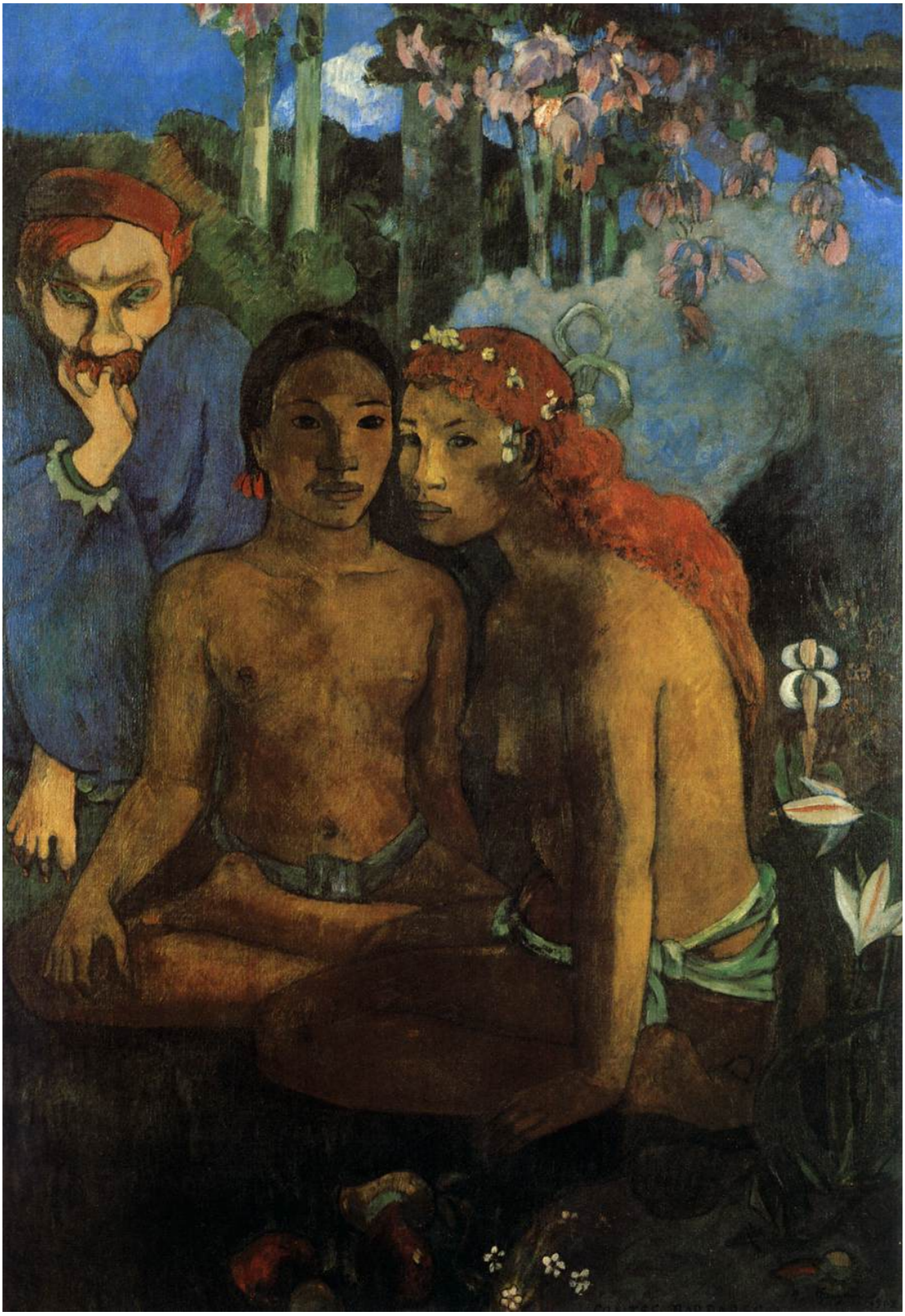
Noble Savages

by Robert Bruce (July 2019)



Contes Barbares, Paul Gauguin, 1902

As José Ortega y Gasset noted in a prescient diagnosis of twentieth century delusions, the most common pathology of Europe's spiritual crisis was a reversion to the pagan idolatry of the tribe and when one looks at the serried ranks of frustrated hack writers and artists who beat a path to the Brown revolution, it is easy to see Nazism as the barbarian sequel to a disintegrating society. Thomas Carlyle doubtless would not have sympathised, but he was disillusioned enough with the soulless temper of 19th century utilitarianism to give one pagan relic a pass.

Thus Carlyle in his famous lecture on the Prophet:

> What is the chief end of man here below? Mahomet has answered this question in a way that might put some of us to shame! He does not like a Bentham, a Paley, take Right and Wrong, and calculate the profit and loss, ultimate pleasure of the one and of the other; and summing all up by addition and subtraction into a net result, ask you, "Whether on the whole the Right does not preponderate considerably?" No, it is not better to do the one than the other; the one is to the other as life is to death,—as Heaven is to Hell. The one must in nowise be done the other in nowise left undone. You shall not measure them; they are incommensurable: the one is death eternal to a man, the other is life eternal. Benthamite Utility, virtue by Profit and Loss; reducing this God's world to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains on:—If you ask me which gives, Mahomet or they, the beggarlier and falser view of Man and his Destinies in this

> Universe, I will answer, It is not Mahomet!

On the question of ultimate destinies, Carlyle merely had to pose the question to answer it and, if its jumble of incondite fragments held little intellectual appeal, its sheer earnestness was bound to appeal to an age destitute of faith but terrified of scepticism. Fanaticism, as Nietzsche noted, with what he termed 'Carlylism' very much in mind, is picturesque and, after the intrepid Richard Burton had given his flowery account of faux spiritual ecstasy at Mecca, he was to be joined by countless other Byronic heroes keen to use Arabs as a handy means of self-expression, not least soldiers like Glubb Pasha whose vision of the Arab 'as every Englishman's idea of nature's gentleman' hints at a revealing, if harmless prejudice.' As Ernst Gellner noted, this is not so much a search for the noble savage as the search for a *savage noble* and it is as well to be clear on what this longing for restored rank and order was prepared to gloss over. When one gets past the obsessively homoerotic stylisations of Arabs and T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the only thing left over is an absurd sentimentalisation of a predatory *herrenvolk* with all the trappings such aristocracies of the blood one can expect and, lest anyone have any illusions on where this leads, the following observations on domestic husbandry of the Bedouin make sobering reading.

> *The gardens were entrusted to slaves, negroes like the grown lads who brought in the tray of dates to us, and whose thick limbs and plump shining bodies looked curiously out of place among the bird-like Arabs.*

Lawrence explains that these healthy young blacks were originally from Africa, and had been brought as children to

Arabia by their fathers on pilgrimage to Mecca, where they were afterwards sold.

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"When grown strong they were worth from fifty to eighty pounds apiece and were looked after carefully as befitted their price." Some of them became servants, Lawrence tells us,

> but the majority were sent out to the palm villages . . . whose climate was too bad for Arab labour, but where they flourished and built themselves solid houses, and mated with women slaves, and did all the manual work of the holding.

The quotation from his famous *Seven Pillars* is entirely characteristic of the tone of the book, and one has to keep in mind this is written by a cultured man *in 1928, not 1828*, and it speaks to the spiritual malaise amongst the upper classes of this time that Lawrence was able to elevate all this covert homophilia, misogyny, and disdain of manual labour, as virtues. In the inter-war period, Arabism was to become something of a cult amongst the upper classes and, if for most, this misanthropy would have manifested itself in little more than the snobbery others might indulge in by converting to Catholicism, in shady individuals like St John Philby, who could rotate his loyalties effortlessly between Nazism and

Wahhabism and the Soviet Union, we are clearly encountering a more deep rooted *traison de clerks*. For Philby, these were clearly emanations of a single misanthropic spirit and, if it is to be expected, bad men might choose Arab slavers and volkish blondes. More tender spirits were also at hand to anoint gentler primitives.

The ethnic candidates for this *pocahontaisation* are legion but, as any anthropologist will know, the heavy lifting was done by the Samoans, forever removed in the cultivated mind from their image as ferocious warrior kings and transformed into the promiscuous hippies of Margaret Mead's fantastic work of fiction. Over the decades, *Coming of Age*—even amongst sympathetic audiences—has not worn well but, anyone who had got the measure of her formative intellectual influences, could have spared themselves the trouble of wading through her turgid fancies of the imagination.

Anthropology, before Mead set up stall in Columbia, was frequently the preserve of middle aged men in tweeds—as in the case of Malinowski employing the steady hand of science to firm up colonial rule. After she had escaped literary oblivion in Greenwich Village, all the routinised transgressions of the counter-culture were let loose on defenceless primitives, particularly when they provided a standing rebuke to bourgeoise civilisation. Thus, Mead who planned her trip to Melanesia with two things uppermost in her mind, 'the influence of the progressive education movement' and 'a quick and partial interpretation of the first flush of success in Russia' s educational experiments.'

It is hardly surprising she saw what she believed and, to judge by