

Michel de Montaigne: *On Cannibals* (1580)

The discovery of so many new lands in the Renaissance had less impact on most Europeans than one might suppose. They were largely absorbed in recovering (and competing with) their own classical past and engaging in violent theological and political disputes among themselves. Yet some Europeans were profoundly shaken by the new discoveries into realizing that much of the world thought and lived very differently from what was then known as "Christendom." No writer was more strongly moved to view his own society from a new perspective in the light of reports brought back of the habits of the natives of the "New World" than Michel de Montaigne.

What reason does Montaigne give for judging cannibalistic Native Americans to be preferable to Europeans?

When King Pyrrhus invaded Italy, after he had reconnoitered the armed forces that the Romans had sent out against him, he said, "I don't know who these barbarians are"--for the Greeks called all foreign peoples barbarians--"but the organization of the army I see before me is not at all barbaric." The Greeks said the same when Flaminius invaded their country, as did Philip, when he saw from a hill the orderly layout of the Roman camp which had been set up in his kingdom under Publius Sulpicius Galba. These examples illustrate how one must avoid accepting common prejudices: opinions must be judged by means of reason, and not by adopting common opinion.

I had with me for a long time a man who had lived for ten or twelve years in this other world which has been discovered in our time, in the place where Villegaignon landed, which he named [Antarctic France \(1\)](#). This discover of an enormous land seems to me to be worth contemplating. I doubt that I could affirm that another such may not be discovered in the future, since so many greater people than I were mistaken about this one. I'm afraid that our eyes are bigger than our stomachs, and that we have more curiosity than comprehension. We try to embrace everything but succeed only in grasping the wind.

. . . I do not find that there is anything barbaric or savage about this nation, according to what I've been told, unless we are to call barbarism whatever differs from our own customs. Indeed, we seem to have no other standard of truth and reason than the opinions and customs of our own country. There at home is always the perfect religion, the perfect legal system--the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything. These people are wild in the same sense that fruits are, produced by nature, alone, in her ordinary way. Indeed, in that land, it is we who refuse to alter our artificial ways and reject the common order that ought rather to be called wild, or [savage, \(2\)](#) In them the most natural virtues and abilities are alive and vigorous, whereas we have bastardized them and adopted them solely to our corrupt taste. Even so, the flavor and delicacy of some of the wild fruits from those countries is excellent, even to our taste, better than our cultivated ones. After all, it would hardly be reasonable that artificial breeding should be able to outdo our great and powerful mother, Nature. We have so burdened the beauty and richness of her works by our innovations that we have entirely stifled her. Yet whenever she shines forth in her purity she puts our vain and frivolous enterprises amazingly to shame.

[Et veniunt ederæ sponte sua melius,
surgit et in solis formosior arbutus antris,
et volucres nulla dulcius arte canunt. \(3\)](#)

All our efforts cannot create the nest of the tiniest bird: its structure, its beauty, or the usefulness of its form; nor can we create the web of the lowly spider. All things, said Plato are produced by nature, chance, or human skill, the greatest and most beautiful things by one of the first two, the lesser and most imperfect, by the latter.

These nations seem to me, then, barbaric in that they have been little refashioned by the human mind and are still quite close to their original naiveté. They are still ruled by natural laws, only slightly corrupted by ours. They are in such a state of purity that I am sometimes saddened by the thought that we did not discover them earlier, when there were people who would have known how to judge them better than we. It displeases me that Lycurgus or Plato didn't know them, for it seems to me that these peoples surpass not only the portraits which poetry has made of the Golden Age and all the invented, imaginary notions of the ideal state of humanity, but even the conceptions and the very aims of philosophers themselves. They could not imagine such a pure and simple naiveté as we encounter in them; nor would they have been able to believe that our society might be maintained with so little artifice and social structure.

This is a people, I would say to Plato, among whom there is no commerce at all, no knowledge of letters, no knowledge of numbers, nor any judges, or political superiority, no habit of service, riches, or poverty, no contracts, no inheritance, no divisions of property, no occupations but easy ones, no respect for any relationship except ordinary family ones, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat. The very words which mean "lie," "treason," "deception," "greed," "envy," "slander" and "forgiveness" are unknown. How far his imaginary Republic would be from such perfection:

[*viri a diis recentes* \(4\)](#)

[*Hos natura modos primum dedit. . . .* \(5\)](#)

They have their wars against peoples who live beyond their mountains, further inland, to which they go entirely naked, bearing no other arms than bows and sharpened stakes like our hunting spears. The courage with which they fight is amazing: their battles never end except through death of bloodshed, for they do not even understand what fear is. Each one carries back as a trophy the head of the enemy that he has killed, and hangs it up at the entrance to his home. After having treated their prisoners well for a long time, giving them all the provisions that they could get, he who is the chief calls a great assembly of his acquaintances. He ties a rope to one of the arms of the prisoner and on the other end, several feet away, out of harm's way, and gives to his best friend the arm to hold; and the two of them, in the presence of the assembled group, slash him to death with their swords. That done, they roast him and eat him together, sending portions to their absent friends. They do this, not as is supposed, for nourishment as did the ancient Scythians; it represents instead an extreme form of vengeance. The proof of this is that when they saw that the Portuguese, who had allied themselves with their adversaries, when they executed their captives differently, burying them up to the waist and firing numerous arrows into the remainder of the body, hanging them afterward, they viewed these people from another world, who had spread the knowledge of many vices among their neighbors, and who were much more masterly than they in every sort of evil, must have chosen this sort of revenge for a reason. Thinking that it must be more bitter than their own, they abandoned their ancient way to imitate this one.

I am not so concerned that we should remark on the barbaric horror of such a deed, but that, while we quite rightly judge their faults, we are blind to our own. I think it is more barbaric to eat a man alive than to eat him dead, to tear apart through torture and pain a living body which can still feel, or to burn it alive by bits, to let it be gnawed and chewed by dogs or pigs (as we have not only read, but seen, in recent times, not against old enemies [but among neighbors and fellow-citizens, and--what is worse--under the pretext of piety and religion.](#) (6) Better to roast and eat him after he is dead.

Translated by Paul Brians

(1) Brazil.

(2) Sauvage in French means both wild and savage.

(3) The ivy grows best when it grows wild, and the arbutus is most lovely when it grows in solitude; untaught birds sing most sweetly . Propertius, I, ii, 10.

(4) Men freshly molded from the hands of the gods. (Seneca: *Epistles*, 90.)

(5) These are the first laws laid down by Nature. (Virgil: *Georgics*, II, 20.)

(6) Montaigne is describing the tortures frequently carried out by the Holy Inquisition against heretics.
