

Natures Simple Plan

A phase of radical thought in the mid-eighteenth century

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A Prefatory note

In this study of the theory of simplicity—the way of Nature—in the England of 1770, I have begun with an essay intended to set forth the general conviction that civilisation had somehow or other failed of its goal—was at least on the decline—and that primitive man, in his savage or even animal state, was better off than the citizens of Europe.

C.B.T.

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The State of Nature

The difference between the savage and civilised state of man has been much considered of late years, since so many discoveries of distant regions and new nations have been made under his present majesty's patronage, and since an eloquent writer upon the continent and even a learned judge who is an author in our own island have thought fit to maintain the superiority of the former.

— Boswell, HYPOCHONDRIACK.

In the spring of the year 1773, four of the most distinguished gentlemen of their day, who had met together at dinner, were engaged in discussing a topic of current and vital interest. The four men were General Oglethorpe (the host), Dr. Samuel Johnson, James Boswell and Oliver Goldsmith ; and the theme of their conversation was the menace of luxury. On this perennially engaging topic each of the four men had the clearest convictions, but neither on this occasion nor in subsequent discussions did they discover a common ground of agreement. Had it looked, at any moment, as though they might attain to an easy or courteous unanimity of opinion, Boswell would probably have thwarted them; for unanimity puts an end to discussion, and it was Boswell's office to keep the talk going. Johnson, of course, would listen to no denunciation of the age in which he lived ; but Goldsmith had no such loyalty. He expatiated on the degeneracy of the nation, and assigned as the cause of the general decline the insidious vice of luxury. To this Johnson at once demurred, contending that not only were there as many tall men in England as ever—proof that the national stature was not on the decline—but also, since luxury could reach but few persons, it was no real menace. 'Luxury,' he said, 'so far as it reaches the poor, will do good to the race of the people: it will strengthen and multiply them. Sir, no nation was ever hurt by luxury.'

The words of General Oglethorpe on this occasion are not recorded, but in a subsequent conversation he remarked, as an old soldier might have been expected to do, that, inasmuch as what we call the best in life depends upon our own attitude of mind, it is obviously wrong to overestimate the physical comforts of civilisation. Thereupon he quoted Addison's description of the Numidian savage in *Cato* :

Coarse are his meals, the fortune of the chase,
Amid the running stream he slakes his thirst,
Toils all the day, and at the approach of night,
On the first friendly bank he throws him down,
Or rests his head upon a rock till morn ;
And if the following day he chance to find
A new repast or an untasted spring.

Blesses his stars, and thinks it's luxury. [1]

On this occasion, however, it was Goldsmith who denounced modern luxury and the 'degenerate times of shame' in which he lived. This had, in truth, become his characteristic vein, though perhaps not his genuine conviction. Three years before, he had published *The Deserted Village*, in which, to use his own words, he 'inveighed against luxury,' and in which he had proceeded to the melancholy conclusion that the rural virtues were deserting England. Piety, Loyalty and faithful Love—to make use of those allegorical capitals which the age affected—were departing with the emigrants to America; and along with them—also to America—was going the Muse of Poetry, to whom, at the end, the author addresses an eloquent though mournful farewell. In the new world, the Muse, if she try her voice, is admonished to teach erring man a lesson (of the need of which the poet seems to have had a prophetic realisation)—to spurn 'the rage of gain.'

Teach him that states of native strength
Though very poor, may still be very blest.

Perhaps, as I have intimated, Goldsmith was less concerned about this vice of luxury than he himself was aware, for, as a matter of fact, he cared not at all for the primitive blessings of rocky pillow and untasted spring so dear to Cato and Oglethorpe. He loved the good things of civilisation quite as well as did his friend Johnson, and, in truth, sometimes snatched at those beyond his reach. Nevertheless he was presumably sincere in his view that poetry flourishes only in a civilisation much simpler than any which he had known. Men like Johnson and Goldsmith might, one would suppose, dismiss the decline of civilisation from their fears if it concerned nothing more alarming than a reduction in the number of tall men or an increase in the consumption of tea and spirits; but it was a vital problem indeed if the production of poetry and the arts was to be hindered by the national love of luxury. *Was* poetry declining? Had it become artificial and false? Did it flourish better in 'a state of nature.'? These were the really important aspects of the question. Could it be that the arts are not subject to human control, but spring up naturally in a youthful civilisation? If so, we are forced back once more to the original question, Is civilisation so far corrupted that art no longer springs naturally into life?

To these questions no simple reply could be given. To follow nature is obviously desirable. A 'return to Nature,' if peradventure we have got away from nature, is also desirable; but what is the state of nature, and how, in the name of all that is reasonable, are we to return to it? There's the rub. But, surely, people may move in the direction of simplicity by renouncing the soft indulgences of civilisation that have proved most perilous? Savages, peasants, animals even, may serve to show us how far we have departed from the norm. To such questions the world of 1770 addressed no slight or casual attention.

Unrivalled opportunities were now offered for a comparison of savage and civilised life. The accession of George III had been marked by a sudden development of the geographical and ethnographical sciences. The single decade of the 'sixties had seen the expeditions of Commodore Byron, Captain Cartwright, James Bruce, Captain Tobias Furneaux, Captain Wallis, and Lieutenant (later Captain) Cook. In 1764 Byron set sail for the southwest. He brought home stories of a race of splendid giants in Patagonia, who had been seen by the sailors as they were entering the Straits of Magellan. Captain Samuel Wallis rediscovered the South Sea Isles, and named the one which has since been called Otaheite and Tahiti, 'King George III's Island.' Captain George Cartwright, who lived for sixteen years in Labrador, made six voyages out and back during that time, and brought home with him the first Esquimaux who ever visited England. James Bruce penetrated into Abyssinia, and made a valuable study of its primitive culture. To this series of brilliant explorations the voyages of Captain Cook, which began in 1768, formed the splendid climax.

Along with the interest in these voyages there grew up the desire to see and study man in his primitive state. It was recalled that Peter the Wild Boy (known to Swift and Arbuthnot) who had been caught in the woods near Hanover a generation earlier, was still living in England. He was sought out and catechised respecting the state of nature ; but, as he had never learned to articulate a score of words, not much of value was discovered. There was a Savage Girl, too, who had been found years before in the woods of Champagne, and who was still living in France. She went by the name of Mlle, Le Blanc ; but this sobriquet, though elegant, was a little inappropriate, for the account of her relates that when she was caught, at the age of nine, she ‘ seemed black ; but it soon appeared after washing her several times, that she was naturally white, as she still continues.’ The girl was generally thought to be an Esquimau, who, having been sold into slavery, escaped from her captors or was abandoned by them, and ran wild in the woods, until by chance she reached the banks of the Marne, where she was finally caught by some French peasants. She must have sojourned in the wilderness for a long time, probably for several years, since, when she was discovered, she had lost all use of language and could give no rational account of herself. When found, she was living like a wild cat in a tree. The account of her, published by M. de la Condamine, was translated into English under the supervision of the Scottish philosopher. Lord Monboddo, and published, with a preface from his own pen, in the year 1768. It is a readable little book, though it was intended by the editor merely as a document for the investigation of the state of nature. He laments that, when he saw Mlle. Le Blanc in 1765, she was ‘ in a poor state of health, having lost all her extraordinary bodily faculties [such as incredibly sharp sight, agility in swimming, and speed in running] and retaining nothing of the savage but a certain wildness in her look and a very great stomach’ ; nevertheless his Lordship says she is proof that ‘ the philosopher will discover a state of nature very different from what is commonly known by that name.’ He himself used her as an example of his new and startling doctrine that mankind has passed through many stages, ‘ from the mere animal to the savage, and from the savage to the civilised man.’ [2]

But the supreme excitement was caused by the appearance in London of Omai or Omiah, a South Sea Island savage, who had been brought home by Captain Furneaux after Cook’s second voyage to the Pacific. Omai was gentle, courteous, likable—almost, as we shall see later, ‘ genteel,’—and there was a widespread desire to regard him as the true state of nature. The British reception in the South Seas had been, on the whole, remarkably cordial. The Tongan Islands, for example, had been named by Captain Cook the Friendly Islands. Whether they stood more in need of the blessings of civilisation or civilisation more in need of the lessons of the South Seas was a question which could now be seriously debated. Horace Walpole, who sneered at everything, despised the ‘ forty dozen of islands,’ picked up the Lord knows where, which so far as he could see, had nothing of more intrinsic interest about them than ‘ new sorts of fleas and crickets,’ or hogs and red feathers. However, he opined that, if properly husbanded, they might produce forty more wars. [3] But his was a lonely voice from the seat of the scornful. The British imagination decked the new islands in the glowing colours of romance. Here was a land of perpetual summer, where man was nourished without toil by the indulgence of Nature. Bread grew on trees and a natural milk flowed from the cocoanut. Under the palm-tree lay the child of the South Seas, ‘ as free as Nature first made man,’ who ever and anon burst into snatches of song as he paid his passionate court to the dusky mistress at his side. Ah, here was Paradise enow !

Does the account seem extravagant? Listen to the voice of the poet who in 1774 put forth anonymously, a poem entitled *Otaheite* :

But Fancy leads us o’er yon Isle to rove.
The Cyprus of the South, the Land of Love.
Here ceaseless the returning seasons wear
Spring’s verdant robes and smile through-out the year.

Refreshing zephyrs cool the noontide ray,
And plantane groves impervious shades display.
The gen'rous soil exacts no tiller's aid
To turn the Glebe and watch the infant blade.
Nature their vegetable bread supplies.
And high in air luxurious harvests rise.
No annual toil the foodful plants demand,
But unrenewed to rising ages stand ;
From sire to son the long succession trace,
And lavish forth their gifts from race to race.
Beneath their shades the gentle tribes repose ;
Each bending branch their frugal Feast bestows.
For them the Cocoa yields its milky flood [4]
To slake their thirst, and feed their temp'rate blood.
No ruddy nectar their pure bev'rage stains,
Foams in their bowl, and swells their kindling veins.

Their ev'ning hours successive sports prolong.
The wanton dance, the love-inspiring song.
Impetuous wishes no concealment know.
As the heart prompts the melting members flow.
Each Oberea [5] feels the lawless flame
Nor checks desires she does not blush to name.

No hoding presage haunts them through the night,
No cares revive with early dawn of light.
Each happy day glides thoughtless as the last,
Unknown the future, unrecalled the past.
Should momentary clouds, with envious shade.
Blot the gay scene and bid its colours fade.
As the next hour a gleam of joy supplies.
Swift o'er their minds the passing sunshine flies.
No more the tear of transient sorrow flows,
Ceased are the lover's pangs, the orphan's woes. [6]

All this is not merely a poet's dream. Many took such statements literally. Lord Monboddo, in a serious scientific work, asserted in so many words, that the Golden Age yet lingered in the islands of the South Seas, [8] ' where the inhabitants live without toil or labour upon the bounty of Nature.' In Otaheite, he says, ' the inhabitants pull bread off trees, which grow with no culture, for about nine months of the year, and when this food fails, it is supplied by nuts and other wild fruits.'

Boswell, who knew Captain Cook, expressed a wish to go and live for three years in Otaheite, in order to meet with people so different from any that had yet been known, ' and be satisfied what nature can do for man.' [9]

We have readied this point without mention of Rousseau. It would, perhaps, be possible to avoid it altogether, for, in truth, Rousseau was not at this time widely read or generally popular in England. Important as was his later influence, it was slight in comparison with the impress made upon the national mind by Captain Cook in the decade of the 'seventies. Nevertheless, Great Britain had her student and critic of Rousseau. James Burnet, more generally known by his judicial title, Lord Monboddo, may be called the Scottish Rousseau, [10] for he held the savage mode of existence superior to civilised life. It was he who first applied to the study of the ' state of nature' the historical or evolutionary method as opposed to

the older philosophic or ‘systematic’ method. Monboddo’s chief claim to remembrance—a recognition which science has not even grudgingly accorded him—is his doctrine of a gradual progression of living things from a rudimentary to a more developed state. In his study of this progression he anticipated some important conclusions of the nineteenth century : ‘ In all natural things,’ he wrote, ‘ there is a progress from an imperfect state to that state of perfection for which, by nature, the thing is intended. This is so evident to me that, from theory only, though it could not be proved by facts, I should believe that man was a mere animal before he was an intelligent being, and that there was a progression in the species such as we are sure there is in the individual.’ [11]

The man who wrote those words might, I should suppose, fairly be reckoned among the forerunners of Herbert Spencer ; but when he is referred to at all, Monboddo is called a predecessor of Darwin. This is because he contended that the orang-outang was man in his primitive state. This in itself was sufficient to draw upon him the ridicule of his contemporaries ; for though they were eager to assert the essential nobility of the savage, they had no disposition to extend their admiration to the animal kingdom and dwell on the simple dignity of orang-outangs. Yet Monboddo, it would seem, might have expected to receive recognition from a later generation to whose habit of thought his own was more naturally related. Two of his contemporaries, it is true, interested themselves in his theories if they did not actually accept them—Robertson the historian and Sir Joseph Banks the botanist, who sailed in Cook’s first expedition, and had seen man in his natural state.

But Monboddo had certain faults which exposed him to the derision of his readers, and, indeed, impaired the entire value of his books. He had, for one thing, the credulity of a child, with respect to anything which he wished to believe. Since he had no real acquaintance with primitive man, save what visits to Peter the Wild Boy and Mlle. Le Blanc had given him, this was a ruinous defect. Much of the evidence which he seriously presents for the study of historians and scientists would have disgraced a book written two hundred years before, and some of the more amusing anecdotes would adorn the lighter pages of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Monboddo must have been deliberately gulled by practical jokers, returned travellers, and yarn-spinning sailors. He believed nearly everything he was told and all that he found in print. He quoted from Cardinal Polignac the account of an animal in the Ukraine called the *baubacis*, which inhabits caverns underground, makes wars, takes other animals into slavery, and lays up provisions for itself :

They make those slaves lie down upon their back, and hold up their legs, and then they pack the hay upon them, which their legs keep together, and having thus loaded these *living carts*, as our author calls them, they drag them along by the tail. I think it can hardly be doubted that this animal, with so much sagacity, if it had likewise the organs of speech would in process of time, invent a language.” [12]

But the most famous of his heresies was his belief in the existence of men with tails. His other lapses from common sense might have been forgotten in time, but his perpetual emphasis on the caudal appendage put all his readers in hysterics :

I could produce legal evidence by witnesses yet living of a man in Inverness, one Barber, a teacher of mathematics, who had a tail about half a foot long which he carefully concealed during his life ; but was discovered after his death, which happened about twenty years ago. [13]

In Monboddo’s theory the existence of a tail was all-important because it would demonstrate man’s relation to the speechless brute. [14] To Monboddo, you see, it was the missing link. Hence his eagerness to discover a man, or, better still, a tribe of men with this useful member. It is related that when James Bruce, the explorer, returned to Scotland from

Abyssinia, he went into a court-room where Lord Monboddo was sitting as judge, and that he at once received a note from the noble Lord requesting to be *immediately* informed if he had encountered any men with tails. Such men, he believed, [15] existed in the Dutch East Indies, where they waved their tails like cats — to the edification of an occasional sailor. What might not Burnet have found in Abyssinia ? Contemporaries of Monboddo made merry over this tender preoccupation of his. An anonymous satirist wrote at some length about the spiritual dangers which might arise from too vain a regard for tails—if we had them :

This rigid Nature, to restrain our pride,
To monkies granted, but to men denied. [16]

Dr. Johnson, who had met the judge in Scotland as well as in London, said of him :
“ Other people have strange notions, but they conceal them. If they have tails, they hide them ; but Monboddo is as jealous of his tail as a squirrel.’

There is a famous passage in the *Descent of Man* where Darwin describes one of our presumptive simian ancestors with an eloquence of admiration which scientists usually deny themselves. A somewhat similar enthusiasm was Monboddo’s. The satirist quoted above calls him the baboon’s ‘ gen’rous friend,’ who ‘ when brutes can rise no more, makes us descend.’ Monboddo convinced himself that orang-outangs live together in society, and frequently act in concert, particularly in attacking elephants, that they build huts to defend themselves against the weather, and ‘ no doubt practise other arts, both for sustenance and defence.’ The animal, he said, is ‘ of human form both outside and inside,’ walks upright, makes slaves of men whom he captures, and (by way of climax) plays the flute. [17] In disposition he is docile and even affectionate, naturally attached to his master and to his mate. He is even capable of remorse and of sensitiveness. Once an orang-outang served as a sailor on board a Jamaican ship trading to the Slave Coast. He messed with the crew, and performed the duties of a sailor. He also served the captain as cabin-boy. One day he had the misfortune to break a china bowl, and ‘ the captain,’ says our author, ‘ beat him, which the animal took so much to heart that he abstained from food, and died.’ In short, the orang-outang can do everything but talk, but even this limitation of his abilities was not, in Monboddo’s eyes, sufficient ground for excluding him from the *genus homo*. Who can prove that language is natural to man ? Monboddo believed that it was not, and wrote a treatise on language in three volumes to defend and establish his view.

Monboddo wrangled with Johnson about the comparative felicity of a savage and a London shop-keeper, and espoused the cause of the former. Although my acquaintance in both groups is, unhappily, restricted, I should, if pressed to a decision, choose as did Monboddo. [18] The learned judge, you see, preferred the estate which had the longer and richer future before it. The London shop-keeper, considered as typical of modern civilisation, was, he held, facing extinction. The impoverished life, physical and mental, which he endured in the metropolis, was but an index of the inevitable disaster which was to befall him and the social world that had made him. For Monboddo, unlike some later evolutionists, dipped into the future, where he discovered no happy lot for mankind. Civilisation has arrived at the abyss. Modern man—such as the shop-keeper—is a paltry creature who, in the general decay, physical and spiritual, has already reached a stage below that of the orang-outang. The popularity of such figures as Mowgli and Tarzan shows that there is a large section of the community—in which, no doubt, are several representatives of the shop-keeping class—who, in sentiment and imagination at least, are not unwilling to revert to a savage state. Monboddo contended that the savage’s perfect knowledge of certain facts, such as concern hunting and warfare, more than repays him for his ignorance of general principles. [19] His senses are more acute ; he has a variety of exact information derived from instinct, which gives him a foreknowledge of everything necessary to his well-being. He is incredibly stronger than

civilised man, and can endure more pain and fatigue. He brings to all his enterprises a patience and perseverance of which modern man is incapable.

As for civilisation, the long story is nearing an end. The decline is now so rapid as to be almost visible, and its stages may be traced from age to age. Warfare alone is enough to make away with us : ‘ The destruction of modern war is so prodigious by the great armies brought into the field and which are likewise kept up in time of peace, and by the extraordinary waste of men, by fatigue, disease and unwholesome provisions, more than by the sword, while the internal policy of Europe at present is so little fitted to supply such destruction that, unless the princes either fall upon some other way of deciding their quarrels or provide better for the multiplication of people, Europe is in the utmost hazard of being again depopulated, as it once was under the Romans, but without the resource which it then had of barbarous nations to repeople it.’ [20] Other causes of decline analysed by Monboddo [21] were commerce (Goldsmith’s *bête noir*) and depopulation or emigration (Boswell’s) and their result is exhibited in the decreasing stature of man, feebler health, and shorter life. [22] In the rapid development of science and the mechanic arts Monboddo took no comfort, since he regarded the natural philosophy of his day as conversant merely with facts and as seldom rising above ‘ the air-pump and the alembic’. The science of universals as developed by the Greeks was the only true source of scientific principles, and its neglect by the new experimental school condemned them to minister to the merely physical needs of man and thus to that softening of fibre which was at once the cause and the symptom of decay.

There is a gusto, a passionate indignation, a satiric force in some of Monboddo’s denunciations of the race which point us forward to the style of a later Scot who was also enamoured of invective:

If Momus, quitting his sportive vein, should assume a tone of keen satire and virulent invective, and if M. Rousseau should lend him words, he would say that man is the most mischievous animal that God has made, that he has already almost depopulated the earth, having in many countries destroyed whole specieses [*sic*] of animals, and continuing daily to destroy those that remain, not only to gratify his luxury and vanity, but for mere sport and pastime. ‘ What atonement [*sic*], most pernicious *biped* or *quadruped* or whatever other title most offends thine ear, what atonement canst thou make for this so great abuse of thy superior faculties and this destruction of the creatures of God ? None other except to destroy thyself next, and so avenge the rest of the animal race. This thou art doing as fast as possible, and for this only I commend thee. When this work is accomplished, then shall the true state of nature be restored, and the real golden age return. Then shall Astraea visit the earth again, whose latest footsteps are now no longer to be seen. So shall the rest of the animal creation, freed from a tyrannical and capricious master, live the life which nature has destined for them and accomplish the end of their being. So shall even man himself, if any of the wretched race yet remain, acquit providence of the imputations he has thrown upon it, and shew that *he was made upright, though he have found out many inventions.*’ [23]

In all the annals of modern nihilism it would be difficult to cite a destructive mania more extravagant than this ; it is, indeed, the climax of the author’s pessimism. Yet in the man himself there was nothing of the Ishmaelite. He was given to self-discipline. In an age of over-eating his meals were light and frugal. He had a most undemocratic love of baths, which he took cold, at the unheard-of hour of six in the morning, and at a ‘ bower’ near a running stream. He sat naked in the open air in order to harden himself, and to protest against the luxury which was lulling the age into effeminacy and decay. He eschewed all modern ‘ conveniences.’ Even when going to London he would not make use of coach or chaise, but rode all the way on horseback. [24] His estates at Monboddo fell into decay, but, as they had been good enough for his ancestors, who were better men than he, he left them unrepaired. He

might be condemned by fortune to live in an era of decay, but he could at least rise superior to the self-indulgence all about him.

In commenting on Lord Monboddo's system, Boswell remarked that if savage life were truly desirable, the felicity might be enjoyed by many, since a man might betake himself to the woods whenever he pleased. [25] Boswell had visited Rousseau in his 'wild retreat' in the Val de Travers, where, however, he seems to have found a measure of savage simplicity still lacking. He spoke to Johnson of a man of whom Lord Monboddo knew, who had lived for some time in the wilds of America, and who was wont to reflect: 'Here am I, free and unrestrained, amidst the rude magnificence of nature, with this Indian woman by my side and this gun with which I can procure food when I want it. What more can be desired for human happiness?' Johnson retorted: 'It is sad stuff. It is brutish. If a bull could speak, he might as well exclaim, "Here I am with this cow and this grass; what being can enjoy greater felicity."?'?

The difference between civilised and savage life may be measured either by sojourn among barbaric peoples or by bringing savages into the heart of modern civilisation. In the representatives of a ruder life brought suddenly into the midst of metropolitan life, the world of 1770 displayed an absorbing and a somewhat naïve interest. In the autumn of 1772, Captain Cartwright, the Labrador explorer, brought a family of five Esquimaux on a visit to London. The head of this family was Attuiock, who, in his own country, held the rank of priest; he was accompanied by his youngest wife and her little daughter not yet four years old, his younger brother and the latter's wife, named Caubvick. These people, arrayed in skins and accompanied by an Esquimau dog and a 'beautiful eagle,' caused a convulsion of excitement in the streets of London. Captain Cartwright was so overrun with visitors at his lodgings in Leicester Street that he was obliged to change his residence, and to devote two days a week to exhibiting the Esquimaux. On these days the crowd at his door was so great as to fill up the street in which the house situated. Among the visitors was James Boswell who went and tried to converse with Attuiock by signs; this he did by way of testing Monboddo's theory that it was possible to carry on a considerable conversation without spoken words.

The Esquimaux saw King George review some of his troops. The king glanced at the strangers, took off his hat, and smiled. Later they were presented at Court, as well as to 'several of the nobility and people of fashion.' They were taken to the opera and to the play. Colman gave a special performance of *Cymbeline* for them, at which they occupied the royal box. But they lacked the power of response to all these opportunities. Once, after a walk from Westminster Bridge to Hyde Park, Attuiock cried out, 'Oh, I am tired: here are too many houses, too much smoke, too many people. Labrador is very good. Seals are plentiful there. I wish I was back again.'

As the days passed, there was some slight advance in their appreciation of the things about them, but, Cartwright says, no intelligent understanding of their origin or use, any more than 'one of the brute creation' might have. Structures like London Bridge and St. Paul's Cathedral they took for natural objects of gigantic size such as their own ice-cliffs, and even after examination, could hardly believe them to be the work of human hands. In the country—Cartwright removed them to Nottinghamshire in February—they were happier, for there the men took naturally to fox-hunting and the women to dancing. 'The land is all made' was their comment on the English scene. [26]

When Cartwright embarked again for Labrador in May, 1773, the Esquimaux were all well-pleased at the prospect of going home. But the poor creatures had not yet finished with civilisation. On the return voyage they fell ill, apparently with small-pox, and all died except Caubvick, who, bald and emaciated, was restored to her wailing countrywomen. She, more than any other in the little group, had seemed to appreciate the comfort and luxury to which

she had been introduced ; she is said to have become a graceful dancer. But she resumed her native mode of living with a complacency which occasioned Cartwright, when he saw her again, great surprise.

Omai, the South Sea Islander, who was brought to London in the autumn of the next year, was received with no less enthusiasm than the Esquimaux had been. He, too, was presented at court ; the artists of the day vied with one another in reproducing his features, he became the favourite of Lady Sandwich ; and all that the gay and fashionable world could do to pleasure a visitor was done for Omai. He was a much more agreeable person than Attuiock, and showed an appreciation of civilisation that was, superficially, as keen as Attuiock's had been dull. But, when the time came for him to return to his home, the general feeling was that he had gained nothing of lasting worth, and that it would have been better for him if he had been left in his island. The mantle of civilisation slipped easily from the brown shoulders of Omai ; but he was never again what he had been before. The touch of the western world, which had not been able to transform him into the image of civilised man, had yet spoiled him for life among his kind.

Those who believed English civilisation to be corrupt found in its effect upon Omai and the Esquimaux plentiful evidence of their contention. Material comforts seemed to them to be shown in their true character as more of a curse than a blessing. But those who took a saner view saw that it was not a question of measuring civilisation by its material possessions, but rather of testing men by their capacity to make a proper use of such ' blessings.' In the last analysis, it is this capacity which distinguishes an Omai from a Pericles, a Caubvick from an Aspasia. I know of no better conclusion regarding the matter than that given by Oliver Goldsmith in a passage now almost forgotten in the *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*. [27] It represents, I think, his reasoned conclusion on this subject of ours, and though it differs radically from the superficial views which he expressed in the conversation quoted at the beginning of this paper, it is none the less characteristic of him—characteristic, moreover, of that finer thought which is always found in his books as distinct from his conversation :

We shall never know whether the things of this world have been made for our use ; but we very well know that we have been made to enjoy them. Let us then boldly affirm that the earth and all its wonders are ours ; since we are furnished with powers to force them into our service. Man is the lord of all the sublunary creation ; the howling savage, the winding serpent, with all the untamable and rebellious offspring of nature are destroyed in the contest or driven at a distance from his habitations. The extensive and tempestuous ocean, instead of limiting or dividing his power, only serves to assist his industry and enlarge the sphere of his enjoyments. Its billows and its monsters, instead of presenting a scene of terror, only call up the courage of this intrepid little being ; and the greatest dangers that man now fears on the deep is [*sic*] from his fellow-creatures. Indeed, when I consider the human race as Nature has formed them, there is but very little of the habitable globe that seems made for them. But when I consider them as accumulating the experience of ages, in commanding the earth, there is nothing so great or so terrible. What a poor, contemptible being is the naked savage, standing on the beach of the ocean and trembling at its tumults ! How little capable is he of converting its terrors into benefits or of saying, " Behold an element made wholly for my enjoyment !" He considers it as an angry deity, and pays it the homage of submission. But it is very different when he has exercised his mental powers ; when he has learned to find his own superiority and to make it subservient to his commands. It is then that his dignity begins to appear, and that the true Deity is justly praised for having been mindful of man ; for having given him the earth for his habitation and the sea for an inheritance. [28]

If a man finds civilisation a menace to the spirit, he would, no doubt, do well to renounce it and retire into a monastery or even to a lodge in some vast wilderness. Such retirement is of obvious value, and the regular life is a genuine need of civilisation in every age. But to renounce the things of civilisation as well for others as for oneself, or, worse still, for the community at large, is to make the perilous assertion that there is but one way to grow in grace. If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, but do so with a rational recollection that an eye does not, naturally, cause offence, and that it may be well for others to keep their eyes.

The consideration of Nature's simple plan was carried over into the Romantic Movement, and may be traced in some of its loveliest manifestations in the work of Wordsworth and of Byron, of Longfellow and of Thoreau ; and the doctrine of repudiation, limitation, and prohibition, has, as we are all aware, remained an essential feature of it. Yet history has, I believe, no outstanding example of a great civilisation based upon renunciations, except, perhaps, that of Sparta, and, the civilisation of Sparta, when all is said, was not conspicuous for its art.

[1] The lines are quoted as given in the *Life of Johnson* (Hill's ed.), vol. 3, p. 282.

[2] *An Account of a Savage Girl*, Edinburgh, 1768, p. xviii.

[3] *Letters*, August 33, 1772 ; December 3, 1784. The conception of Tahitan as superior to European civilisation is as old as the discovery of the Island, and the vitality of the notion is shown by the ever-increasing literature of the South Seas. Of the influence of Tahiti on the character of Torquil and his companions, Byron says in *The Island* (2.268) that it

Tamed each rude wanderer to the sympathies
Of those who were more happy if less wise,
Did more than Europe's discipline had done,
And civilised Civilisation's son.

[4] Cf. Byron, *The Island*. 2,256ff.

[4] Oberea was queen of Otaheite.

[5] From *Otahaite*, London, 1774, an anonymaus poem. My friend, Professor Collins of Princeton calls my attention to the fact that a selection from this poem appeared in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* for March, 1775.

[6] *Origin and progress of Language*, Second ed., 1774 ; 1.226n.. 390 n.

[9] *Life of Johnson*, ed. Hill, vol. 8, p. 59.

[10] Among other references to Rousseau, see his *Origin of Language* 2d ed. 1.403 and 414 n, and *Antient Metaphysics*, 3.233. Chapter XII in the first volume of the former work is avowedly an attempt to solve ' Mons. Rousseau's great difficulty with respect to the invention of language.' In the preface to the *History of the Wild Girl Monboddo* says that Rousseau is the ' only philosopher of our time' who has conceived the *magnum opus* of philosophy to be ' to inquire whether, by the improvement of our faculties, we have mended our condition and become happier as well as wiser.' But, he adds, though Rousseau had the idea, none has executed it.

[11] *Antient Metaphysics*, vol 3, p. 282.

[12] *Origin of Language*, 1.423.

[13] *Origin of Language*, 1.262 n.

[14] I have dwelt thus long upon the orang-outang because if I make him out to be a man, I prove by fact as well as by argument, this fundamental proposition, upon which my whole theory hangs, that language is not natural to man. And, secondly, I likewise prove that a natural state of man, such as I suppose it, is not a mere hypothesis, but a state which at present actually exists.' (*Origin of Language*, vol. 1, p. 358.)

[15] *Origin of Language*, vol. 1, p. 258.

[16] From *An Heroick Epistle from Omiah to the Queen of Otaheite*, London, 1775. Embryology might have aided Monboddo.

- [17] See, *Origin of Language*, vol 1, p. 268, and *Antient Metaphysicks*, vol 3, pp. 41 ff. Monboddo refused human dignity to the monkey and even the ape : ‘ Though I hold the orang-outang to be of our species, it must not be supposed that I think the monkey or ape, with or without a tail, participates of our nature.’ (*Origin of Language*, vol. 1, p. 311.) Goldsmith attacks Monboddo’s theory in his *History of Animated Nature* (1774), vol. 4, p. 904, where he says of the oran-outang : ‘ All its boasted wisdom was merely of our own making.’ He provides an engraving of the animal, which shows him stick in hand, with two of his sheds or huts in the middle distance.
- [18] Johnson confessed to Mrs. Thrale that at another time he might very probably have argued for the savage.
- [19] *Antient Metaphysicks*, vol 2, pp. 157, 313.
- [20] *Origin of Language*, vol. 1, p. 430.
- [21] Monboddo’s incomplete MSS. contain an outline for an essay on the *Degeneracy of Man in a State of Society*. See W. Knight, *Lord Monboddo and his Contemporaries*, p. 276.
- [22] This general attitude is also attacked by Goldsmith in his *History of Animated Nature*. ‘ Man,’ he says, ‘ was scarce formed when he began to deplore an imaginary decay.’ He concludes, on the evidence of antiquities and the fine arts, that men have been in all ages ‘ much of the same size that they are at present.’ He admits, however, that our ancestors excel us in the poetic art, ‘ as they had the first rising of all the striking Images of Nature.’
- [23] *Origin of Language*, vol. 1, page 414. n.
- [24] In this respect he was but practising the precepts of Rousseau. The latter philosopher proposed to have no carriages whatever in Corsica. Ladies and priests might ride in two-wheeled chaises ; but “ les laiques, de quelques rangs qu’ils soient, ne pourront voyager qu’à pied ou à cheval.” Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres inédites de Rousseau*, p. 119.
- [25] In his *Hypochondriack*, No. 51, *London Magazine*.
- [26] The best account of the Esquimaux in London is found In C W. Townsend’s *Captain Cartwright and his Labrador Journal*, Boston, 1911. See the entry for October 22, 1772, *et seq.*
- [27] E.d. 1774 vol I, chapter 15.
- [28] Compare the opening sentences of the book : ‘ The world may be considered as one vast mansion where man has been admitted to enjoy, to admire, and to be grateful. The first desires of savage nature are merely to gratify the importunities of sensual appetite and to neglect the contemplation of things, barely satisfied with their enjoyment : the beauties of nature and all the wonders of creation have but little charms for being taken up in obviating the wants of the days, and anxious for precarious subsistence.’

Nature’s simple plan : a phase of radical thought in the mid-eighteenth century (1964)

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