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# 1

## Feral Man

The myth of feral man is as old as myth itself. Cronus the Titan, having castrated his father Uranus and seized power over the gods, married his sister Rhea. Mother Earth and the dying Uranus prophesied that Cronus would be dethroned by one of his sons. He therefore swallowed the children which Rhea bore him every year – Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades and Poseidon. Rhea was determined to save a son and thus gave birth to Zeus in the middle of the night on remote Mount Lycaeum in Arcadia. She gave the newborn child to Mother Earth who entrusted it to the care of the goat nymph Amaltheia whose milk he drank alongside his foster-brother Pan. When Zeus became Lord of the Universe he paid homage to Amaltheia by setting her image among the stars as Capricorn.

Tyro, having been ravished by Poseidon who disguised himself as the river-god with whom she was infatuated, bore twins. Frightened of the reaction of her wicked stepmother Sidero she left the twins on a mountainside. They were discovered by a horse-herd who took them home with him. One twin – Pelias – was raised by a brood mare, the other – Neleus – by a fierce bitch. Tyro later married her uncle who then adopted the twins.

Feral man is as old as recorded history. He appears in the pages of Herodotus. Rome, we are told, was founded by the twins Romulus and Remus who were suckled by a she-wolf and, in a poetic symmetry, the last Roman surviving the pillaging Goths is said to have been saved by a kindly animal who offered him a nourishing teat.

There were many reports during the Middle Ages of abandoned children who spent years in isolation, or who were nourished by wild beasts, but it was not until the eighteenth century that scientists and philosophers, particularly in France, who were fascinated by the question of the nature of man began to examine seriously the case histories of

those who had been denied a normal childhood in human society. The philosopher Condillac and the naturalist Buffon were both fascinated by *enfants sauvages* which they imagined could tell us something of the true nature of mankind. Condillac was particularly intrigued by the bear-child of Lithuania, discovered in 1694, whose story provided evidence for his conceptual model of man as a statue endowed with senses by which he hoped to illuminate the origins of his sensorial nature. Christian Wolff also used the same example in his immensely tedious but influential efforts to explain the relationship between concepts and language.<sup>1</sup> In an earlier work the great legal theorist Baron Samuel von Pufendorf had argued that a child would have to fall to earth from the heavens for a true understanding of the fundamental nature of man.<sup>2</sup> Pufendorf's disciple Heinrich Conrad Koenig argued that the feral men such as Peter of Hamelin and Anna Gennärt were concrete examples of the *Fictio Pufendorfiana*.<sup>3</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that August Rauber in his work on feral man of 1885 should remark that had not such children existed they would have had to have been invented.<sup>4</sup>

Rousseau in his 'Essay on the Origin of Inequality' of 1754 describes five such cases. The earliest was that of the wolf-child of Hessen, a boy of about 7 who was discovered in 1344. The bear-child of Lithuania was found in 1661 at the age of about 12, and the second Lithuanian bear-child of 1694 was about 10 years old. Two further wild children were found in the Pyrenees in 1719 and the famous Peter, the wild boy of Hanover, who provided entertainment for the court in London, was discovered in 1724. Rousseau reported that all these wild children walked on all fours and showed no signs of the ability to reason. Believing that the 'noble savage' was an intelligent biped he insisted that feral men owed their unfortunate characteristics to the imitation of the animals among which they had been obliged to live.

Persian myths tell of children fed by bears. Japanese sagas accord this Samaritan role to monkeys. The abandoned child, surviving in the wild, often tended by a wild animal, has been an enduring literary device. In our own day the stories of Mowgli and Tarzan still have their fascination.

This was but one phase in the long debate which dates back to Aristotle about whether the upright stance was an essential criterion of humanity. There is no valid reason to suppose that man was intended to walk on all fours. The head and the spine are designed for an upright stance. Mankind is not adorned with a tail. A woman's breasts are inappropriately placed for a four-legged creature. The legs are wrongly designed and are far too long for anything other than an upright stance. Although some observers claimed that all feral men walked on

all fours, the wild boy of Aveyron walked upright and did not have any callouses on his knees. But none of this answers the questions as to whether orang-outangs are human because they walk upright, or feral men beasts because they walk on all fours. Columbus' Caribs were not accepted as human beings until they were decreed so in a papal bull of 1537. Linné made a clear distinction between *homo sapiens* and *homo ferus*.

Four years after Rousseau's prize essay the great Swedish botanist, Carl Linné, published the tenth edition of his *Systema naturae*, in which he introduced seven further examples of feral man. Three more were added in the thirteenth edition of 1788. Johann Christian Daniel von Schreber's 'Mammals Drawn From Nature With Descriptions' of 1775 and Michael Wagner's 'Contributions to a Philosophical Anthropology and Related Sciences' mentioned some further cases.<sup>5</sup> Herder, who insisted that the ability to speak was an essential human characteristic, for without language there could be no thought, cited Schreber's examples of feral man in his 'Ideas on the Philosophy of Human History'. Claude Lévi-Strauss echoed Herder when he wrote, 'he who speaks of man speaks of language; he who speaks of language speaks of society'.<sup>6</sup> By the time Kaspar Hauser appeared in Nuremberg in 1828 there were 16 recorded cases of feral men in Europe, by far the most famous and best recorded being that of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest case is that of the wild boy of Hessen of 1344. The great Dutch anatomist Nicolas Tulp, whom Rembrandt used as a model for his *Anatomy Lesson*, was delighted to be able to examine the Irish sheep-child (*juvenis ovinus hibernus*) who was captured in 1672 and brought over to Holland. The calf-child of Bamberg (*juvenis bovinus bambergensis*), described by Linné, could fight large dogs with his bare teeth and it is reported that his intelligence showed some signs of improvement since he entered human society in 1680. The second bear-child of Lithuania, discovered in 1694, was able to learn to walk upright and to speak. The girl from Kranenburg in Holland (*puella transilana*), who was given the name Anna Maria Gennärt, was about 19 years old when she was captured in 1717. She was never able to speak, but learnt to spin wool, a trade which she practised until her death. It was said that a business man from Amsterdam had got a woman pregnant whereupon he had sent her away. The child died in early infancy. On his deathbed the businessman ask to see his child. Hoping that he would leave her some money his spurned mistress stole a 16-month-old baby and went to see her repentant lover. Having inherited some money the woman left the child in the woods where she lived for many years until she was captured by the local peasants. At that time she was about 18 years old.<sup>8</sup>

Peter, the wild boy of Hanover, is the subject of more detailed reports and is mentioned by both Rousseau and Linné. He had been abandoned by his father, but managed to find his way back home after one year in the wilds. He was savagely beaten by his stepmother who chased him away for good. Having managed to avoid numerous attempts to capture him he was finally seized at the age of about 13 in 1724. At first he was placed in the charge of the poorhouse in Hamlin. Then he lodged with a burgher in the vain hope that he would learn a useful trade. The religious leader Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf und Pottendorf asked whether he could have the boy so that he could make some experiments with him. He was told that the king had placed him in the care of a philosopher who wished to do some research in innate ideas.<sup>9</sup> He was thus taken to the court of George I in London. For some time he was in the care of Queen Anne's physician, the renowned wit Dr John Arbuthnot, whose friend Jonathan Swift wrote a satirical piece on

the wonderful Wild Man that was nursed in the woods of Germany by a wild beast, hunted and taken in toys; how he behaveth himself like a dumb creature, and is a Christian like one of us, being called Peter; how he was brought to court all in green, to the great astonishment of the quality and gentry.<sup>10</sup>

Swift wrote:

I am told, that the new sect of herb-eaters intend to follow him into the fields, or to beg him for a clerk in their kitchen; and that there are many of them now thinking of turning their children into woods to graze with cattle, in hopes to raise a healthy and moral race, refined from the corruptions of this luxurious world.

Peter lived in society for 18 years, but was never able to speak. He showed some appreciation of music and gradually got used to wearing normal clothes. The Scottish anthropologist Lord Monboddo was fascinated by this case and wondered whether Peter had any sense of 'the great Author' of the wonders of nature that so obviously fascinated him. He was told that he had no consciousness of the existence of God.<sup>11</sup> Peter provided clear evidence for Monboddo that the 'state of nature is not an imaginary state . . . but a real state, upon which we may safely found our philosophy of man'. Other observers were less enthusiastic and said that Peter, far from being an example of man in a state of nature, was simply an idiot.<sup>12</sup>

The wild girl of Sogny in the Champagne was captured in 1731 when she was about 10 years old.<sup>13</sup> She lived on a diet of small birds, frogs and fish and particularly relished rabbit's blood. She claimed to have lived with another human whom she had killed by accident. She was looked after by nuns in Châlons-sur-Marne who taught her to speak. She was taken to live with a religious order in Paris where she was visited by the Duke of Orleans. Her ambition was to become a nun, but ill-health prevented her from taking the veil.

In 1756 Dr Milsintown found a wild child of about 12 on the Scottish island of Barra and undertook the awesome task of making him into a human being and a Christian. The good doctor had little success with either endeavour. The sickly child who had a cleft palate, upon which Milsintown performed a singularly clumsy and painful operation, soon died. Shortly before his death he was baptized and given the name Edward.<sup>14</sup>

Jean of Liège, who was estimated to be 21 years old when he was captured, was a strict vegetarian. It was assumed that he had spent about 16 years in the wild and, like Peter, he was never able to speak. In 1767 two further wild children were discovered in Hungary. Tomko managed to learn Slovak and to understand some German. His health was poor and he appeared to have no sexual drive. The Bear-Child, discovered in the same year, was kept in a hospital in Karpfen.

The most famous of all the wild children, and the one about whom the most has been written, is Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron.<sup>15</sup> He was first spotted in 1797 playing stark naked in a wood in the Tarn. He was captured, but escaped after 15 months. He was caught once again by some hunters in the summer of 1798 and was placed in the care of a widow. Again he escaped and spent part of the winter in the woods. On 19 nivôse of the year VIII (9 January 1800) he was spotted in the garden of a dyer by the name of Vidal who lived at Saint-Sernin-sur-Rance in Aveyron. The following day he was brought to an asylum in Saint-Affrique and on 4 February he was taken to Rodez. Here the naturalist Abbé Bonnaterre made a preliminary examination of the boy.<sup>16</sup> Bonnaterre had worked in Paris on the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, was pursued by the Committee of Public Safety, and forced into hiding. On the creation of the central schools he was appointed professor in Rodez in 1796.

Bonnaterre was particularly interested in the phenomenon of wild children and had studied the scanty literature on the subject. Like most contemporary philosophers he believed that society was ontogenetic and that 'the greatest source of ideas among men is their human interactions'.<sup>17</sup> He made a meticulous preliminary study of the child. News

of the discovery excited the scientific world and Victor was taken to Paris to be examined by the most illustrious psychologist of the time, Philippe Pinel, the head of the Bicêtre. Pinel, who is often regarded as the father of psychiatry since he was the first person to write a textbook on the subject, introduced a number of reforms in the asylum, put a stop to the more brutal practices of the time, and insisted on a more humane treatment of the mentally ill. He classified mental illness in four categories: mania, melancholia, dementia and idiocy. In his classic text on mental illness he classified idiots as 'destitute of speech and confined to the utterance of some inarticulate sounds. Their looks are without animation, their senses stupefied, and their movements heavy and mechanical.'<sup>18</sup> Pinel decided that Victor was an idiot because he showed characteristics identical to those of his idiot patients in the Bicêtre.

Many philosophers have argued that speech is essential for humanity. Julien Offray de La Mettrie as a thorough-going materialist, once reviled as an atheist and now regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern psychology, rejected Descartes' notion of innate ideas. He insisted that ideas could not exist without speech, and since wild children had no speech they could not have any ideas, innate or otherwise. Thus a wild child could not of his own discover God, since Descartes' belief that all humans had an innate notion of God was a fallacy. For la Mettrie 'tous nos idées viennent des sens', an idea which he acknowledged as a 'belle conjecture' which came from Arnobius the Elder who, in the fourth century, had argued that if a child were raised in total isolation on a simple diet he would emerge after 20 or more years 'as baffled and mindless as an animal, a piece of wood or a stone'.<sup>19</sup> This was an idea which particularly appealed to Feuerbach when he first met Kaspar Hauser.

Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, the resident physician in the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in the rue Saint-Jacques, violently disagreed with his distinguished colleague at the Bicêtre. Itard was profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Locke and Condillac and believed that a human being was a social construct. He argued that Victor's idiocy, which he could hardly deny, was due not to any inherent genetic failure, but simply to the fact that he had been excluded from human society at a vital stage in his development. His idiocy was thus due not to nature, but to the lack of nurture.

In his first report of 1801 Itard said that the wild boy no longer wet his bed, could dress himself, and had learnt some elements of table manners; his sentiments and affections showed signs of growth, but he still had little intellectual curiosity. He painfully learnt to say all

the vowels, except the 'u', and three consonants. Thus he could say the word *lait*, but that was the extent of his verbal ability.

In the six intervening years before the next report Victor made some further progress. He showed signs of emotional development, his senses were more acute and he was able to perform simple tasks. Although he remained virtually mute he was able to read and write a number of words and thus indicate his wishes and concerns.

Victor was evicted from the Institute in 1811, was given a small state pension, and lived with a caretaker, Madame Guérin, in the Impasse des Feuillantines. He died in 1828, aged about 40, the year that Kaspar Hauser arrived in Nuremberg. He was almost forgotten and was no longer the talk of Paris as when he had dined with Madame Récamier, whom he delighted by stripping off his clothes and climbing a tree in the best *enfant sauvage* manner. He met the Marquis de Sade, and it was widely rumoured that he was none other than Louis XVII.

Itard died in 1837. He had a distinguished career, acknowledged by the medal of the Legion of Honour and his election to the Academy of Medicine, but he never bothered to visit Victor after he left the Institute.

Itard's eulogist, Dr Bosquet, remained convinced that Victor was a cretin and that Itard's failure to make significant progress with him was due to this simple fact.<sup>20</sup> Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol, whose father had worked with Itard many years before, was convinced that Victor was an idiot who had been abandoned by his parents.<sup>21</sup> Pinel agreed. Itard thought the exact opposite: Victor was an idiot because he had been abandoned in the woods. Other experts who shared Pinel's opinion felt that although Itard was a psychiatrist and educator of genius his efforts were largely wasted on the wild boy of Aveyron. Itard suffered greatly from such criticism and continued to insist that there was nothing congenitally wrong with Victor and that his idiocy was due to his years of isolation. He argued that Victor had made enormous progress under his supervision and that this poor savage should not be compared with children who had enjoyed a normal upbringing in 'the most civilised country in Europe'.

The most spectacular modern case of feral children was that of Amala and Kamala who were discovered near Midnapur, some 120 miles west of Calcutta, in October 1920, by the Reverend J. A. L. Singh.<sup>22</sup> The two girls, aged about 18 months and 8 years had been nurtured by a she-wolf. They were taken by Singh to an orphanage in the vain hope that they might be saved for 'humanity and Christianity'. The younger child died a year later, the older lived for a further eight years. Singh's diary of the case was published in the United States in 1942 in a book

co-authored by R. M. Zingg, Professor of Psychology at the university of Denver and an expert on feral children.<sup>23</sup>

Even though Singh's account had been authenticated by Arnold Gesell, a professor of paediatrics at Yale, it was not long before its veracity was under fierce attack. The English-born American anthropologist Ashley Montagu, the most outspoken opponent of the view that cultural phenomena are genetically determined, announced that however attractive such stories of children reared by wolves might be they could not be accepted by any serious scientist.<sup>24</sup> An American sociologist who cooperated with Gandhi's one-time secretary Nirmal K. Bose cast further doubt on Singh's account of the case. They were unable to find Godamuri, the village near which he had claimed to have found the children. Nor could they find anyone who could corroborate his tale. They concluded that Singh had made up the story as a publicity stunt, possibly in the hope of making some money.<sup>25</sup>

Singh found a supporter in the little-known British novelist Charles Maclean who travelled to India in 1977. He claimed that Godamuri had been renamed Ghorabanda and that the older villagers in the region vividly remembered the capture of the wolf children. Too much credence should not be given to this account, for there are countless stories of feral children in India, dating from 1858 when William Henry Sleeman reported the appearance of such children in Husanpur, Sultanpur, Chupra, Lucknow and Banikpur.<sup>26</sup> Rudyard Kipling's father collected stories of feral children and doubtless inspired his son to write the story of Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* and *The Second Jungle Book*.<sup>27</sup> A number of cases of feral children in India was reported in the twentieth century, the last being Ramu who was found near New Delhi in 1954.

Many of the things about feral man that fascinated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectuals are no longer of pressing interest. We are hardly concerned about the precise nature of our distinct species of *homo sapiens*, the broader questions having been answered by Darwin. Our attention is directed to the even more sensitive questions of the differences between the races and between males and females. Similarly the issue of innate ideas is hardly central to the philosophical debate, although Noam Chomsky's postulate of an innate grammar has done something to revive the question. Figures such as Kaspar Hauser continue to fascinate hermeneutists and linguists. A speechless foundling in possession of an authorless letter is a challenge to both disciplines.

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher clearly enunciated the hermeneutic programme when he said that it was his aim 'to understand speech as well and even better than the speaker'.<sup>28</sup> From this starting point it is

argued that the truth about Kaspar Hauser is to be found in the text and not in what lies behind it, since speech does not have the ability to represent. From the moment of his arrival in Nuremberg Kaspar Hauser became the point at which various discourses crossed.<sup>29</sup> From this point of view there is little more to him than a discursive meeting place. For most people he remains a mystery, a symbol of a world that cannot be understood. To the hermeneutist, however, he is an allegory for the relationship between speech and the world. Kaspar Hauser shows that language does not depict the world and his linguistic efforts are seen as an exemplification of a romantic longing for a state in which there is no distinction between being and meaning. It is a melancholy longing for it can never be achieved.<sup>30</sup>

Psychoanalysts are also intrigued by the story of Kaspar Hauser. Freud's famous study of paranoia published in 1911 was based on Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of a Neuropath*, in which he used the phrase 'soul murder', a notion which he had picked up from Feuerbach's book on Kaspar Hauser. 'Soul murder', which Feuerbach defined as 'the criminal invasion of man's most sacred and unique property – the freedom and destiny of his soul', became part of Freud's vocabulary and was used by Jung, Abraham and Ferenczi.<sup>31</sup> Schreber was a distinguished jurist, the presiding judge in a division of the appeal court in Saxony, who suffered from dreadful paranoid delusions and wrote a harrowing account of the torments they caused.<sup>32</sup>

In 1909 Freud published an essay in which he pointed out that it was a typical childhood fantasy to believe that one was a bastard or a changeling, and that one was not the child of one's official parents. Naturally one assumes oneself to be of more distinguished birth than one is in fact, usually imagining oneself to be the offspring of a landowning aristocrat.<sup>33</sup> In the first (non-sexual) phase of this questioning of parental authority the child fantasizes that he is a foundling. In the second (sexual) phase only the role of the father is placed in question, and the child believes himself to be a bastard child of some distinguished person. In the inflated language of psychoanalysis this rests on an infantile conflict between a narcissistic inflation of the ego and a grossly exaggerated father image. Such fantasies feed on the fact that *pater semper incertus est* whereas the mother is *certissima*.<sup>34</sup> Freudians thus believe that this widespread fantasy lies at the root of the fascination of the story of Kaspar Hauser as a child whose origins were wrapped in mystery. It is also used to explain Kaspar Hauser's often arrogant behaviour and his brief but intense relationship with Lord Stanhope.

Alexander Mitscherlich even goes so far as to suggest that a Kaspar Hauser complex, rather than an Oedipus complex, should be seen as the fundamental causes of neuroses in today's world which he described as a 'fatherless society'.<sup>35</sup> Children grow up denied the affection and comfort provided by their parents and fellow man. They are alone, virtually without a culture, developing within an asocial environment. The individual is merely a creature driven by the compulsions of the moment. From birth he suffers from impoverished relations with his cultural environment. The modern masses are thus open to seduction, anger, disloyalty and fear. The Oedipus complex, according to Freud, works itself out in normal relations between individuals, does not necessarily hinder a person's healthy development, and is an essential component of our civilization. The Kaspar Hauser complex, based on a lack of love and affection, is a far more serious matter, for it cannot be overcome.

A more contemporary case provides evidence for Mitscherlich's theory. In 1970 a girl came to the attention of the Los Angeles County welfare office. She came with her aged grandmother and her virtually blind mother who was searching for the services for the blind, having left her brutal husband. The worker on duty was shocked by the little girl's appearance. She was barely able to walk, and seemed to want to correct her bent-over stance by holding her hands out in front of her as if grasping an imaginary railing for support. The eligibility worker assumed that the child was autistic and estimated that she was about six years old. Her supervisor did not agree with this diagnosis, but could not fail to notice that something was seriously amiss. It was soon revealed that the child was a teenager, although she only weighed 49 pounds and was a mere 44 inches tall. She understood a few simple words, but was only able to say 'stop it' and 'no more' plus a couple of other negatives. She was incontinent, could not focus her eyes beyond 12 feet, was unable to chew food, had difficulty in swallowing, and had no perception of heat and cold.

Further investigation revealed that she had been imprisoned from the age of two in a room measuring 10 by 14 feet, and had been tied down naked to a potty seat for hours at a time. She was beaten if she made the slightest noise. Like Kaspar Hauser, whose fate was similar, she was much liked by those who took care of her. She was sweetly innocent and responded to the care and affection that was lavished on her. The hospital workers named her 'Genie'.<sup>36</sup>

This sensational story was reported in the local press, but was somewhat overshadowed by the Charles Manson trial, the bombing of Hanoi,

and the controversial policies of Governor Ronald Reagan. The parents' arrest and the father's suicide were reported on national news and Genie became something of a celebrity. Her arrival at Los Angeles' exclusive Children's Hospital happened at a time when linguistics and the question of language acquisition was the subject of intense academic debate. Noam Chomsky's ideas about an inborn generative grammar were at the height of fashion. B. F. Skinner's theory that 'verbal behaviour' was entirely learned had many supporters, and Eric H. Lenneberg's theory of brain growth, which postulated that it was virtually impossible to acquire a first language after the age of 12 or 13, were hotly debated.

The debate over the acquisition of language is long-standing and fraught with difficulties. Is it a purely biological function like sight or hearing as Epicurus argued, or is it a gift of God as Leibnitz insisted – although he made an exception for Chinese, a language which God in his infinite goodness could not possibly have imagined, and which was thus clearly the invention of some ingenious Asiatics.

Herodotus tells us that in the late seventh century BC the Egyptian King Psamtik I of Egypt, a ruler with burning imperial ambitions, sought to discover the universal language which would hold his kingdom together. He ordered two infants to be taken from their mothers to be raised in an isolated shepherd's hut. The shepherd was told not to speak to the children and to note their first words. Two years later one of them uttered a sound that resembled the word *bekos*, the word for bread in the Phrygian language. Whereupon the king announced that Phrygian was the original language on which all others were based.<sup>37</sup>

King Psamtik has been accused of a pitiful lack of methodological rigour and historians, although prepared to accept that the flute and the Dionysian orgy may well have originated in Phrygia, are dubious that the language, of which precious few traces remain, was the first that crossed human lips. Father Salimbene of Parma tells us that Frederick II of Hohenstaufen conducted a similar experiment to discover mankind's original language. He was a truly remarkable ruler who had absorbed the cultures of Europe and the Orient, a patron of the arts and sciences, the author of a treatise *De arte venandi cum avibus* (The Art of Hunting with Birds) which was the definitive work on ornithology for several centuries. His tolerance towards Moslems was such that many Christians feared that he might convert to Islam. Others thought he was an atheist who believed in nothing at all. But he was brutally harsh in the pursuit of heretics and discriminated against the Jews, forcing them to wear special clothing. He was a man of immense culture and learning, but was also a suspicious and mean-spirited despot. The *stupor mundi* ordered

a number of children to be brought up in silent isolation. Alas, these harsh experiments brought no results. The good priest reports that these efforts were in vain. All the children died.<sup>38</sup> In 1807 G. F. A. Wendeborn complained that it was a 'misunderstanding of humaneness' not to conduct experiments on a dozen children of both sexes who would be raised in complete isolation so as to unlock the secrets of human nature.<sup>39</sup>

For many linguists Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, published in 1957, provided the answer to these perplexing problems that had troubled inquisitive minds for so many centuries. By concentrating on syntax rather than vocabulary, Chomsky sought to show that all languages are essentially identical. This similarity is based on an innate structure of which language is an expression. The fact that by the age of four a child can produce and understand a large number of sentences which are new to them is indication that they can rearrange familiar words in new ways according to rules of which they are not aware. Thus the structure and design of language is in the genes. A particular language is the result of the interaction between this 'universal grammar' and the specific linguistic data to which the individual is exposed. Chomsky claimed that prelinguistic children on a desert island would most likely invent their own language and that this language would obey the same syntactical rules. He thus came to much the same conclusion as Montaigne who claimed in 1580 that a child brought up in solitude would develop some kind of language. Subsequent thinkers worried about what kind of language that would be. Would it be the language of the soul, or the language of the intellect? Did thought generate language and language society, or could it be the other way round?

The environmentalists, recovering after Chomsky's shattering review of Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour* in the review *Language* in 1959, argued that there was no evidence for a language gene, that learning a language was a long and difficult process, and that the innatist argument was little more than a metaphor. As a prominent psycholinguist, George Miller remarked: 'The trouble with language acquisition is that the nativists have proved that it's a mystery and the environmentalists have proved that it's impossible.' It was the old debate between Condillac and Descartes. Victor appeared on the scene when Condillac's ideas were in vogue, Genie when Chomsky's transformational grammar was all the rage.

Genie was fascinating both to linguists and to psychologists interested in the effects of sensory and social deprivation. But there were serious problems. The whole case was compromised by what one consultant, Jay Shurley, described as the 'glitz factor'. Genie was a celebrity and there was fierce competition among the 20 psychologists and

neurologists concerned with the case as they sought the maximum of publicity and professional glory. There was also the problem that the team needed funding from the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) and thus the scientific value of the case was to some more important than the interests of the patient.

Seven months after Genie arrived at Children's Hospital she contracted rubella and was boarded with her teacher, Jean Butler, with whom she was particularly close. She was a single woman with private means, fiercely protective of her pupil, determined to keep the inquisitive scientists at bay. She applied to the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) to adopt the child. When they argued that Genie needed a step-father, Jean Butler asked her lover, a psychologist at the University of Southern California, to act in this capacity. He consented. Under Butler's care Genie improved greatly. Her bed-wetting was less frequent, she masturbated less often, her speech improved somewhat, and she appeared to be a happier and more contented child. Nevertheless the DPSS turned down the application for adoption and Genie was returned to the Rehabilitation Centre.

Genie was now placed in the care of David and Marilyn Rigler. David Rigler was the head of the Genie research project funded by NIMH, his wife Marilyn was a graduate student in human development. They lived with their three adolescent children, a golden retriever puppy and a cat in a comfortable home in an exclusive area of Los Angeles. They were handsomely rewarded by grant money for their efforts.

After a promising start Genie's language ability hardly improved, even though in other respects she was progressing remarkably well, and there was no evidence that she was mentally defective. The vast amount of data collected by researchers all over the country had produced precious little of value. NIMH was reluctant to renew the grant and the Rigers were under constant attack from Jean Butler who blamed Genie's lack of progress and even regression on their failure as guardians. She had now married her lover, lived in great style, and collected some six thousand pages of documents to bolster her case against the Rigers. In spite of all her efforts her attempt to become Genie's foster parent failed and Genie was returned to the Rehabilitation Centre. She then lived with the Rigers for four years in their home in an exclusive district of Los Angeles. She was then returned to her mother, who was unable to cope, and Genie passed from one foster home to another.

Jay Shurley, Professor of Psychology at the University of Oklahoma and a specialist on cases of extreme isolation, who worked with Genie, made some prescient comments on the case which are directly relevant

to Kaspar Hauser. He pointed out that she was suddenly removed from an unfriendly but consistent environment to one that was overpowering. She went from a famine to a feast, and was unable to adjust to a frantic new world. Furthermore she was used by the scientists who found her case fascinating but had little concern for her real needs. She was exploited in both her worlds just as Victor and Kaspar had been before her.

After some severe initial problems of adjustment Genie continued to make progress to the point that at a meeting of the American Psychological Association in Honolulu in September 1972 Victoria Fromkin, a distinguished linguist and member of the Genie team, reported to her colleagues that Genie's linguistic ability disproved Eric Lenneberg's then fashionable theory that language acquisition was virtually impossible after the age of five. Lenneberg and Chomsky had both been invited to join the Genie team, but had refused on the grounds that she was too emotionally disturbed for there to be any valuable scientific results in the field of language acquisition – a view which Professor Fromkin rejected out of hand. It soon became apparent that Professor Fromkin had been too optimistic in her assessment as Genie's linguistic abilities improved only minimally.

Genie's inability to master syntax seemed to support Lenneberg's theories, but were a problem for the Chomskians. If part of language was innate why was it that it was precisely this part which Genie lacked? Experiments on the receptivity of her left and right brain suggested an answer. Genie's brain processed language in the right hemisphere rather than the left. Susan Curtiss suggested that Genie's left hemisphere had not been stimulated in early childhood so that she perceived language as an environmental sound and thus appropriately processed it across the aisle.<sup>40</sup> Research on deaf children suggests that this is indeed the case. If they are not exposed to sign language at an early age they do not process language in the left hemisphere.

The facts of Genie's tragic life are fully known, but most wild children became the subject of much speculation. Why had they been left alone to fend for themselves? Who were their parents? Were they insane, or were they merely lacking in education? None of the wild children was the object of more speculation than Kaspar Hauser. In large part this was because he, like Genie, was not a truly wild child. Unlike any of the others he learnt to speak, to read and to write. Although retarded in his development, he would have been able to hold down a modest job. He shared with all the wild children an air of mystery – indeed the words 'mystery' and 'puzzle' are the characteristic words in many of the hundreds of pamphlets, articles and books written during his lifetime

and subsequent to his death. The mystery surrounding him could lead some imaginative spirits to believe that he was symbolic of certain aspects of human existence, or even that he had some divine mission. Those of a less mystical cast of mind were convinced that he was of noble, or even royal blood, and eagerly espoused the notion that he was the heir to the Grand Duchy of Baden – a belief that greatly appealed to the radical critics of the corruption of the petty German states. Many would have none of this and proclaimed him to be a swindler enjoying a comfortable life at the taxpayers' expense and wallowing in the admiring curiosity of the highly born, the rich and the fashionable. Satirical journals frequently stooped to dubious levels in poking fun at the case. *Der Komet* recommended a number of books on the subject. Among them were: *Caspar Hauser, The Unnatural Fruit Of Intercourse Between A Negress And A Baboon, Explained, Described And Edited With The Permission Of The Father By The Originator Of This Popular Prank – Sir Jocko The Long-Nosed Ape and A Medical-Fantastical-Political-Diplomatic-Cannibalistic-Bestial Experiment – Caspar Hauser Shown In The Magic Lantern of Public Opinion to Be An Impostor . . . By An Anonymous Author Who Is Well-known*.<sup>41</sup>

The Kaspar Hauser of these pamphlets was certainly no 'noble savage', a child of nature whose innocence illuminated the falsity and depravity of contemporary civilization. By the time he appeared in Nuremberg the romantic cult of the savage, the child and the peasant was no longer fashionable.<sup>42</sup> Yet although actual savages, children and peasants were hardly objects of uncritical wonderment, as abstractions they provided rewarding objects for philosophical and ethnological investigation. This philosophical and ethnological approach was then applied to contemporary society as a critique of existing conditions, particularly of power relationships. It was a process that began with the French philosophes, was taken up by German philosophers such as Herder, and then pursued by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his attempt to find a universally valid methodology for the examination of cultures, and by Michel Foucault as an 'ethnology' of contemporary society.<sup>43</sup>

The myth of the 'noble savage' dates back to Christopher Columbus whose enthusiasm for the virtues of the Arawaks knew no bounds.<sup>44</sup> But Columbus also provided in his description of the Caribs the archetype of the evil savage. This distinction between the noble and the evil savage is nowhere more striking than in the works of Bartolomé de las Casas and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés.<sup>45</sup> Oviedo went to San Domingo in 1514 as inspector of mines and wrote his history of the Indies on his return to Spain. He described the natives as cannibals,

sodomites, idolaters and pitiless beasts with insatiable sexual appetites. They could only be saved by the firm hand of Christian conquerors.

Las Casas' *History of the Indies* was a direct attack on Oviedo with whom he had clashed over the question of Indian rights. Whereas Oviedo insisted that such beasts could have no rights Las Casas argued that the Spanish behaved like ravenous beasts of prey who fed upon the Indians. He saw the Indians as a meek, patient, peaceful and virtuous people who were ruthlessly exploited by the conquistadors.

Both the noble and the evil savage are projective fictions. The nobility of Las Casas' savages is contrasted with the brutality of the Spanish. The idealized savage is representative of a condemnation of the barbarity of the civilized world. But he is also the ideal subject. He is submissive, but at the same time retains his sensuality and unrepressed sexuality. He is emotionally free, but knows his place in society. Las Casas was the first person to represent another culture as a means of criticizing European civilization. His Indians were to him what the Nambikwara were to be for Lévi-Strauss – their virtues and skills exposed the vices and vanity of European civilization. By the same token Oviedo's evil savage justifies colonial repression and exploitation, but there is a hint of envy of his aggressiveness and unrestrained libido.

Amerigo Vespucci was clearly titillated by the libidinal generosity of the Indians and somewhat coyly reported that their women treated the penises of their lovers with a balm which swelled the organ so as better to satisfy them. He was horrified at the tales of their cannibalism and claimed to have seen salted human hams hanging in their huts, but he felt that theirs was a prelapsarian society in which mankind lived in harmony with nature, naked, propertyless, uninhibited and with no gods to fear.<sup>46</sup> To live 'sans roi, sans loi, sans foi' was for some commentators a vision of horror, for others pure utopia.

The Franciscan monk Bernardino de Sahagún studied the Nahautl language, wrote a history of the conquest of Mexico from the native point of view, and is often considered to be the first ethnologist.<sup>47</sup> He first wrote his history in Nahautl so that the Indians could speak for themselves. Later he translated the book into his native Spanish. His viewpoint was far removed from that of the cultural relativist, for his concern was to understand the Indians' culture in order better to cure it of its ills and introduce these misguided people to the mysteries of the Christian faith. Sahagún respected The Other, was non-judgmental in his descriptions of Aztec religious practices, insisted that like any other culture the Nahautl had its strengths and its weaknesses, but was never in any doubt that Christianity was the only true religion and that

European culture was superior to that of the Indians. However harsh his judgment of the Spaniards' behaviour in the New World he insisted on the fundamental superiority of Spanish culture. Spain might be a society given to indiscriminate slaughter, but it was still a bearer of Christian truths. Sahagún had a profound respect for the otherness of the Nahautl, but found it difficult to square with his belief in the universal equality of mankind. The savage endowed with considerable nobility confronted the murderous conqueror from a Christian culture. This clash of civilizations could only be overcome by the triumph of the Cross. Sahagún, like Las Casas, had made a bold step away from ethnocentrism, delivered a blistering attack on the shortcomings of his own society, but remained convinced that Christianity and European civilization offered the only true hope for universal salvation.

It was Montaigne who first made the noble savage into a philosophical concept. Las Casas and Sahagún condemned the Spaniards for their barbarous behaviour towards a people which had many virtues; Montaigne claimed that the barbarity of the civilized world resulted from its separation from nature. Civilization was itself barbarous: the Spaniards were thus no special case. The Indian, living close to nature sets an example of utopian communal living. Such was his enthusiasm for the three Brazilian Indians with whom he conversed, and for the reports of various travellers, that he threw his scepticism overboard and announced that the New World had realized the utopian dreams of ancient philosophers. The Golden Age was no philosophical pipe dream, but a tangible reality. Montaigne's Indians, like those of Lévi-Strauss, lived in a way which European philosophers could only imagine.<sup>48</sup> Like any present-day cultural relativist he bemoaned the devastation of such societies by greedy, power-hungry Europeans who destroy such perfection all for the 'traffic of pearls and pepper'. The iron age destroyed the golden age.<sup>49</sup>

Montaigne's Indians lived in a classless society where there was no division between rich and poor. Without agriculture or industry there were no disparities of wealth. Without a written language there could be no Mandarin class. Without hierarchical kinship structures there was no familial ranking. Without trade or inheritance and lacking even the ability to count there were no classes. In this egalitarian society there was no place for lies, miserliness, envy, spite, or hatred. The country was so naturally abundant that there was no need for work and the people were seldom if ever sick. It was a society free of restraints and restrictions and thus their sexual life was uninhibited – in marked contrast to guilt-ridden Christian Europe with its taboos and restrictions.

Montaigne felt that their supposedly complete sexual freedom meant that there could be no jealousy, possessiveness or shame. Europeans like Montaigne saw in American Indians a picture of their former selves, and bemoaned the loss of their freedom and spontaneity.

Montaigne was a conservative sceptic who withdrew from public life in the Bordeaux parlement at the age of 38 and retired to his country estate where he wrote his *Essays*. His motto, *que sais-je?* is indicative of his scepticism and his open-minded and undogmatic mind. He returned to public life, serving as mayor of Bordeaux while the murderous religious war still raged. He was a leading figure of the *parti des politiques* which called for religious toleration, but as a conservative he opposed the Reformation, for it had called the old order into question and set off a chain of events which had led to the current disaster. His scepticism and his conservatism were in accord. Truth and falsehood were for him subjective judgments the outcome of which was likely to be disastrous. Thus it was best to stay with the familiar than risk the new. In contrast his scepticism made him an outspoken critic of existing society. Thus although he roundly condemned the cannibalism of his beloved Indians, he argued that European practices such as torture, sadistic executions and the burning of witches were far worse. He believed that by painting a grim picture of the barbarities of the cannibals attention was deliberately diverted away from the cruelty and viciousness of European society. In spite of his conservatism he also knew that custom and tradition could be forms of tyranny.

His projective fiction of the noble savage enabled him to live among the Tupinamba when he sat in the tower of his ancestral home and pondered the iniquities and injustices of his own times, a perfumed handkerchief to cool his brow. Here he distanced himself from the real world in melancholy isolation and found thereby the freedom for which he yearned. As a cultural pessimist he despaired of the written word, of which he was a past master, as only serving to stir up strife. Rome, he declared, was at it best when it was the least learned. Among contemporary societies the Turks were the highest in his estimation. They glorified the sword and despised the pen.<sup>50</sup>

The noble savage lived on in the imagination of philosophers and provided a convenient literary device with which to exorcize the abuses of contemporary society. Campanella's *Città del Sol*, Thomas More's *Utopia* and Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* formed the foundation of a literary genre that was to become increasingly popular. Montaigne's noble savage, whom Columbus would have counted among the evil savages, can be found in the description of the voyage made by the Dominican

Father Du Tetre to the West Indies in 1640, and in the writings of his fellow Dominican Labat who published a book on the Caribs in 1722. Du Tetre was to have a profound influence on Rousseau who did more than any other philosopher to popularize the notion of the noble savage.<sup>51</sup> Captain Cook, Johann Georg Forster and Louis Antoine de Bougainville brought back glowing reports of the Tahitians, conveniently overlooking the complexity of their social structure and the higher level of their civilization, and extolled the virtues of this primitive Pacific paradise. Their fictional ethnology provided a means of criticizing existing society and for the projection of dreams of personal freedom.

Baron Louis-Armand de Lahontan felt that the Hurons were the truly noble savages who lived according to their three commandments of brotherly love, virtue and tranquillity.<sup>52</sup> Lahontan had served with the French army in Canada – his first visit to New France was in 1683 – and convinced himself that the Hurons, unlike the French, lived in harmony with nature. He argued that only a bloody revolution, carried out by means of a military coup, and the abolition of private property could save France from greed, materialism, violence and selfishness.

Voltaire agreed with Lahontan that the civilized were the true barbarians, and his highly idealized noble savage – a Frenchman who had been brought up among the Hurons – commented on the evils of contemporary society from the peace and quiet of the prison library in the Bastille where he had been incarcerated thanks to the machinations of his putative father-in-law and a wicked Jesuit.<sup>53</sup> Voltaire's Huron, unlike Lahontan's, is no revolutionary. Like Montaigne in his tower, his meditations in the Bastille lead him to the conclusion that he should make his peace with the world around him, maintain an ironic and melancholy distance from it, and pursue a career. Voltaire's hero is thus not a true noble savage. In his ignorance he merely lacks the trappings of a civilization which, for all its shortcomings and evils, is susceptible to perfection.

Diderot confessed that he believed the state of nature to be a fiction but that only in Tahiti were people truly happy. In Europe only the Calabrians led a tolerable existence for they lived in a state of anarchy. His fictional character argued that anarchy caused less harm than civilized behaviour, for European civilization was based on domination and sexual repression. Calabrians sought to destroy the power structure and Tahitians lived in a free and open society with complete sexual freedom.<sup>54</sup>

Rousseau also saw the savage as a freedom fighter against the tyranny of Western civilization. His Caribs, like Montaigne's Tupinamba,

Diderot's Tahitians, or Lévi-Strauss's Nambikwara, heroically resisted attempts by colonialists to impose their way of life upon them, a way of life which they too condemned. He adopted the point of view of the Carib in order to write an ethnology of European society. He believed that despotism was inevitable and that it would in turn be overthrown. Despotism was based on power, and when that power dwindled it would finally collapse. The result would be a new state of nature with all against all. For Hobbes the state of nature was overcome by the formation of society. For Rousseau it was the consequence of social development. The *Second Discourse* makes it clear that he did not hanker after a long lost primitive state of nature when mankind was merely a 'stupid and limited animal', but looked forward to a state in which reason, an equitable distribution of property, morality and civil rights were guaranteed. Rousseau, like Montaigne before him, saw himself as a noble savage. It was not for nothing that he frequently quoted Horace: 'I am a barbarian because they do not understand me'.<sup>55</sup>

Along with the noble and ignoble savage there were the myths of the Wild Folk who roamed the woods and forests of Europe. To some they were dwellers of an Arcadia, delighting in the beauties of nature, leftovers from a golden age of which Gonzalo speaks in *The Tempest*:

All things in common nature should produce  
 Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,  
 Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,  
 Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,  
 Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,  
 To feed my innocent people.

(2.i.166–71)

Others feared the Wild Folk as dangerous heathens who would viciously attack unsuspecting travellers.

The noble savage was not merely a convenient myth whereby contemporary society could be called into question, it was also a fictional device whereby fundamental questions about human nature could be asked. Is there such a thing as 'human nature'? Is each individual a product of circumstances, a historical artifact? Behaviourists deny that mental ability is genetically determined. Marxists see society as ontogenetic. Psychoanalysts assert that even instinctual behaviour is the result of individual experience. Those who assert the importance of genetic factors are vulnerable to ferocious attack for asserting a point of

view which provides ammunition for racists, reactionaries and the enemies of the poor and underprivileged. Is the new-born child a *tabula rasa*, or does it possess certain innate ideas?

At the time that Kaspar Hauser appeared in Nuremberg people were still worried about the question of whether mankind is by nature good or evil. Nowadays it is generally felt that unacceptable behaviour is the product of an undesirable society or of faulty parenting, and those who think otherwise belong to an endangered minority. Concepts such as original sin seem to most people to be quaintly scholastic. Although Kaspar Hauser emerged into a largely secular world morality was still a serious issue. Was the foundling a sweet innocent, a holy fool, a Parsifal? Or was he by nature mendacious, spiteful and fraudulent? Were his shortcomings the result of a faulty socialization since his release from his prison cell, or were they due to an essentially evil character? Which was at fault – the individual or society?

Kaspar Hauser was not only the object of fierce debates, onto whom such notions were projected, he was also the pawn in a political game of republicans against legitimists, of radicals against conservatives. If that were not enough his case aroused the interest of all manner of faddists, charlatans, fortune hunters and sensation seekers. A simple-minded foundling thus became the point of intersection of so many strains of thought so that his own curious personality became hidden under layers of fictional projections. Each had their own Kaspar Hauser – prince, fraud, sweet innocent, pathological liar, tragic object of abuse, victim or culprit.

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