with scenes and examples of men employing the expanding expertise that was making the whole experience possible—the evolving instruments, the developing knowledge of winds and stars, of currents and tides. The final two chapters are a hair-raising account of the return voyage: the ship—a leaky, rotting hulk—blundered off course and soon exhausted its provisions. The voyagers were reduced to eating whatever on board could provide “juice and moisture,” right down to the horn lanterns; Léry and
his shipmates faced the imminent breakdown of all the inhibitions of civility as they cast the starved dead bodies into the sea.

But the book's heart is the long middle section: a portrait of a New World people just before it was engulfed by European colonization. Although Léry has often been cited as an early contributor to the myth of the "noble savage," his work is far too rich to be characterized by so simple an expression: his is a complex portrait of a people. They are human beings who command his admiration and respect on some points, elicit his ridicule or disapproval on others; people who delight him and who appall him; whom he envies for their life in this world while he fears for their souls in the next. He looks at them and their culture with the eyes of a Calvinist, a humanist, a craftsman, and of a guest among them in their villages.

The Histoire d'un Voyage is placed at the intersection of two great axes of early modern European experience: the Protestant Reformation and the discovery of America. At almost the last moment when such a collaboration was possible, a consortium that included both Catholics and Huguenots undertook to establish a colony and mission in the New World. Among fourteen representatives sent from Calvin's church in Geneva was the twenty-two-year-old Jean de Léry.

Léry was born in Burgundy in 1534. Almost nothing is known of his earliest years, and historians disagree as to whether he was an artisan or a member of the minor nobility. Léry's life was shaped by the Wars of Religion (1562–1598), which were preceded by a long period of tension and persecution of the Huguenots. In the very year of Léry's birth, events took place that marked a sharp turning point for the Reformation in France: the "Affair of the Placards," in which Protestants denounced the Roman Mass as idolatry. From then on, the French monarchy would fluctuate in attitude between the merest tolerance and active hostility. Léry was a child when in 1536 Calvin published his Institutes of the Christian Religion, and in 1541 established his theocracy in Geneva. By the time Léry was grown, the Genevan church was training native Frenchmen to return to France as missionaries of the Reformed Gospel, and he joined this missionary group. In 1556 he and his fellows were called on to go not to France but to Brazil, where they formed the first Protestant mission to the New World.

Léry's account of that voyage was not merely a log of day-to-day notes. By the time he wrote the version to be published, he had experienced twenty more years, which included some of the most hideous in
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French history. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre had flooded across the land in waves of such violence that Frenchmen were to be seen roasting and eating other Frenchmen's hearts. Léry himself had lived through the siege and famine of Sancerre. That period gave occasion for a focused meditation on the differences and similarities between the ways of Europeans and the ways of "savages," and indeed for the growth of a nostalgia for the Brazilian forests and for his Tupi friends.

Those years began for Léry in 1558, when he returned to France and from there went back to Geneva to resume his studies for the ministry. Soon after his return he was married. (It is not known whether there were any children.) At this time Léry wrote an account of the deaths of three of his Huguenot companions at the hands of the colony's leader: La Persécution des fidèles en terre d'Amérique appeared in a Protestant martyrology, l'Histoire des Martyrs, edited by Jean Crespin.

Léry began his ministry in 1562 near Lyon. The violence that marked the beginning of the Religious Wars was particularly extreme in that region, where the Huguenots were meeting with reprisals for destroying the images in the Catholic churches. Léry opposed physical iconoclasm, for, like Calvin's, his war against graven images was on a different level. There are records of his trying, without success, to protect the churches against this kind of vandalism even as he was trying to establish the Reformed Religion. In both his life and his writing, he was a man who preferred to build bridges rather than burn them, and who, in a time of fanaticism, could both give spirit to the resistance of his side and temper the violence around him.

In 1563 Léry returned to Geneva, where he wrote the first draft of his Histoire d'un Voyage. (The draft was lost, rewritten, lost again, and found later in its original version.) In 1564 he was serving the church of Nevers, and by 1569, he was at La Charité-sur-Loire. It was there, in August 1572, that the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre caught up with him. Twenty-two Huguenots were slaughtered, but Léry managed to escape to Sancerre.

From January to August of 1573, Sancerre was besieged by royal Catholic forces and reduced to starvation. Léry's Histoire mémorable de la ville de Sancerre was published in 1574, four years before the publication of Histoire d'un Voyage. The same ethnographic wholeness that distinguishes the later book is seen in the earlier. He observes and records how a community copes under such enormous pressure, and what characterizes the point of moral crisis, but he is also interested in practical human ingenuity: how does one manage to eat, when all ordinary food-
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stuffs have been consumed? How does one work one’s way down, from dogs and cats to mice and rats, to shoe leather and parchment? Léry’s experience, both on shipboard and in the Brazilian villages, helped his fellow Sancerrois survive, in ways ranging from the small but real comfort of the Tupi hammock, to the confidence that boiled leather really can sustain life.

Here, as in the Brazil book, Léry explores the outermost limits of permissibility: in such extremity, does eating the flesh of your dead neighbor fall within them? Léry’s “No!” was not merely conventional: those limits had been candidly and concretely surveyed and reestablished in the New World and on the voyage back. In Sancerre, he saw them violated: the remains of a dead child, her flesh half-eaten, was the evidence that destroyed her desperate, demoralized family.

Léry was not only the recording spectator of Sancerre. As pastor, he bore responsibility for the moral health and courage of the community, and he was a chief negotiator with the royal representatives—who noted with a grudging admiration that Léry’s recipes for fricasseed rats had allowed Sancerre to be obstinate for much longer than was convenient. After the siege, Léry took refuge in Berne, where he was received by the children of the Huguenot leader Admiral Gaspard de Coligny. It was there that he had the leisure and security to write down the Sancerre experience. In 1576, he was back in France, this time in his native Burgundy. It was at this point that he found in Lyon his original manuscript of the Histoire d’un Voyage, and the work appeared in its first edition in 1578.

Léry spent the last years of his ministry in the Vaud region of Switzerland. One of the last documents of his life records a baptism that he performed in 1613, the same year in which he died of the plague. He was seventy-nine.

Brazil had been claimed by Portugal in 1500, when it was discovered—by accident—by the Portuguese expedition of Pedro Alvarez Cabral.8 The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) had divided the New World between Spanish and Portuguese zones of influence, and this new discovery, falling on the Portuguese side of the line, was a windfall. By 1556, the Portuguese had established captaincies along the Brazilian coast and were exploiting its economic possibilities. Chief among these was the tree known as “brazilwood,” which eventually gave its name to the country. Brazilwood was the source of a highly valued red dye, and it was not only the Portuguese who traded in it: since the early sixteenth century, French
sailors and traders had been up and down the coast of Brazil. Great fortunes were built on shipments of the dyewood sent back to France—especially to Normandy.

Both the French and the Portuguese were continually dealing with the various tribes of the Tupinamba Indians of the coast. The Portuguese were largely bent on subduing the Indians and putting them to work in sugarcane factories. The French, on the other hand, had more informal and friendly relations with them, moving in and out of their villages as guests and traders, dealing on a basis of mutual benefit. Some Frenchmen—known in the French accounts as the “truchements de Normandie” or “Norman interpreters”—went even further: they moved into the villages, learned the language, cohabited with the women, had children by them, and (it was said) adopted all their practices—even cannibalism. While these “truchements” were a scandal to the French missionaries, they were undoubtedly immensely valuable to them as liaison agents.

For the first half-century after the discovery of Brazil, the French who were there had no official status, even with the French government. This was not on account of respect for the Treaty of Tordesillas—which the French by no means regarded as incontestable. Rather, the French monarchy was preoccupied with other matters. The expedition of 1555 was an attempt to change that state of affairs, and to get a foothold in Brazil.

Léry’s motive for publishing his *Histoire* precisely when he did is stated in his Preface. That Preface, however, with its long tirades, is uncharacteristic of the book as a whole, and can be more a stumbling-block than a threshold to the work without some explanation of the origins of the enterprise, the controversy that had developed in France around rival accounts of it, and of its principal players: Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, and André Thevet.

Villegagnon, the leader of the expedition, had a long-established reputation as a valiant soldier and as a passionate and difficult man. He belonged to the Order of the Knights of Malta, and he frequently manifested the purity and intransigence that the chivalric orders intended to develop. In his distinguished military career, he had combatted the traditional foes of Christian Europe: the Moors in Algiers, the Turks in Hungary. He had played a role in the life of Mary Queen of Scots, commanding the ship that carried her off from Scotland to marry the future Francis II of France. He became Vice-Admiral of Brittany, but quarreled with the governor of the city of Brest, and found that the king sided against him. It
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may have been disgruntlement that set him to thinking of America, and sent him to ask Admiral Coligny for help in financing a colonial venture in Brazil. Hedging all his bets, however, he also acquired the support of the Cardinal de Lorraine, the leader of the Catholic clergy in France and a member of the uncompromisingly anti-Huguenot Guise family.

Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, was a Huguenot sympathizer, and was to become one of the foremost leaders of the Protestant movement in France—and on St. Bartholomew's Day, one of its martyrs. Even before the religious wars erupted into their full virulence, he was interested in securing a refuge for the Huguenots. He was able to interest Henry II in the venture by presenting the prospects for profitable trade in brazilwood and other commodities from the New World, and for challenging Spanish and Portuguese hegemony.

Villegagnon had been acquainted with Calvin when they were both students in Paris. In the first chapter of the Histoire, Léry's claims—and the evidence is fairly strong—that Villegagnon wrote to Calvin from the colony and requested that the Reformed Church of Geneva send him some “ministers of the Word of God, along with other personages well instructed in the Christian religion.” Later, Villegagnon denied sending any such letter, which in any case was no longer extant. Regardless of whether the letter was sent, the Calvinists who came did believe that they were summoned jointly by Admiral Coligny and Villegagnon to join the colony in Brazil, and to establish there a Reformed refuge and mission. The disintegration of the relations between Villegagnon and the Calvinists, recounted in Léry’s Chapter VI, is perceived by him as a succession of betrayals on Villegagnon’s part; most historians have come to think it was a misunderstanding. In any case, Villegagnon eventually had three of Léry’s party killed, and he plotted the deaths of the rest.

André Thevet was a Franciscan friar (or Cordelier) and a notable traveler, and was closely allied to the Catholic figures of authority: he was the chaplain of Catherine de Medici and Royal Cosmographer for Charles IX. Villegagnon took him on as chaplain at the beginning of the Brazil expedition. Thevet was in Brazil for only ten weeks or so, and had left before Léry and the Calvinist group arrived. His Singularités de la France antarctique, published shortly after his return in 1556, enjoyed a considerable vogue and did much to popularize the figure of the Brazilian Indian, and he himself was extravagantly praised by the major poets of his time as a new Jason or Ulysses. In 1575 he published his Cosmographie universelle, which included much of the Singularités material, with some important additions: it included a passage in which Thevet
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accused the Calvinist ministers of cupidity and sedition, and blamed them for the wreck of the Villegagnon colony.

Léry’s long, impassioned, and sometimes difficult Preface is his attempt to set the record straight. But it becomes clear over the ensuing decades that more is at issue than clearing the record on that one ten-month encounter. With successive editions of the *Voyage*, together with works of other writers, we see the Protestants staking out their ground of moral and intellectual influence over how the experience of discovery and expansion in the New World would be assimilated by Europe.¹⁰

Thévet was known to be careless and credulous, and Léry, with his meticulous habits of memory, verification, and logic, demolished Thévet’s garbled accusations.¹¹ Nevertheless, a caveat is in order. There are certain areas where Thévet, a less selective collector of oddments, has given us valuable information that Léry either disregards or disparages. In the reportage of the two men there is more overlap than Léry would like to admit, even in anecdote and wording. It is likely that both authors supplemented their direct experience (of which Léry’s was certainly the greater) with information from sources that they both used—the much-scorched Norman interpreters, for example. Indeed, it is almost certain that Léry was even to some extent indebted directly to Thévet.¹²

Villegagnon may not have been the turncoat that Léry claims, but he does seem to have been a violent and unstable man. It became clear at a certain point that his island compound was no safe place for Léry and his friends, and the task for them was now to escape with their lives. Since the next boat to Europe would be loading brazilwood for another two months, they established themselves at a tiny trading post—a few shacks—on the mainland, and for those two months depended for their survival on the good will of the Tupinamba. The experience of that period, together with those of previous extensive excursions while they were still with Villegagnon’s colony, provided the material for Léry’s ethnography.

The mission had failed; the colony was a fiasco, and by 1560, would fall to the Portuguese. The most lasting results of the venture were to be in the writing about it. While the duty of preaching the Gospel to all mankind was much on the minds of Léry and his friends, and they made a few modest attempts, their making any lasting impact, and the quality of this “anthropologist’s breviary” owes much to those circumstances. The reflectiveness and intimacy of this account may be due in part to a kind of detachment concomitant with the
status of the refugee; knowing that he could not stay in Brazil long enough to have any permanent influence, Léry also knew that he had a unique chance to take in the sights, sounds, and smells of this New World that he would probably never see again.

What would Léry’s contemporaries expect to find in a book about Brazil? What habits of imagining, categorizing, or judging would influence how they would assimilate and shape what they were to hear? Through what prisms would they refract the dazzling flood of images from the New World; on what patterns of likeness and difference would they project them?¹³

The New World discoveries did not immediately transform all European habits of mind; for a long time, Europeans would try to think of America in the ways already familiar—including ways of thinking about strange peoples that dated back to the ethnographies of Herodotus.¹⁴

The great transmitter of these ethnographies was Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79), whose *Natural History* was immensely important in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance for its lore on arts and industry and on flora and fauna, as well on as human populations. But what was incidental to Herodotus’s descriptions became the hallmark of Pliny’s work, and part of his legacy to the Middle Ages: a fascination with the monstrous and the fabulous at the expense of systematic inquiry into the normal functioning of ordinary, if foreign, societies.

All through the sixteenth century, one finds in travel books a semantic attraction between the term “America” and the terms “monster” and “marvel.” The immensely popular voyage writing of Sir John Mandeville peopled the European imagination with headless men wearing their eyes in their shoulders, or with ears hanging down to their knees; and with human devourers of human flesh. Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago mundi*, which preserved the lists of monstrous populations from Pliny into the late medieval times, was read and annotated by Columbus himself, who kept seeking after one-eyed or dog-headed races of men.¹⁵ According to medieval legend, in the forests of Europe itself could be found “wild men,” degenerated from fully human status: hairy, solitary, deprived of language; often brutal, but sometimes gentle and strangely courteous.¹⁶ These notions of half-human creatures whetted the European appetite for tales from the New World, for glimpses of such giants and Amazons as André Thevet provided. (Léry, aware of his readers’ expectations about monsters and marvels, takes pains to establish himself as a credible witness rather than a fable-monger.)¹⁷

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But something more than a mere fascination with the marvelous and monstrous would be needed if Europe was to assimilate the enormous new “other,” neither Turk nor Jew, African nor Asian. And indeed, even as the news from America was arriving, the humanist enterprise was expanding the dialogue with ancient Greece and Rome beyond such fascinations to include a serious consideration of cultures that were not Christian, but yet could be regarded as admirable for their rationality and civility. Plutarch provided examples of stoic virtue; through the figures of Diogenes the Cynic, or the barbarous Germans of Tacitus, the classical world had reflected upon and criticized its own high civilization; through Ovid’s *Metamophoses*, an old form of “soft” primitivism pervaded the Renaissance: the Golden Age, when an innocent human race lived on acorns and honey, trees bore fruit all year around, the earth bore no scar of the plow and the sea no wake of ships, and no one distinguished between “mine” and “thine.”

The first popularizer of Columbus’s voyages, Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d’Anghiera), was an Italian humanist at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. Through his *Decades de Orbo Novo* the earliest accounts of the New World were suffused with humanist idealization. While this undoubtedly encouraged receptivity and friendliness, it had some distinct disadvantages. Humanism could also represent New World peoples as preformed and familiar abstractions, and could thus obscure the specificity of their real cultures. Their very bodies were often portrayed in the forms and poses of the gods of classical antiquity (one sees this in the illustrations in Léry’s *Histoire*).

Sixteenth-century humanism was largely subordinate to Christianity. And for Christian Europe, the discovery of America quickened a whole series of latent questions. If the Bible was supposed to have accounted for all the progenitors in human creation, then where did these new-found peoples fit in? Where did they come from? Were they descended from Adam? After the Flood, which of the three sons of Noah was their ancestor? Is the Indian, like the African, a descendant of Ham, and condemned to be “a servant of servants unto his brethren”? And how could it be that the Indians knew nothing of one of the signal consequences of original sin, namely, that after the fall Adam covered himself from shame?

Were the Indians human beings at all? The answer came from Pope Paul III: in 1537 the Bull *Sublimus Deus* declared them to be “true men” and not to be treated as “dumb brutes created for our service.” Thus the
Pope guaranteed the validity of New World evangelizing: only "true men" were candidates for salvation.  

But was it possible that they had already been evangelized; that they had received the Revelation and let it slip away? For there were legends that the Apostle Thomas had preached the Gospel in India, and even after the distinction between America and the East Indies had been clearly established, the belief persisted that St. Thomas had evangelized the New World.

America as fact and image, voyage account or speculation, reached Europe through a vast network of texts quickly translated into all the major European languages and disseminated by a burgeoning printing industry that was coeval with the discoveries. For his general knowledge of the New World, Léry relied mainly on the General History of the West Indies by the Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara, whose detailed account of the Conquest, while it judges Indians severely, casts a sardonic eye on the methods of the conquistadors.

Of all the New World peoples encountered by Europeans in the sixteenth century, the Tupinamba entered the most freely into the European imagination. They were to be given memorable literary form by Montaigne: they are the “Cannibals” of his famous essay (for which Léry was probably an important source). In fact, they were the all-purpose allegorical figure of “America” for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The figure found in innumerable paintings, frescos, and friezes, with plumed skirt and headdress, carrying a wooden sword with a disk-shaped head: that figure is a stylized Tupinamba Indian.

Popularized by Vespucci and Thevet (and by countless sailors’ and merchants’ reports), the Tupi were irresistible. They were known to live in a lush tropical setting of brilliantly colored flora and fauna; their natural appearance accorded with European standards of beauty; and they were usually naked. The splendor of their feathered costumes rivaled the caparisoned horsemen of Agincourt; with their weapons they outdid the English bowmen. As European chivalry was on the wane, a nostalgia may have attached to the Tupinamba, who seemed like knights without horses, clad not in shining armor but in gleaming feathers. They were impelled to greater lengths for honor and vengeance than were even the feudal nobles, for in sinister and fascinating rites, they ate their enemies.

When Henry II paid a state visit to Rouen in 1550, there was a sort of Brazilian exotic package, ready to present to him as a spectacle: on an island in the Seine was set up a mock Brazilian village, where fifty real Tupinamba Indians, joined by two hundred fifty sailors in savage guise

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(naked and painted black and red) hunted, cut brazilwood, fought, and danced among trees swarming with monkeys and parrots. Brazil was already a consumer item.²²

From the very beginning of the ethnographic section of the *Histoire*, we can watch Léry threading his way among these preconceptions, rejecting some and endorsing others, making distinctions and noting discrepancies between what he had heard and what he now saw. The question of the marvelous and the monstrous had first to be dealt with. The bodies of the Tupi are manifestly normal: "neither monstrous nor prodigious with respect to ours"—so much for Mandevillian expectations. In fact, even more "normal" than ours: stronger, more robust, freer of deformities.

Léry's Calvinism makes him proof against any simple Arcadian expectations, but his description nevertheless contains formulaic expressions of the Ovidian Golden Age: "woods, plants and fields always verdant"; they all drink at the Fountain of Youth, living to the age of one hundred twenty because of the "small care that they have of the things of this world"—whereas we Europeans drink of the corrosive waters of mistrust and avarice.

Léry re-creates the amazement (surely no longer fresh, even in his time) in the fact "no less strange than difficult to believe" that they go about "as naked as they came out of their mother's womb," in defiance of the shame that is natural to fallen man. Not only are they not hairy (like the Wild Man of European myths); they make their nakedness still more naked by plucking out all body and facial hair. This utterly exposed surface is then re-covered by layers of inscriptions and various kinds of ritual mutilations, and decorative or deforming stone inserts for their faces. Indeed, if they are given clothes, they simply miss the point: a shift, for instance, is worn pulled up above the navel, or wrapped around the head. In lieu of garments, they wear body paint; on certain occasions they cover themselves with a gum to which they attach the down of birds—and thus the hairy Wild Man is reconstituted, explained by Léry not as a prodigy of nature but as a product of culture.

In a rather troubling passage (one that compels us to take measure of the assumptions that separate us from Léry), he speaks of the women slaves at Fort Coligny: in spite of whippings, "It has never been in our power to make them wear clothes... Secretly stripping off their shirts and other rags, they would not be content unless before going to bed they could promenade naked all around our island." The image of the naked, incorrigible *femme sauvage* (Vespucci had popularized a particularly lu-
rid version) is inevitably the focus for erotic attraction and fear in many of these narratives. Léry, however, seeks to defuse the image of the New World woman as an incitement to lust. “This crude nakedness,” he says, “is much less attractive than one might think.” It is, he says, the rouge, the ruff, the wig, the farthingale, the “robes upon robes” that drive men wild, rather than “the ordinary nakedness of savage women, who, however, for natural beauty, are in no way inferior to ours.” Léry accords the Brazilian woman an intrinsic beauty on which man can look without sin. Desire, suggests Léry, has little to do with the accessibility of the naked body and much more to do with the inexhaustible play of the imagination, the never-ending manipulation of cultural signs.

The section on natural history (Chaps. IX–XIII) is a veritable encyclopedia of flora and fauna, rendered with such precision that modern botanists and zoologists have been able to identify almost every item he mentions: from the palms and hardwoods to the glorious panoply of birds, from the manatee to the sloth; by Léry’s description, the ethologist can readily recognize the threat display of the iguana. For his classification, Léry uses an informal hybrid of various systems. He follows the general outline of Pliny’s *Natural History*, beginning with man as the sovereign creature; but unlike Pliny, he puts, for instance, insects and bats with birds, “things that fly.” A touch of popularized Aristotelianism appears in his mention of plants as things with “vegetative soul.” His approach is an improvisational and empirical one, allowing expression of astonishment at the splendor of the parrots’ plumage, of ecstasy at the smell and taste of pineapple.

The taxonomy of the natural world here (as in most botanical and zoological works of the time) is defined mainly by the use human beings can make of it: what is good to eat, what can be used for ornamentation or shelter. You can learn the different preparations for the poisonous and nonpoisonous forms of manioc (cassava); given the materials, you could make the brew *caouin* yourself from Léry’s instructions; or build the *boucan* for grilling meat (human or other); or assemble an intricate, finely fitted arrow.

He continually interweaves ethnographic detail and anecdote with natural history to show the interpenetration of the animal and the human realms. There are odd glimpses of personal exchange, or recognition on the part of the wild things. The *sagouin* is so proud and touchy that if you hurt its feelings it will “let itself die of chagrin.” A terrifying “monstrous lizard” encountered in the forest transfixes them with his gaze, and in
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retrospect, seemed to have "taken as much pleasure in looking at us as we had felt fear in gazing upon it."

The relationship of the Tupi to their abundant and generous world is a revelation to the Old World visitor. They move about the Brazilian forest and seashore as sovereigns. They cavort in the water like dolphins, and hoot with laughter at the Europeans who officiously come to rescue them in their boats.

The marvels of America, the difference that Léry never fails to proclaim, are to him a fresh revelation of what God can do. In the words of another Calvinist, Urbain Chauveton, America is the providential gift of a "tableau tout neuf"—a wholly new picture—to reanimate our jaded sense of wonder and revivify our adoration of God. But Léry will say repeatedly that the great error of the Tupi is that in their own praise of the abundance in which they live, they attribute to nature what should be attributed to the Creator of nature. Just "how far they are removed from such knowledge" is exemplified in the subjects of Chapters XIV, XV, and XVI: on war; on cannibalism; on religion.

Léry's description of Tupi wars reveals an ambivalence. They do not fight for lands, or spoils, or ransoms; they fight for vengeance. And in the code of European chivalry, vengeance is the price exacted by honor. But for Léry, these inveterate, unremitting hatreds bear too much resemblance to the viciously retaliatory relations between Catholics and Protestants at the very time of his writing. He knows that the point d'honneur is deadly, in Brazil or in France.

And yet, he admires. The councils of war are exemplary in their order and eloquence, and can be assimilated to the discourse of Renaissance magnanimity, the ideal of générosité, or large-hearted uncircum­spect valor. And as for the magnificence of the Tupi warrior in his full regalia, Léry gives way to sheer delight in the "marvel" of the "great featherings of red, blue, green, scarlet" sparkling in the light.

The sequel of these splendid combats was the ritual slaughter and eating of captured enemies, and in European culture this is said to be the most forbidden of all acts, the insurmountable barrier to sympathy or understanding. But in fact, there was a rich and elaborate European discourse of cannibalism, in which the travelers' New World reports were only one strand among many.

In the first place, the anthropophagic metaphor had moved to the center of Protestant polemic in the harrowing controversies over the Eucharist and transubstantiation (as when Léry compares the savage
tribe of Ouetaca with Villegagnon, who “wanted to eat the flesh of Jesus Christ raw”).

Furthermore, Léry’s readers knew firsthand about real, literal cannibalism. There were the sieges, like that of Sancerre, which on occasion produced the cannibalism of desperation. And there were the riots and Lynchings of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, in which mobs or individuals, in paroxysms of hatred, threw themselves on the bodies of slain Huguenots and tore into them to devour their hearts or livers. Even when the specific act of cannibalism was not involved, mutilation and dismemberment of the corpses were everyday events during the Wars of Religion. The body of Admiral Coligny himself, the most revered and beloved of French Protestant political leaders and the prime target of the Massacre, was castrated and strung up on display.

Thus, when Léry discusses the horror of Tupi cannibalism, it is not a horror that disqualifies the Tupi as members of the human species. Their cannibalism is first and foremost ritual—a socially interpretable act—and it is that aspect that makes it, if not redeemable, at least tolerable to contemplate. Léry could see in it an order and a containment that was reassuring and even, one senses, aesthetically compelling—a “tragedy,” as he calls it.26

The victim was an established enemy. According to different phases of the ritual, he was at certain moments incorporated into the community, at others rejected from it; but he had his own moment, his own song of defiance, when he was allowed to assert his own dignity and valor. The killing took place without torture, by a single great blow to the head. The cannibal feast was a social event: the distribution of the cooked flesh among neighboring groups was a gesture of solidarity and also of shared responsibility, implicitly entailing allegiance. (As a Frenchman, Léry belongs to an allied group, and he narrowly avoids offending his Tupi hosts by refusing to partake.)

What does it all mean? All the chroniclers asked this question; the explicit answer is not the only one that the ethnographer is looking for, but it is a starting point. “Vengeance” was the most frequent reply, and in fact the various warring tribes among the Tupi seemed to have been locked into systems of automatic retaliations; the victim could always say, “In eating my flesh you are eating the flesh of your own kinsmen, which I have devoured.” One group affirms its own integrity and strength by demoralizing the other, “pursuing the dead and gnawing them right down to the bone.”

A wife is granted to the prisoner while he is awaiting execution,
which may be months or even years away; that wife will then, on the appointed day, eat her erstwhile husband and the children she has had by him—enough, as Léry says, to make your hair stand on end. But if you “consider what goes on every day over here, among us”—and here Léry matches intensity for intensity, detail for detail: the human fat sold to the highest bidder, the human heart roasted over coals, on the familiar streets of towns such as Lyon and Auxerre. These orgies of hatred unleashed by the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre may have had their own laws and rituals that emerge under the analysis of the anthropologist and historian; but as Léry saw them, they were utterly horrible because they signaled the utter breakdown of European order—a convulsion, a formless, aberrant manifestation of savagery in which neighbor devours neighbor. Tupi cannibalism, with its containment, keeps categories of friend and enemy stable; it makes possible large, well-defined areas of trust that will, as we shall see, be the basis of his relationship with them.

Léry speaks of the books that will bear “witness for posterity.” The Wars of Religion have been for the French the ultimate bad news concerning what civilized human beings are capable of doing to each other. For Léry and many other Protestants, it was urgent that the hideous facts not be forgotten or swept under the carpet. The histories and martyrologies of Théodore de Bèze and Jean Crespin kept alive both these memories and the French Protestant identity, even if the cause did not prevail. Yet, for all that he gives examples of European conduct that are worse even than Tupi cannibalism, he would not obscure the central fact of what he regards as their fallen state: the ignorance of their Creator which has allowed them to stray into such dreadful practices.

From Léry’s Chapter XVI one learns less about Tupi religion than about how Léry, as a devout sixteenth-century European Protestant, reconciles his faith, his doctrines, and his experience of these people. What he does present of Tupi religious practice is as ammunition assembled in his two-front war with Roman Catholicism and with a nascent movement of free-thinking, and the reader is given a review of the repertoire of Protestant polemical devices.

Chapter XVI is permeated, both textually and ideologically, with Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, and in fact Léry’s opening words, “There is no people, however barbarous and savage, that lacks the feeling that there is a divinity,” are taken from it almost verbatim, by way of a quotation from Cicero. Léry begins his chapter by amassing evidence that would seem to make the Tupinamba an exception: they are
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“ignorant of the sole and true God”; “they neither confess nor worship any gods”; “they do not pray by any religious form to anything whatsoever”; they are at the zero degree of religious awareness. Or so they are presented at the beginning of the chapter; but we will see the polemic and the rhetorical effects for which Léry is laying the groundwork.

“Can it be that, like brute beasts, these Americans live without any religion at all? Indeed they do, or with almost none.” With that “almost,” Léry begins to qualify his absolute negation. In fact, they do possess the merest glimmer of religious awareness, for they do believe in the immortality of souls and in an afterlife: those who are good dance eternally with their ancestors in beautiful gardens behind the mountains, while the worthless are “incessantly tormented” by Aygnan, who is the figure in Tupi lore that Léry identifies with Satan. Even if they define the virtuous life as one of killing and eating many enemies, they at least make the distinction.

And particularly, they suffer the torments of the devil even in this life. From the description of the Tupi in their natural setting, they might seem to be happy pagans, too content to feel any need for redemption. The point of entry for the Christian message is their pain: their fear of Aygnan, which makes them sweat with anguish—and which makes them infinitely more salvageable than the European atheist. Like the vast majority of his contemporaries, Léry fully believes in devils, and will not tolerate any metaphorizing or psychologizing about them. And now we can see the rhetorical strategy underlying the hyperbolically negative description of Tupi religious sense. Even these savages, the most benighted imagined, could serve as theologians to the European atheist. Through their belief in the immortality of the soul and the reality of the devil, they have more access to the divine than the European free-thinker who has rejected the Christian revelation.

As Léry builds up the dossier on the Tupi religious sense, he counts as evidence even their submission to those “impostors,” those “charlatans,” the caraïbes, or Tupi shamans, who appear every few years to engage them in certain mysterious ceremonies. Like most missionaries, Catholics or Protestant, Léry regards these shamans as competitors for the souls of the Indians; and like other Huguenot writers, he sees their “idolatrous” practices as analogous to the Roman Catholic cult of saints and relics (the caraïbes dance in and out of villages like “popish indulgence-bearers”). But Léry is capable of a candid admiration and even a delight in what he does not rationally approve of. As a clandestine witness of a religious ceremony, he is enraptured with the “marvelous

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