

Preface

The title of this book will inevitably create some confusion, for there are a number of dimensions in which the Noble Savage intersects the field of the mythical. The fundamental myth is that there are, or ever were, any actual peoples who were “savage,” either in the term’s original sense of “wild” or in its later connotation of an almost subhuman level of fierceness and cruelty. The “Savage” and the “Oriental” were the two great ethnographic paradigms developed by European writers during the age of exploration and colonialism; and the symbolic opposition between “wild” and “domesticated” peoples, between “savages” and “civilization,” was constructed as part of the discourse of European hegemony, projecting cultural inferiority as an ideological ground for political subordination. For most of the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the American Indians constituted the paradigmatic case for the “savage,” and the term was most widely applied to them. If “savage” is not always flagged by quotes in the following citations and discussions of writings of this period, it should never be regarded as unproblematic; the idea that any people, including American Indians, are or were “savages” is a myth that should long ago have been dispelled.

However, the primary source of the ambiguity built into the title of this book is less obvious and more insidious. This is because the title refers to a living, contemporary myth that most of us accept as fact; and because the myth itself deceives us by claiming to critique and offer an exposé of another “myth,” the existence of Savages who were really noble. The purported critique typically examines ethnographic or theoretical writings on “savage” peoples to problematize any potential claims to their “nobility.” The supposed exposé asserts that the “myth” of savage nobility was created in the eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as part of a romantic

glorification of the “savage” to serve as a paradigmatic counterexample for constructing attacks on European society, and that belief in the existence of actual Noble Savages has been widespread ever since.

Many accept this combination of critique and exposé as disproof of the “myth”; but the critique and the exposé were themselves a deliberate mythological construction, projected at a particular time in the history of anthropology for a specific political purpose. It is this construction, the false claim of widespread belief in the existence of the “Noble Savage,” inspired by Rousseau, that constitutes the myth that is the subject of this book.

The real myth, in other words, is what we have been deceived into thinking is the reality behind the myth. Herein lies the difficulty of our task, for it involves calling into question some of our most deeply rooted beliefs and confronting an unexpectedly insidious influence that still continues to shape the construction of our disciplinary identity. In so doing, we must inevitably consider the possibility that something we have long taken pride in as evidence of our own intelligent, critical thinking was in fact no more than our gullible acquiescence in a scholarly hoax—a hoax that has been perpetrated on us for political reasons that many of us would dislike intensely, if we understood them.

The chronological framing of the following narrative seems to me to present a clear and consistent story, but it may seem rather like a mystery novel, with the reader having to follow obscure clues until the solution is revealed at the end. In fact, there is no mystery behind the myth of the Noble Savage, other than its continued success and longevity. Serious investigators have known since the 1920s that Rousseau did not create the myth, but its source has never been satisfactorily identified. This is the first great problem we face, and it suggests a first step toward a solution.

In a preliminary approach to the question, we will find that the failure to discover the source of the myth has resulted from a misguided substantivist orientation that has sought its origin in objective fact, accepting that there must actually have been a real belief in something called the “Noble Savage” reflected in the ethnographic and related literatures. In fact, since the claim of the reality of belief in the Noble Savage is part of the construction of the myth itself, any attempt to find its substantive basis in the world “out there” reinforces the myth by playing the game defined by its own rules and leads away from a solution to the problem of its source. For example, Bruce Trigger and Wilcomb Washburn (1996: 1/1:72), while alluding to “the noble savage as conceptualized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau,”

nevertheless suggest that “the so-called myth of the Noble Savage was not simply a product of the salons of Paris, as is often claimed.” This is an important first step toward problematizing the substantive basis of the myth, but a clear critical understanding of it needs to be informed by an examination of its discursive foundations.

Thus, for example, it is hardly problematic that writers of the romantic period romanticized “savages,” since this must necessarily be true merely by definition: that “romantic” writers romanticized the subjects of their writings is simply a circular statement. We would undoubtedly find it more problematically interesting if, instead, they had never found “savage” characters worthy of embodying romantic themes; for such a case would provide evidence of a racism so obtuse as to suggest that the evolution of Europeans beyond a bestial level of intelligence had been very recent indeed. But to take all such cases as *prima facie* evidence of belief in the “Noble Savage” not only ignores important questions of the meanings of various modes of romantic representation but also distracts from the more important issue of what is meant by the attribution of nobility and savagery. Terms used as essentializing labels become self-validating and draw attention away from themselves to the content to which they are affixed. But to understand the Noble Savage, what is needed is not a faith in its reality supported by self-validating repetitions of a formula but rather a suspension of faith that can support a serious investigation of its origin and meaning.

The solution, as we will see, is to treat the Noble Savage as a discursive construct and to begin with a rigorous examination of occurrences of the rhetoric of nobility as it was applied by ethnographic and other European writers to the peoples they labeled “savages.” In focusing on the discursive rather than the substantive Noble Savage, which might be imagined to lurk behind any positive reference to “savages” anywhere in the literature, we will find that the term “Noble Savage” was invented in 1609, nearly a century and a half before Rousseau, by Marc Lescarbot, a French lawyer-ethnographer, as a concept in comparative law. We will see the concept of the Noble Savage virtually disappear for more than two hundred years, without reemerging in Rousseau or his contemporaries, until it is finally resurrected in 1859 by John Crawfurd, soon to become president of the Ethnological Society of London, as part of a racist coup within the society. It is Crawfurd’s construction, framed as part of a program of ideological support for an attack on anthropological advocacy of human rights, that creates the myth as we know it, including the false attribution of au-

thorship to Rousseau; and Crawford's version becomes the source for every citation of the myth by anthropologists from Lubbock, Tylor, and Boas through the scholars of the late twentieth century.

The chronological sequence of the following chapters also conceals the process followed in my own investigation of the myth. In fact, I began with a look at related historical problems in Rousseau's writings. Having absorbed the myth as part of my professional training, I was at first incidentally surprised and then increasingly disturbed by not finding evidence of either the discursive or the substantive Noble Savage in Rousseau's works. Finding this an interesting problem in its own right, I began to explore the secondary literature on the subject, beginning with Hoxie Neale Fairchild's *The Noble Savage* (1928), finding confirmation of my readings of Rousseau but no satisfactory investigation of the myth's real source.

Intrigued by how a myth that had been discredited for nearly seventy years had continued to dominate anthropological thinking and escaped serious critical examination for so long, I began to reexamine the ethnographic literature, where I had been convinced I had seen many references to the Noble Savage before. But all my critical reexaminations of ethnographic writings proved disappointing, until a systematic pursuit of possible earlier sources for Dryden's well-known 1672 reference to the Noble Savage revealed what was obviously an original invention of the concept by Lescaurbot some sixty-three years earlier. However, since Lescaurbot's Noble Savage was so different from that posited by the myth, further searching was necessary to find the reintroduction of the term and the construction of the myth itself.

Once again, since a temporal point of departure had been established by George W. Stocking, Jr.'s (1987: 153) identification of a reference to the myth in 1865 by John Lubbock, it was possible to establish a time frame for a search of the ethnographic and anthropological literature in the period between Rousseau and Lubbock. Examination of the sources most likely to have influenced Lubbock finally revealed a clearly original formulation of the myth as we know it in Crawford's 1859 paper. With the double invention of the concept and the myth established, it seemed necessary to conduct yet another survey of selected works of the ethnographic and derivative literatures from the intervening period, but from the new perspective of a concept once privileged by its embeddedness in the myth and the culture of anthropology now having become problematized by the new critical framing of the survey.

Thus the core of this narrative is contained in the beginning and ending sections, parts 1 and 4; and a concise view of my basic argument may be

found in those sections, particularly chapters 2 and 17. The intervening parts are a frankly experimental project in rereading the ethnographic literature from the perspective provided by examining the construction of the Noble Savage in Lescarbot and Crawford. This project is necessarily incomplete, given the vast extent of the literature, but equally necessarily undertaken if one is to understand the broad outlines of the historical developments that led from Lescarbot's invention of the concept to its disappearance during the Enlightenment and its reemergence into the mainstream of anthropological discourse in Crawford's construction of the myth in the mid-nineteenth century.

Parts 2 and 3 must therefore be taken as tentative explorations of a much larger field, where further readings will certainly reveal many more examples of the rhetoric of nobility than those presented in this brief survey. It is, of course, quite likely that such examples will necessitate some revisions of the argument presented here—after all, it would be reckless to claim that the concept of the Noble Savage does not and could not exist in the writings between Lescarbot and Crawford. But it seems quite unlikely that additional examples of the rhetoric of nobility would displace either or both authors from their key roles in developing the concept and the myth into powerful currents in the stream of anthropological discourse, which is the primary focus of this book. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out such a possibility. Thus, to help in the evaluation of such additional examples, I have suggested some general principles for a critique of the rhetoric of nobility in the introduction to part 2, with discussions of particular critical issues raised in conjunction with the discussions of specific works throughout parts 2 and 3.

Obviously, then, this is a book with an empty center. As a study in the history of ideas, it leaves a frustrating sense of the nonexistence of any discernible "idea" of the Noble Savage after its first invention by Lescarbot. As a study in the history of discourse, it turns away from opportunities for technical analysis of discursive forms to explore fields of changing meaning in the energizing currents of cultural, historical, and political implications of the rhetoric of nobility. But these strategies seem the only feasible approach in this first attempt at a critical study. Its central subject does not exist, being only an illusory construction resulting from the conjunction of contingent causal and contributory circumstances. As a scholar whose fieldwork has long been situated in Buddhist cultures where assertions of nonexistence and illusion often serve as normative characterizations of the state of the world and knowledge of it, this is entirely familiar, natural, and intellectually intriguing to me. For some, it may be unfamiliar and discon-

certing. I hope, though, that others will find the exploration of the process of deconstructing nonexistent entities and illusions as rewarding an experience as I have found in completing this study.

Some of the most familiar names from the history of anthropology are in the following pages, as are many unfamiliar writers who have long faded into obscurity but who have played key roles in the construction of the Noble Savage. Even in the cases of well-known writers, however, our investigation leads us to consider little-studied aspects of their work; so in the end, both cases involve the exposition of material that is new and unfamiliar. For this reason, I make considerable use of citations, often fairly extensive, from the various authors studied, to allow them their own "voice" as far as possible, to present their ideas in adequate depth to avoid superficial impressions, and to gain some appreciation of the cultural and intellectual forces that shaped their ideas and rhetoric. As this study is an ethnography of other times rather than other places, and of other anthropologists rather than other races, I think this is what we owe them; and I find the attention to their viewpoints repaid by what they give us in return.

But I am too much a product of my own temporocultural environment to sit respectfully and silently by as they speak, without engaging them in conversation or debate, asking questions, and even shouting back at some egregious diatribe about the physical or mental inferiority of some racial group; or applauding the open-mindedness of Rousseau, Prichard, or Boas; or vacillating between appreciation and loathing for a complex personality such as John Crawford, perhaps the most likably despicable racist I have ever encountered. Some may find this frustrating, and they deserve a re-visitation of the subject by authors with a more neutral, balanced viewpoint; but, in the meantime, it seems to me, neutrality and balance could hardly have been adequate sources of inspiration for the writing of a book such as this one.

There is a vast secondary literature on the wide range of periods and topics that must necessarily be touched on by a study of this subject, given the long history of its creation and its perpetuation into the present. Although considerations of space and the necessary priority of primary sources preclude extensive consideration of the scholarly literature in the following discussion, readers will find an enriched understanding of the subjects covered here by exploring some of the most important scholarly studies available. For the Noble Savage concept and myth, and the question of Rousseau's authorship, the classic study is Fairchild's *The Noble Savage*. More recent treatments are provided by works such as Gaile McGregor's *The Noble Savage in the New World Garden* (1988) and Tzvetan Todorov's

On Human Diversity (1993). For *le bon sauvage* in French literature, Gilbert Chinard's *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècle* (1913) is an influential work that offers interpretations very different from those presented here.

Rousseau, like Darwin, is the subject of a publishing industry in his own right, and at least a considerable share of a lifetime could be spent exploring the scholarly literature on him and his ideas. Maurice Cranston (1982, 1991) provides the best available multivolume biography, still unfinished, that incorporates a great deal of recent scholarship in a balanced, analytic way. Likewise, Cranston's translation of the *Discourse on Inequality* (Rousseau 1755b) may be the best available English rendition of the text that has been taken as emblematic of Noble Savage mythology. Some of the most important scholarly commentary on the issue, pro and con, is included in the works listed in the preceding paragraph. The issue of Rousseau's influence on the development of anthropology, it seems to me, still awaits adequate scholarly treatment; but Michele Duchet's *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (1971) helps to situate his anthropological ideas in the context of other leading thinkers of the time without, of course, linking him to the generation of the myth of the Noble Savage.

For the Renaissance ethnography that gave birth to the Noble Savage concept, the available resources are more diverse. Margaret T. Hodgen's *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1964) discusses many of the important issues and problems in the ethnography of the period, including the interpretation of "savage" cultures in terms of the myth of the Golden Age, a subject covered from a more general historical perspective in Harry Levin's *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (1969). Renaissance ethnography has been given creative treatment by recent work in history, literary criticism, and cultural studies; two interesting and very different examples exploring themes covered in this study are Anthony Pagden's *The Fall of Natural Man* (1982) and Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* (1991).

Even believers in the myth of the Noble Savage have long recognized the need to take note of the growing development, in the century after Rousseau, of increasingly negative representations of the "savage." Some have conceived this need in terms of a logically balanced opposition between the "noble" and the "ignoble Savage," an opposition given early popular currency by Mark Twain (cited in Barnett 1975: 71) and subjected to more comprehensive scholarly investigation in works such as Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr.'s *The White Man's Indian* (1978). Others, noting the real imbalance of positive and negative representations during this period, have fo-

cused their attention on the pervasively dominant imagery of the “ignoble savage.” The definitive work of the “ignoble savage” scholarship, Roy Harvey Pearce’s *The Savages of America* (1953; later retitled *Savagism and Civilization*, 1988), covers a wide range of ethnographic, philosophical, political, and popular writings over almost exactly the same historical time span as this study. Two more specialized works, Louise K. Barnett’s *The Ignoble Savage* (1975) and Ronald Meek’s *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (1976), explore the uses of negative representations of the “savage” in the fields of American literary fiction and Enlightenment European sociocultural evolutionary theory, respectively. A more broadly focused work, Olive P. Dickason’s *The Myth of the Savage* (1984), is useful because of its combination of critical analysis with historical and ethnographic surveys of French Canada, an area of considerable importance to this study, and its inclusion of an overview of the often-contentious subject of Indians who had visited Europe and their reactions to what they saw. Gordon Sayre’s *Les Sauvages Américains* (1997) is a wide-ranging exploration of the early ethnographic literature, with some provocative suggestions and interpretations that lend help in understanding the sometimes striking differences between representations of the “savage” in French and English literature. While most such recent studies explicitly or implicitly treat the savage as a constructed category, Andrew Sinclair’s *The Savage* (1977) argues that “savages,” in the etymological sense of “men of the forest,” represent an ancient part of the human heritage that has been drawn into increasingly oppositional polarity with civilization—thus according the category a unique sort of deeper metaphysical valorization than it receives in other studies, including this one.

For the process leading up to the construction of the myth of the Noble Savage in the context of the rise of anthropological racism in nineteenth-century England, the single indispensable source is Stocking’s *Victorian Anthropology* (1987). Some of Stocking’s shorter works are also very helpful, particularly “What’s in a Name?” (1971) and “From Chronology to Ethnology” (1973). The literature on race and racism is vast; but a recent historical survey of American racism, Audrey Smedley’s *Race in North America* (1993), provides an anthropological perspective. For American racist anthropology, which had considerable influence on the ideas and rhetoric of British racists such as Burke and Hunt, William Ragan Stanton’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1960) is a classic study despite its occasional tendency to idealize the scientific accomplishments of the American racists. George M. Fredrickson’s *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971) provides some critiques and counterinterpretations for some of Stanton’s evaluations.

Stocking's *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (1968) furnishes wider-ranging and more sophisticated treatment of important issues relating to race and racism in the history of European and American anthropology. For the leading opponents in the struggles over racism in the Ethnological and Anthropological societies, Stocking's works contain the best available discussions of Prichard and James Hunt; and Amalie M. Kass and Edward H. Kass's *Perfecting the World* (1988) is a well-researched biographical study of Thomas Hodgkin. For Crawford, who would influence the thought and discourse of anthropology for a century and a half by his invention of the myth of the Noble Savage, there is no scholarly study available.

Finally, a technical note: I have generally preferred to cite first editions, contemporary translations, and facsimile reprints to reproduce the style as well as the content of works covering a wide historical range. Sometimes, however, either because of accessibility or enhanced clarity for contemporary readers, I have chosen to cite modern scholarly editions and translations or use my own translations. In all cases, though, I have chosen a form of citation that differs from ordinary anthropological conventions by privileging historical over commercial chronology. In simple terms, this means that I choose the date of first publication for the primary citation, rather than the date the particular copy on my bookshelf happened to have first been offered for sale. Thus, for example, if I cite two English translations of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, first published in 1755, they become Rousseau 1755a and 1755b. The actual publication dates of these particular editions, respectively 1761 and 1984, appear in a secondary position later in the citation. In primary position, they would visually suggest either the existence of two different Rousseaus writing identically titled works or a particularly long-lived individual; but their main problem is that Rousseau's critics, such as Chinard (1913), would appear to antedate the work they criticize (Rousseau 1984), a confusion more likely to occur in cases such as Smith (1755) and Rousseau (1761), where one might be less likely to guess that the "earlier" work is a critique of the "later" one.

Assuming that most of you share my interest in understanding the development of a discursive exchange on the Noble Savage, which entails understanding who said what and when, I have chosen to render the sequence of events as transparent as possible by giving primary emphasis to the times when particular ideas were voiced and were heard. In most cases, this means primary citation of the date of first publication; but there are some exceptions. Where important new elements are introduced in second or later editions, these are cited separately from the first edition. And in part 4, where month-to-month developments in the political takeover of the

Ethnological Society are of crucial importance, but the publication of papers was often delayed by two or more years, I cite key papers by the date that they were actually given before the society, rather than by the later date of their publication. Unpublished materials, of course, are cited by the date of their composition. If all this sounds complex and inconsistent, its goal—and, I hope, its result—is to provide a consistent interface that reveals as clearly as possible the complex sequence of events by which something as deviously powerful and debilitatingly consequential to anthropology as the myth of the Noble Savage was generated.

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Introduction

THE MYTH OF THE “MYTH OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE”

More than two centuries after his death, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is still widely cited as the inventor of the “Noble Savage”—a mythic personification of natural goodness by a romantic glorification of savage life—projected in the very essay (Rousseau 1755a) in which he became the first to call for the development of an anthropological Science of Man. Criticism of the Noble Savage myth is an enduring tradition in anthropology, beginning with its emergence as a formalized discipline. George Stocking (1987: 153) has cited a reference as early as 1865 by John Lubbock, vice president of the Ethnological Society of London, the first anthropological organization in the English-speaking world; and other early citations include such leading figures as E. B. Tylor (1881: 408) and Franz Boas (1889: 68). The critique extends throughout the twentieth century, appearing in the work of scholars such as Marvin Harris.

Although considerable difference existed as to the specific characterization of this primitive condition, ranging from Hobbes’s “war of all against all” to Rousseau’s “noble savage,” the explanation of how some men had terminated the state of nature and arrived at their present customs and institutions was approached in a fairly uniform fashion. (Harris 1968: 38–39)

And it continues into the present. For example, a recent article begins with the assertion, “The noble savage, according to eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is an individual living in a ‘pure state of nature’—gentle, wise, uncorrupted by the vices of civilization” (Aleiss 1991: 91). Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991: 26), taking a more complex his-

torical position, nevertheless states, "Rousseau . . . thus formalized the myth of the 'noble savage.'"

Clearly, in the 1990s the Noble Savage and Rousseau's purported role in its creation remains a leading critical concern both in anthropology and in the growing list of disciplines that take an interest in the ethnographic literature and the history of cross-cultural encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans. Where the Noble Savage is invoked, Rousseau's name is almost invariably found in close proximity, although sometimes with their linkage implied in ambiguous ways. Edna C. Sorber, for example, writes,

They probably didn't plan it that way, but the perpetrators of the "noble savage" concept in 18th and 19th century America were doing the rhetorical criticism that more specialized rhetorical critics were ignoring. While the followers of the Rousseau point of view may have originally been the philosophers, as writings on the American Indian came to dominate such discussions other considerations took precedence.
(1972: 227)

In a very few cases, Rousseau is identified not as the original author of the Noble Savage but rather as the most effective agent of its promotion. Bobbi S. Low (1996: 354), for example, writes, "Dryden (in *The Conquest of Granada*, 1672) seems to have been the first to use the term. Rousseau, of course, used the concept effectively to anathematize civilization" (cf. McGregor's discussion of Rousseau's role, below). But in most cases, attributions of authorship to Rousseau are straightforward and apparently unproblematic. Katherine A. Dettwyler (1991: 375) refers to "images of Rousseau's 'noble savage' transported to the past"; and Michael S. Alvard (1993: 355–56) charges that "Jean Jacques [*sic*] Rousseau's concept of the 'Noble Savage' has been extended and re-defined into the 'Ecological Noble Savage' by both conservationists and anthropologists." Even such a generally careful scholar as Stocking (1987: 17) remarks, "The ambiguous 'noble savage' of Rousseau's 'Discourse on Inequality' was not the only manifestation of primitivism or historical pessimism among the French philosophers of progress."

None of these authors apparently feels any need to support the claim of Rousseau's authorship with a citation; it is simply, unquestionably true, presumably one of those public-domain bits of information for which the citation is an implicit "Everyone knows . . ." After all, even the *Oxford English Dictionary* says:

NOBLE (4 a) Having high moral qualities or ideals; of a great or lofty character. (Also used ironically.) NOBLE SAVAGE, primitive man, conceived of in the manner of Rousseau as morally superior to civilized man.

But like some other anthropological folklore, this particular invented tradition is not only wrong but long since known to be wrong; and its continuing vitality in the face of its demonstrated falsity confronts us with a particularly problematic current in the history of anthropology. A convenient point of entry to this current is Fairchild's classic study, *The Noble Savage*. Fairchild, an avowed enemy of the Noble Savage myth and an outspoken critic of Rousseau's influence on romantic thought, investigated Rousseau's writings (Fairchild 1928: 120–39) and was forced to conclude, as an earlier examiner of Rousseau's "supposed romanticism" (Lovejoy 1923) had implied, that the linkage of Rousseau to the Noble Savage concept was unfounded: "The fact is that the real Rousseau was much less sentimentally enthusiastic about savages than many of his contemporaries, did not in any sense invent the Noble Savage idea, and cannot be held wholly responsible for the forms assumed by that idea in English Romanticism" (Fairchild 1928: 139).

Those few scholars who, since Fairchild, have bothered to look critically at the question have come to the same conclusion. Thus, although anthropologists have generally tended to accept the legend of Rousseau's connection with the Noble Savage more or less on faith, Stanley Diamond (1974: 100–1) points out his critical perspective and his avoidance of the term. Scholars of literary criticism and cultural studies who have examined the issue in any depth have reached similar or stronger conclusions. For example, Gaile McGregor, retracing Fairchild's investigation from a late-twentieth-century perspective, says,

Despite his undoubted influence, however, it is important to distinguish Rousseau's own position on primitivism from popular assessments. As in Montaigne's case, the text itself contains elements which are obviously inhospitable to an unadulterated theory of noble savagery. While he does indeed, in Moore's words, lavish "uncommon praise on some aspects of savage life," Rousseau's overall estimate of that level of existence is far from enthusiastic. . . . Like Montaigne, then, Rousseau's aim was basically relativistic. (1988: 19–20)

And Tzvetan Todorov (1993: 277) similarly concludes, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought is traditionally associated with primitivism and the cult of

the noble savage. In reality (and attentive commentators have been pointing this out since the beginning of the twentieth century), Rousseau was actually a vigilant critic of these tendencies.”

So it seems clear that we must conclude that Rousseau’s invention of the Noble Savage myth is itself a myth. But this conclusion, unanimously supported by serious investigators and clear as it is, raises some obvious questions. If Rousseau did not create the concept of the Noble Savage, who did? How did it become associated in popular and professional belief with Rousseau, and with the origins of anthropology? And, perhaps less obviously, why has belief in a discredited theory lingered on for seven decades after the publication of a clear disproof, particularly among anthropologists themselves? Is there something in the nature of anthropology itself, either in its intrinsic nature or in its historically contingent construction, that requires such a belief?

I will suggest in the following pages that there is; that not only is everything we have believed about the myth of the Noble Savage wrong, but it is so because our profession has been historically constructed in such a way as to require exactly this kind of obviously false belief. In outlining this suggestion, I will advance some apparently contradictory proposals: that belief in the Noble Savage never existed but that the Noble Savage was indeed associated with both the conceptual and the institutional foundations of anthropology, and not only once but twice, in widely separated historical periods, both before and after Rousseau’s time; and finally, that there was indeed a single person who was the original source of both the Noble Savage concept and of the call for the foundation of a science of human diversity but that this person was not Rousseau.

A ROSE AS REPRESENTED BY ANOTHER NAME MIGHT STINK

If Rousseau was not the inventor of the Noble Savage, who was? One who turns for help to Fairchild’s 1928 study, a compendium of citations from romantic writings on the “savage,” may be surprised to find *The Noble Savage* almost completely lacking in references to its nominal subject. That is, although Fairchild assembles hundreds of quotations from ethnographers, philosophers, novelists, poets, and playwrights from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, showing a rich variety of ways in which writers romanticized and idealized those whom Europeans of the period considered “savages,” almost none of them explicitly refer to something called the “Noble Savage.” Although the words, always duly capitalized, appear on nearly every page, and often several times per page, it turns out that in

every instance, with four possible exceptions, they are Fairchild's words and not those of the authors cited. The myth of the Noble Savage suddenly seems very nebulous, and problematic in quite a different way than we might have expected.

But before concluding that the Noble Savage was a figment of the imagination or some kind of conceptual hoax, we should examine the apparent exceptions. Three of these date from after Rousseau's death. In Henry Mackenzie's novel *Man of the World* (1787), when a European captive who has lived several years with American Indians decides to return to civilization, his "imagination drew, on this side, fraud, hypocrisy and sordid baseness, while on that seemed to preside honesty, truth and savage nobleness of soul" (cited in Fairchild 1928: 92). While not an exact match, the wording is acceptably close, and the comparison of "savage nobleness" with civilized corruption seems to fit the myth as most have understood it. The comparison is, however, specifically identified as a construction of the imagination rather than as reality, and the context is not that of an idealization of the savage. For, as Fairchild (1928: 90–92) points out, Mackenzie places a noticeable emphasis on savage violence and cruelty, which seems incompatible with the Noble Savage myth. Furthermore, the passage leaves some doubt as to whether the construction "savage nobleness" implies equivalence or qualification: that is, might "savage" nobleness contrast with some other variety, such as "true nobleness"?

The other two cases are even more doubtful. In one, the wife of the poet Shelley describes the plot of one of his unfinished works written in 1822: "An Enchantress, living in one of the islands of the Indian Archipelago, saves the life of a Pirate, a man of savage but noble nature" (Fairchild 1928: 309). Here, despite the verbal similarity, the point is one of reference to qualities of an individual's nature rather than to man in a state of nature; and the "but" suggests an exceptional case that violates the normal opposition between "savage" and "noble" natures. The difference in implication of the application of the term "savage" to the pirate and to peoples living in a "state of nature" should be obvious enough to need no comment.

In the third case, Sir Walter Scott says in 1818 in *The Heart of Midlothian*: "One . . . stood upright before them, a lathy young savage. . . . Yet the eyes of the lad were keen and sparkling; his gesture free and noble, like that of all savages" (cited in Fairchild 1928: 317). Here again, despite the verbal resemblance, the nobility is of a different kind, a nobility of gesture; and the "savage" in question is actually a Scottish Highlander! Although Fairchild rightly points out, here and elsewhere, that attributions of savage wildness and natural goodness were often transposed from more exotic

locales onto various groups of Europeans,¹ he also points out that Scott showed a rather obvious disinterest in the purported nobility of more ethnographically remote peoples.

Given the problematic nature of these three cases, we seem drawn more strongly toward an impression that there is little support in the literature for the idea that there was widespread belief, or even any belief at all, in the existence of something actually called "the Noble Savage." But is this really important? Why, after all, should we problematize the words "Noble Savage" rather than their conceptual content or objective field of reference? Isn't this mere empty formalism? After all, isn't there overwhelming evidence that "savages" were heavily laden by European writers with the baggage of romantic naturalism, which is the point of the critique, rather than the label attached to it?

But the fact is that both the label and the contents are problematic. In Fairchild's survey of "exotic" and "romantic naturalist" literature, for example, one finds the label "Noble Savage" affixed to literary representations ranging from the most absurd parroting of Parisian salon discourse by Huron warriors to African slaves lamenting their lost freedom. Are these really equivalent cases of "romantic naturalism," equally deserving of the critical scorn and derision implied by labeling them both "Noble Savage"?

In some of the cases Fairchild cites, "primitive" and "natural" ways of life seem so idealized and exalted that few readers could avoid wondering whether such paradises could ever exist on earth, or, if they did once, that anyone could ever exchange them for "civilization." And in some cases, "civilization" takes on such a quasi-hellish character that one wonders how it could ever have developed at all, or prevented its victims from mass desertion to happier states of existence. But in other cases, even the slightest criticism of European cruelty or corruption, or the least hint that non-European peoples might have any good qualities whatsoever, seems to qualify as "romantic naturalism," to be labeled as yet a further instance of belief in the "Noble Savage."

One can, of course, argue for the real merits of connecting such cases and maintain that any belief at all in things such as freedom or goodness is in reality nothing but romantic fantasy. But all such arguments, like the arguments against them, are necessarily problematic and require deliberate and careful construction. How much easier, instead, to have a ready-made polemic label such as "the Noble Savage" that assumes the validity of the connection even as it heaps scorn on any imaginable opposition, and saves the work of constructing an argument by assuming what it purports

to critique? It seems that, given the problematic nature of its field of reference, we have no other choice but to also seriously consider the problematic nature of "the Noble Savage" as a discursive construct. Neither its content nor its verbal form should be accepted at face value, without further question.

But as soon as we begin to consider the Noble Savage concept as a discursive construct rather than as a substantive given element of objective or commonsense reality, we begin to further problematize it. The term is rather obviously a forced union of questionable assumptions. That men could ever be either savage, that is, wild, or noble, that is, exalted above all others either by an environmentally imposed morality or by their station of birth, is equally questionable; that the two could be causally related is absurd. The absurdity precludes serious belief in the concept, exactly the point of their juxtaposition. The Noble Savage clearly belongs to the rhetoric of polemic criticism rather than of ethnographic analysis, or even of serious credal affirmation.

As a discursive artifact, the term is further problematic in that it would appear to belong almost exclusively to Anglophone culture, to the English language and its writers in Britain and North America. The expression is simply not widely used in other languages: compare, for example, Todorov's (1993: 270) section called "The Noble Savage" in English translation, with "le Bon Sauvage," literally "the good savage," in the French original (Todorov 1989). A more striking comparison arises in juxtaposing the French, Spanish, German, and English abstracts of Georges Guille-Escuret's "Cannibales isolés et monarques sans histoire" (1992: 327, 345): the English "noble savage" contrasts noticeably with *bon sauvage*, *buen salvaje*, and *gute Wilde*, all sharing attributions of goodness and wildness but lacking the highly charged polarities of the English term. And one wonders why the editors found it necessary to mark only the English term by framing it in quotes. Could it be that communication with English readers on this subject requires a dramatically highlighted emotional intensity? If so, where did that intensity, or the need for it, come from?

One might protest that *le bon sauvage* and "the Noble Savage" simply mean the same thing, that they are dictionary equivalents, and that translation would never be possible if strict logical equivalence and formal congruity were always demanded (see Church 1950; Carnap 1955). In fact, the assertion of identity may be true of their extensive meaning, in the sense of reference to the "same" object; but intensively, they say something very different about it and so represent their objects very differently. The French *bon sauvage* and its cognates express a gentle irony; the English "Noble

Savage" drips with sarcasm, intensified by its obligatory framing in capitals and/or quotes. One usage embodies a critical stance that could, and sometimes does (see Atkinson 1924; Todorov 1989), include a dimension of critical appreciation; the other, a stance that is uncompromisingly hostile and polemic.

More specifically, nobility transcends mere goodness; it represents a more exalted state, and significantly, the exaltation implies an innate exaltation above other beings and their qualities. Nobility is a construction not only of a moral quality but also of a social class and social hierarchy. But is this not a contradictory association, given the supposed linkage of the term with eighteenth-century "romantic" advocates of egalitarian, democratic ideals? Perhaps the term represents a simple attempt to liberate by defeudalizing language, distinguishing "true" moral nobility from a class designation. Or perhaps the term's apparent link to orders of hierarchy and dominance is more than superficial. A look at its historical usage suggests this is in fact the case.

The single clear citation of the term "Noble Savage" in either Fairchild (1928) or McGregor (1988), which is also cited as the term's earliest occurrence by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, comes not from the romantic period or the eighteenth century but from John Dryden's seventeenth-century drama, *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*:

I am as free as Nature first made man,
'Ere the base Laws of Servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble Savage ran.
(Dryden 1672: 34)

Here, the freedom of the noble savage is not only associated with wildness and nature, and contrasted with a baseness that must be implicitly attributed to civilization, but the latter is associated with servitude linked to law. The combination is specific and complex enough to suggest an underlying argument or a conceptual foundation not clarified in the lines themselves. Dryden's words appear to be a poetic condensation of a preexisting construction that we must seek in earlier sources; a likely starting point would be the ethnographic sources on "savage" ways of life.