

## Ancient Bard and Gentle Savage

Chauncey Brewster Tinker,

*But heed, ye bards, that for the sign of onset  
Ye sound the antientest of all your rhymes,  
Whose birth Tradition notes not, nor who fram'd  
Its lofty strains.*

Mason, *Caractacus*.

The leading English poet of the mid-eighteenth century, the man who was most tremulously responsive to its changing manner and enlarging thought, lived in almost complete retirement from the world. To his contemporaries Thomas Gray must have seemed detached from everything that could reveal the true literary movement of the day a fatally isolated and academic figure. In 1750 he had finally published, after incredible elaboration, a poem which became at once the most popular in the language, the famous *Elegy*. But of all poets then living Gray was perhaps the least fitted to enjoy the prominence and popularity which he had achieved ; he was not only shy, but like most shy people, somewhat cynical as well, hurt by censure yet unconvinced by praise, self-conscious when he should have been self-assertive, and with a large contempt for the vulgar, even when they united in his praise. Any other poet than Gray would have been profoundly influenced by the success of the *Elegy* ; it would have fixed the character of his literary production for many years. But Gray never made a second attempt. His eager and changeful interests had passed on to a type of poetry as different from the *Elegy* as may easily be conceived. Four years after the production of his masterpiece he began the composition, in his hesitant fashion, of two Pindaric odes, cast, to be sure in an antique mould, but filled with new themes, and in the most remarkable manner prophetic of the literary movement of the next two decades. It has long been common to remark that in Gray's poetry we have an epitome of that of his age. This reputation, surprising enough for a poet so essentially academic as Gray, is the more unusual because of his lack of one of the fundamental poetic qualities. Gray lacked passion, and he knew it. He was by nature pensive, melancholy, scholastic ; there was none of that ' wild dedication of himself so characteristic of romanticism. Poetry needed, he knew, not only ' the master's hand,' which was already his, but ' the prophet's fire,' which was by no means his. This lack he felt not only in himself, but, quite properly, in the poetry (so-called) which was being produced all about him. [1] The more he dwelt upon the lack, the more he came to feel that this prophetic fire which had deserted poetry had once been its most characteristic sign, and had, indeed, inspired the very origins of the art. The farther back one went in poetic history, the more intense was this passionate utterance, which now the age had lost. Therefore, for the Pindaric odes, he selected subjects which permitted him to return, at least in imagination, to the intenser passion of these earlier ages ; perhaps they would touch his lips as with a living coal. *The Progress of Poesy* is a typically eighteenth century theme, in which the tradition of poetry is followed from ancient Greece down to Thomas Gray himself, but the poem contains very remarkable novelties and, if not passion, at least more abandon than Gray had yet permitted himself.

I desire in particular to direct your attention to one of the stanzas which is conspicuous for its romantic subject-matter:

In climes beyond the solar road,  
Where shaggy forms o'er ice-built mountains roam,  
The Muse has broke the twilight gloom  
To cheer the shiv'ring Native's dull abode.  
And oft, beneath the od'rous shade

Of Chili's boundless forests laid,  
She deigns to hear the savage Youth repeat  
In loose numbers wildly sweet  
Their feather-cinctured chiefs and  
dusky loves.

Lapland and Chili in 1754 ! All this, we may well remind ourselves, is nearly twenty years before that renewal of interest in primitive man which ensued upon the explorations of the 'sixties, and which was discussed in the first of these lectures. But Gray's digest of the passage in the annotations makes it still more worthy of analysis. ' Extensive influence of poetic genius over the remotest and most uncivilised nations : its connection with liberty and the virtues that naturally attend on it.' Liberty, it appears, therefore, is as much the need of poetry as of nations. In particular Liberty brings into poetry romantic passion (since the verse is to be ' wildly sweet') and ' loose numbers.' Liberty is opposed to the restraints of society, the inhibitions of culture, and encourages that wild dedication of oneself to dusky love and feather-cinctured chief, which lends a vivid passion to the verses. And the ' loose numbers' ? or, translating into French, shall we say *vers libres* ? Clearly, the poetry of the Chilian savage boy will not be in the Pindaric form! Perhaps it will be found not to respect the bonds of metre, but to pour its ecstasy in some lawless though eloquent mode, while Liberty stands smiling by. Perhaps, our poet may have felt, the language of passion is inconsistent with the regular harmonies and fixed rhythm of eighteenth century verse. Poets were abandoning the heroic couplet for blank verse, for ' ode and elegy, and sonnet' ; would a perfect obedience to the law of Liberty compel them to abandon metre entirely ?

Gray's other Pindaric ode, *The Bard*, is, by common consent, the more romantic of the two. I will not analyse so familiar a poem, but only point out that in it we encounter, as the poet's chief creation, the figure of the ancient bard himself. The author no longer writes about primitive song, but gives us the primitive singer.

There he stands upon the slopes of Snowdon, and sings forth the story of his woe, while the cruel troops of Edward I pass through the valley at his feet.

A few years later, under the influence of Ossian, Gray wrote, as though summarising all his earlier views : ' Imagination dwelt many hundred years ago in all her pomp on the cold and barren mountains of Scotland. The truth (I believe) is that, without respect of climates, she reigns in all nascent societies of men, where the necessities of life force everyone to think and act much for himself. [2]

This theory of Gray's was amusingly set forth in Lloyd and Colman's burlesque of *The Bard* :

Shall not applauding critics hail the vogue ?  
Whether the Muse the style of Cambria's sons,  
Or the rude gabble of the Huns,  
Or the broader dialect  
Of Caledonia she affect,  
Or take, Hibernia, thy still ranker brogue?

With Gray's these satirists coupled the name of a contemporary poet and dear friend, William Mason, who is still remembered for two verse-tragedies in the Greek style, *Elfrida* and *Caractacus*. The second of them is closely connected with the present subject because it was composed under the influence of Gray and with his careful assistance and criticism. Indeed, the drama itself is plainly inspired by *The Bard* ; only instead of a single minstrel, with harp and streaming beard, we have a whole chorus of them, who sing strophic odes anti-

phonally, and comment on the action of the piece after the manner of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. The life of these minstrels is well described by one of the characters of the drama:

Yonder grotts  
Are tenanted by bards, who nightly thence,  
Robed in their flowing vests of innocent white,  
Descend with harps that glitter to the moon,  
Hymning immortal strains.

The subject of this tragedy is the betrayal and capture of Caractacus, the aged British leader, and the slaughter in battle of Arviragus, his only son, the great general of the Britons. Arviragus is himself, one of the tribe of heroic savages ; except for colour, he is cousin-german to Oroonoko, for he is animated by all the generous impulses and nobility of soul that distinguish the genus. The action of the piece passes in the sacred grove of the Druids, in the midst of which stands an altar surrounded by a Druid circle of stones ; there is the usual background of brawling stream, cliffs, and yawning chasms. The Principal Druid speaks for the British nation, and his attendant bards sing the odes.

These lyrical passages are certainly the best poetry Mason ever wrote. Gray admired them intensely. They were afterwards excerpted from the drama, and made into an oratorio, [3] for which Dr. Arne wrote the music. Of the many odes which the play contains this is, perhaps, the best. It bears some slight resemblance to the lyrics in Byron's Manfred :

Mona on Snowdon calls :  
Hear, thou king of mountains, hear ;  
Hark, she speaks from all her strings ;  
Hark, her loudest echo rings ;  
King of mountains, lend thine ear,  
Send thy spirits, send them soon,  
Now when Midnight and the Moon  
Meet upon thy front of snow :  
See, their gold and ebon rod,  
Where the sober sisters nod,  
And greet in whispers sage and slow.  
Snowdon, mark ! 'tis Magic's hour.

To the already numerous bards in our midst there is now added a further company of *phantom* bards :

Snowdon has heard the strain :  
Hark, amid the wondering grove,  
Other harpings answer clear,  
Other voices meet our ear ;  
Pinions flutter, shadows move,  
Busy murmurs hum around,  
Rustling vestments brush the ground ;  
Round and round and round they go,  
Thro' the twilight, thro' the shade,  
Mount the oak's majestic head,  
And gild the tufted mistletoe.  
Cease ye glittering race of light,  
Close your wings, and check your flight.  
Here arranged in order due,

Spread your robes of saffron hue ;  
For lo, with more than mortal fire,  
Mighty Mador smites the lyre:  
Hark, he sweeps the master-strings.

Whatever you may think of Mason's verses, you will observe that he has outdone Gray in depicting the life of the bard, not of course because he has multiplied the number of singers, but because he has aspired to show the bard at what he conceived to be the bardic task of guiding the destinies of a people. His was the 'master's hand, the prophet's fire' in ancient Britain. The entire picture is highly idealised of course, as are the 'loose numbers' of the bard, which he often permits in

unbridled course to rush  
Thro' dissonance to concord, sweetest then  
Ev'n when expected harshest.

Mason seems to have felt that he could best give an impression of free verse by exchanging the regularities of iambic rhythm for the continual variations of the strophic ode. We are not of course to assume that he supposed that the ancient bards actually sang anything like them. The use of a strophic form was as far as Mason, who was in no sense an original person, dared to go. Gray had chosen this as the most fitting modern medium for the bardic chant, and Mason instinctively followed the lead of his master. The real step in the direction of 'loose numbers' was to be taken by Mason's successor who, abandoning fixed metres altogether, represented the bard as singing rhythmic, or, if you will, polyphonic, prose.

The bardic figure had now reached a high degree of imaginative development—so high, indeed, that a need was felt for something more substantial than a poet's dream of what a bard might have sung. Oh, for the song itself, the very words of the minstrel of Nature, as he sang them to the British warrior thirteen hundred years ago!

And pat it came—just at the moment when the public was prepared to receive it, in the line of direct descent from Mason and from Gray—the poems of Ossian, son of Fingal, ancient British bard of the third century A.D., filled with the prophet's fire, sung in loose numbers wildly sweet, in honour of the chieftains of old, passionate, sad as the wind that sobbed over Morven, the joy of heroes, the consolation of the bereaved. The dream of Gray come true ! The highly-coloured imaginings of Mason outstripped by the authentic facts of history ! But *were* they authentic? *Caractacus* was published in the spring of 1759, the first volume of Ossianic poetry in the autumn of 1760. The sequence was suspicious. Ossian, when one thought it all out in cool blood, had come a little too pat. There is no necessity of rehearsing here the well-known history of the publication—within four short years—of the Ossianic epics and lyric fragments which are now known to have been almost entirely the work of a young Scots clergyman, James Macpherson, with a gift for making vague sublimities moan through polyphonic prose. On the title-page of the epic, *Fingal* (Macpherson's second Ossianic 'discovery'), is a beautiful engraving of the bard himself, exactly as the bard had been conceived in the previous decade. The blind harper, clad in flowing robes, 'with beard that rests on his bosom,' sits before the caves and crags, already dear to the romantic heart, and sings a tale of the olden time.

The essential similarity between the creations of Gray and of Macpherson is attested by the immediate interest which the former poet took in the Ossianic publications and his eagerness to have their authenticity proved. In the end, he seems to have accepted them as genuine.

No less important than the influence of Ossian upon the literatures of Europe was the counter effect of the bardic tradition in getting specimens of genuinely primitive poetry brought to public attention. *Temora*, the last of Macpherson's Ossianic forgeries, appeared in 1763, the same year in which Percy put forth his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry from the Icelandic*. In the next year Evan Evans published his *Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards*, which was followed in 1765 by Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poesy*. It is, perhaps, correct to say that the Ossianic forgeries could have been successfully published only in the decade of the 'sixties ; for ten years earlier there would have been no demand for them, and ten years later too much was known about the nature of early narrative poetry—at least that of the north—to permit of so general a hoax.

But what of the south? In *The Bard*, it will be recalled, Gray described the Muse as listening not only to the Icelandic or Lapland peasant, but also to the savage youth of the boundless forests of Chili. With this figure it was far more difficult to deal than with the ancient bard because there was a total lack of acquaintance with the religion, folk-lore, and customs of the Malay, the African, and the American. The idealisation of the redskin belongs to a later generation. [4] Smollett's description of the Indians in *Humphry Clinker* is the most extravagant burlesque—the humour of the comic supplement—except where, by way of sneering at the French Jesuits, he represents the Indian's religion of Nature as superior to Catholicism.

The negro was a somewhat more popular figure, though the full tide of sympathy was delayed for ten years or so. Nevertheless Dr. Hawkesworth's version of *Oroonoko*, which revived, in a disinfected form, Southerne's old tragedy, (which was itself a dramatisation of Aphra Behn's novel), was acted in 1775 with some success. In this the noble black man appeared in his usual rôle of ethical grandeur. This version of Hawkesworth's contains, as an addition of his own, a song supposed to be sung by the slaves on a West Indian plantation. It has, to be sure, a somewhat operatic ring about it.

Come, let us be gay, to repine is in vain,  
When our loss we forget, what we lose we  
retain ;  
Our toils with the day are all ended at last ;  
Let us drown in the present all thoughts of  
the past,  
All the future commit to the Powers above  
Come, give us a smile as an earnest of Love.

Ah no—it will not, cannot be ;  
Love, Love, and Joy must still be free,  
The toils of day indeed are past,  
And gentle Evening comes at last ;  
But gentle Evening comes in vain  
To soothe the slave from sense of pain.

In vain the Song and Dance invite  
To lose reflection in delight ;  
Thy voice thy anxious heart belies,  
I read thy bondage in thy eyes :  
Does not thy heart with mine agree ?  
Man. Yes, Love and Joy must both  
be free.

*Woman.* Must both be free, for both disdain  
The sounding scourge and galling chain.

*Man.* 'Tis true, alas ! they both disdain  
The sounding scourge and gall-  
ing chain.

Interest in the passionate children of the south was vastly heightened by the arrival in England of Omai, or Omiah, a native of Ulitea (now Raiatea), brought from the Society Islands by Captain Furneaux in the autumn of 1774. Omai, unlike the Esquimaux described in a previous lecture, knew how to make himself agreeable to the persons he met, and displayed an enthusiastic appreciation of civilisation. Everyone who came into contact with him seems to have liked him, for he possessed what a contemporary called the 'unsuspecting good-nature of childhood,' a respectful and even genteel manner, and a *naïveté* that delighted everybody. Omai's exact age was not known, but he was somewhere in his twenties. He is described as 'tawny,' with the flat nose, and thick lips of the Polynesian. His hands and fingers were tattooed. He had long black hair flowing over his shoulders. His expression of countenance was intelligent, yet placid and kindly.

Omai's portrait was drawn several times while he was in England. The best picture of him is, in my opinion, that of Nathaniel Dance, which was engraved by the Bartolozzi in October, 1774. Dance has not only indicated the sweet temper of the savage, but has produced a picture of use as a document and a record. Omai is shown with his long hair loose over his shoulders, and with tattoo-marks visible on his hands in which he holds an Otaheitan stool or seat, a bag, and a fan. He is arrayed in a long robe, elaborately wound about his shoulders and waist, so as to cover his body, with the exception of his forearms, feet, and ankles, which are bare. This, I suppose, was the contemporary notion of the way a savage should be represented in art. His is certainly not the Tahitan costume, of the simplicities of which we are, perhaps, sufficiently informed, and which would not serve in the rigors of a London autumn ; neither is it the costume which Omai wore in England as a rule, for it was found more convenient for him to don the conventional clothes of the day ; so he appeared regularly in a reddish brown coat, white waistcoat, breeches, and sword—a costume which pleased him and the century well enough.

Sir Joshua Reynolds gives a different picture of Omai. He was impressed by the dignity of the young savage, and therefore posed him in a heroic attitude against a fanciful Otaheitan landscape, which is perhaps the first attempt in the history of English art to depict the scenery of Tahiti. He wears the flowing robes and also a turban. Every trace of barbarousness, except the bare feet, is carefully omitted by Reynolds, who has succeeded in lending to the Polynesian savage the poise and regal aloofness of an Arab. Nothing could reveal more adequately the traits which were sought for in the gentle savage. Yet Reynolds's picture is true to one side of Omai, for all the testimony with regard to him—and we have a great deal—constantly emphasizes his courtesy and self-restraint under the strange and difficult conditions into which he had been thrust. Boswell uses the word *elegance* to describe his behaviour, and says that Johnson accounted for it on the ground that Omai had passed his time, while in England, only in the best company. [6] Mrs. Thrale invited Omai to her home at Streatham, where he was introduced to Johnson, who gave the following account to Boswell : ' Sir, Lord Mulgrave and he dined one day at Streatham ; they sat with their backs to the light fronting me, so that I could not see distinctly ; and there was so little of the savage in Omai, that I was afraid to speak to either, lest I should mistake one for the other.'

Mrs. Thrale tells us that when Omai beat Baretta at chess, everybody admired the savage's good-breeding and the European's impatience—a subject on which Johnson delighted to tease Baretta. [7]

Omai passed a large part of his time with Lord and Lady Sandwich at Hinchinbroke, and there is said to have been woe in the heart of the peeress when the savage left her. Omai was presented at court, and given an allowance by George III, whom he addressed by the delightful and appropriate name of *King Tosh*. [8] The author of the anonymous satire entitled, *Omaiah's Farewell, inscribed to the Ladies of London*, [9] calls Omai 'the courteous Indian,' [10] and asserts that 'the first personages of the kingdom' were 'assiduous to do him favours.' In truth, Omai developed a very real preference for fine society, and showed marked indifference to the lower classes, a characteristic which the enthusiastic believers in equality and fraternity among men in a state of nature might have studied to their considerable enlightenment.

A very human and charming side of Omai is revealed by George Colman in his *Random Recollections*. Colman, when a little boy, met Omai during an expedition of Sir Joseph Banks, the botanist, who had gone into Yorkshire to gather herbs. Omai, who was living with Banks at the moment, took a fancy to 'Tosh,' as he called the boy George. The savage and the youngster went in swimming together, and Omai carried George on his back, to his alternate fear and delight, for the boy had never been in the sea before. Omai entertained the whole party; gave an exhibition of Otaheitan cooking; stalked a covey of partridges and caught one in his hands—to the horror of British sportsmanship; seized a galloping horse by the tail and allowed himself to be dragged along by the terrified animal, while he gave an exhibition of agility in shunning the flying hoofs. He and the boy made up a lingo for themselves, half Otaheitan, half English, in which they contrived to jabber to their mutual enlightenment. What boy could ask for a better companion?

Very little was done to improve Omai's mind while he was in England. It was even roundly asserted that Banks preferred to keep him in a state of primitive ignorance as an object of curiosity. [11] Omai himself wished to learn to write, but no steps were taken to teach him. He appears to have had no regular instruction after leaving his first teacher, James Burney, who could speak Otaheitan. He was obliged to 'pick up' what English he could—with the usual deplorable results of that process. Nevertheless his untutored efforts to express himself are more interesting than any real mastery of the language could have been, since they are at once pointed, picturesque, and, often, adequate. Though they convulsed people with laughter, they beautifully illustrate the indebtedness of language to metaphor and, indeed, re-veal the essentially poetic mind of the savage. Ice, for example, which he had never seen before, he called, appropriately enough, *stone-water*. [12] Snow was similarly 'white rain.' He assumed that a person who used snuff was satisfying an appetite, and therefore in declining the offer of a pinch, said simply, 'No tank you, Sir, me nose be no hungry.' [13] He even experienced difficulty in referring to the familiar domestic animals, since, as a Tahitan, the only quadrupeds he knew were the hog, the dog, and the rat. Therefore he instinctively called a horse a 'big hog.' For a bull in a field he early acquired a respect, and referred, 'reverentially,' as Colman puts it, to a 'man-cow.'

Fanny Burney, who thought that Omai's gracious manner 'shamed Education,' and expatiated on his greatness of soul, gives a good account of his conversation [14] in all its strangeness. She was vastly amused at it, though she found it difficult to understand. She also had the privilege of hearing Omai sing a native song, and though she was not pleased, her account may be given in full. It may serve to bring us back to the subject of primitive poetry:

My father, who fortunately came in during his visit, asked him very much to favour us with a song of his own country, which he had heard him sing at Hinchinbrooke. He seemed to be quite ashamed; but we all joined and made the request so earnestly, that he could not

refuse us. But he was either so modest, that he blushed for his own performance, or his residence here had made him so conscious of the *barbarity* of the South Sea Islands' music, that he could hardly prevail with himself to comply with our request ; and when he did, he began two or three times, before he could acquire voice or firmness to go on.

Nothing can be more *curious* or less *pleasing* than his singing voice ; he seems to have none ; and *tune* or *air* hardly seem to be aimed at ; so queer, wild, strange a *rumbling* of *sounds* never did I before hear ; and very contentedly can I go to the grave, if I never do again. His *song* is the only thing that is *savage* belonging to him.

The *story* that the words told, was laughable enough, for he took great pains to explain to us *the English* of the song. It appeared to be a sort of *trio* between an old woman, a young woman, and a young man. The two latter are entertaining each other with praises of their merits and protestations of their passions, when the old woman enters, and endeavours to *faire l'aimable* to the youth ; but, as she cannot boast of her *charms*, she is very earnest in displaying her *dress*, and making him observe and admire her taste and fancy. Omiah, who stood up to act the scene, was extremely droll and diverting by the grimaces, *minauderies*, and affectation he assumed for this character, examining and regarding himself and his dress with the most conceited self-complacency. The youth then avows his passion for the nymph ; the old woman sends her away, and, to use Omiah's own words, coming forward to offer *herself*, says, ' Come ! *marry me* ! ' The young man starts as if he had seen a viper, then makes her a bow, begs to be excused, and runs off.

Though the singing of Omy is so barbarous, his actions, the expression he gives to each character, are so original and so diverting, that they did not fail to afford us very great entertainment of the *risible* kind.

Now anyone experienced in the collection of folk-lore could have explained to Fanny and her father that they had gone about their business in a singularly unhappy way. They had first made the singer self-conscious, and had then permitted him to apologise for the *barbarity* of his song. Just what effect Omai expected to produce I of course, cannot say ; but I feel certain that, during the singing, the Burney girls must frequently have been giggling—or choking down their giggles—when they should have found something of a truly serious import. In short, if Miss Burney despised Omai's song, it was because she did not know how to listen to it. She was a true daughter of the century. Had Omai sung in a minor key something vaguely sublime and wildly passionate—had he somehow or other happened to recall Ossian to her mind—she would have been transported with delight. But there was no hint of the heroic in what he sang—no note of primitive passion. He was not the minstrel of the tropics singing of dusky loves and feather-cinctured chiefs, and his piece was in no way like *The Bard* or the odes of Mason. It was something quite different in kind from the poetry that Miss Burney knew, something that had to be explained to her, something queer and grotesque, like the decorations on an Indian pot, of which, naturally, she had never heard. But the loose numbers, the wild sweetness, the bursting heart, the rude eloquence of Nature—these were not in it, for these things belong to romanticism, and not to primitive poetry.

The little scrap of folk-lore from the South Seas which found its final resting-place in the vivacious diary of Miss Burney bears upon it several of the characteristic marks of primitive poetry. It blends poetry, music, and dramatic action into a single product, in which no one of the three component elements is quite distinguishable from the others. The acting and the grimaces of Omai, we may be sure, were not assumed for the mere purpose of making his song intelligible to the company, but were vitally necessary to the piece as he had received it from tradition.

When Banks was first in Tahiti, he heard some native songs, [15] which he must have considered trivial enough, since he did not take the trouble to record them :

‘ There was a large concourse of people round the band, which consisted of two flutes and three drums, the drummers accompanying their music with their voices. They sang many songs, generally in praise of us, for these gentlemen, like Homer of old, must be poets as well as musicians.’

It would be interesting to know what the Polynesian Homer sang when first the white shadows appeared in the South Seas. Banks was not sufficiently interested to find out and write down even the verses about himself, but was content to record that the songs were short and not without rime and metre. Such songs are frequently improvisatorial and close to the event or person that they celebrate or describe. Had the poetry been recorded for us, we should have found it simple indeed, and its singers untutored ; but we should not have found it easy to understand or valuable as a model. Indeed it could not have been successfully imitated, any more than Dr. Burney, with all his music, could have blown a tune on an Otaheitan flute. All imitation of primitive verse is a *tour de force*. It may be, like one of Chatterton’s Rowley poems or one of Rossetti’s imitations of a popular ballad, exceedingly beautiful ; but it is a new thing with qualities of its own and of its age. The fabrications of Macpherson and his disciple Chatterton have no doubt their own peculiar charm, but it is not the charm of the centuries which they profess, respectively, to represent.

Before the movement had spent itself, there arose a poet in England who united much of the new romantic fashions of his day with the common sense, the chilly and prosaic sense, that had long characterised the age. This was William Cowper. He himself had written a poem in which an ancient bard was represented as speaking to Queen Boadicea

prophetic words  
Pregnant with celestial fire,  
    Bending as he swept the chords  
Of his sweet but awful lyre.

He felt and gave poetic expression to the new emotions about mankind and the equally new emotions about animals. He felt pity for poor Africans shut up in the hold of a slave-trader and pity for poor prisoners shut up in the Bastille. Yet he never really surrendered himself to the ecstasies of romanticism, and therefore in his lines of farewell to Omai, (for after a year or two, the courteous savage was taken back to the Society Islands), Cowper displays that sanity and that calmness which have been so noticeably absent from all the utterances regarding primitivism which we have studied. The lines are, like much that Cowper wrote, prim and drab, but not without a certain interest to those who have followed Omai’s career. He is speaking—indeed, Cowper is usually speaking—of life in the country. [16]

Here virtue thrives as in her proper soil ;  
Not rude and surly and beset with thorns,  
And terrible to sight as when she springs  
(If e’er she springs spontaneous) in remote  
And barbarous climes, where violence prevails  
And strength is lord of all ...  
War and the chase engross the savage whole.

The man who wrote those lines had not forgotten the search for the golden age and the interest in the gentle savage that had characterised the previous decade. The hard condition of the

life the savage leads ‘ binds all his faculties,’ and this is true of Esquimau and Patagonian alike. And then a sudden reference to the South Seas :

Even the favoured isles  
So lately found, although the constant sun  
Cheer all their seasons with a grateful smile,  
Can boast but little virtue.

Therefore he can but pity them, but more than all the rest he pities Omai :

Thou hast found again  
Thy cocoas and bananas, palms and yams,  
And homestall, thatched with leaves. But  
hast thou found  
Their former charms? And having seen our  
state,  
Our palaces, our ladies, and our pomp  
Of equipage, our gardens and our sports,  
And heard our music, are thy simple friends,  
Thy simple fare, and all thy plain delights  
As dear to thee as once ?

The poet’s fancy shows him the savage climbing to a mountain-top to scan the ocean for the sight of an English sail :

Every speck  
Seen in the dim horizon, turns thee pale  
With conflict of contending hopes and fears.  
But comes at last the dull and dusky eve,  
And sends thee to thy cabin well prepared  
To dream all night of what the day denied.  
Alas ! expect it not.

But poor Omai had died long before [17] Cowper wrote these verses.

Omai had come to England as an ideal savage ; he returned to the South Seas a mere man. The ‘ noble savage’ was the offspring of the rationalism of the Deist philosophers, who, in their attack upon the Christian doctrine of the fall of man, had idealised the child of Nature. Man in a state of nature, the Indian with untutored mind, was, they held, a noble creature—indeed, the noblest work of God. Take him untouched by the finger of civilisation, and you would find in him a potential perfection. Among his endowments there must be of course an artistic sense which would put to shame the artificialities of civilisation. Omai, when brought to this large test, had proved to be a pleasant person, but not (poor soul) the ideal man. What the age learned from its empirical test of men in the savage state was precisely what every age must learn about its fellows in another stage of existence that they are, *mutatis mutandis*, very like ourselves, good and bad, glorious and inglorious, and that the state of perfection is placed before man for his inspiration and not as a beautiful dream of what existed long ago or, perchance, still exists in some unsuspected isle of the far seas.

[1] But not to one in this benighted age  
Is that diviner inspiration giv’n  
That burns in Shakespeare’s or in Milton’s page

The pomp and prodigality of heav'n.

In his essay on Lydgate, Gray says :

' I fear the quickness and the delicate impatience of these polished times in which we live are but the forerunners of the decline of all those beautiful arts which depend upon the imagination.' He uses both ' pomp' and ' imagination' of the Osslanic poetry.

[2] Gray to Brown, February 8, 1763.

[3] *The Lyrical Part of Caractacus*, London, 1776.

[4] I have of course not attempted even a sketch of the long and fascinating history of the sentimentalised savage, whether red or black, Icelandic or Malay. I am concerned only with the sudden revival of interest in him which, as I have said before, is connected with the explorations of the eighteenth century navigators. To trace the origin of the idealised redskin would take one back at least to Lope da Vega, who in the second act of *El Nuovo Mundo* represents a group of Indians as singing an antiphonal chant to the Sun, which contains allusions to Phoebus and Diana. [This reference I owe to my friend Professor Stoll.] In England the tradition is at least as old as Florio.

The tendency to idealise the Indian was undoubtedly furthered by the missionaries who desired to put the Indian character in the best possible light.

[6] *Life*, Hill's ed., vol. 3, p. 8.

[7] Collison-Morley, *Baretti and his Friends*, p. 220 *et. seq.* Cf. Hill, *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, vol. 2, p. 292.

[8] Tosh, his attempt to pronounce ' George.'

[9] London, 1776.

[10] *i.e.*, ' Savage.'

[11] Sir Joseph Cullum's notes, first published by Edward Smith in his *Life of Banks* (1911), p. 41.

[12] Walpole's *Letters*, January 28, 1776.

[13] *Cumberland Letters*, October 10, 1774.

[14] *Early Diary*, 2.132.

[15] *Journal*, June 12, 1769.

[16] *The Task*, book 1, 11. 600 ff.

[17] It is said that a later navigator to the South Seas, who inquired for Omai, learned that he had died about 1780.

Nature's simple plan ; a phase of radical thought in the mid-eighteenth century (1922)

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