

CHANGING VIEWS OF OTHERS

Age of Enlightenment

Robinson Crusoe says:

What authority or call had I to pretend to be judge and executioner upon these men as criminals, whom Heaven had thought fit for so many ages to suffer unpunished to go on . . . It is certain these people do not commit this as a crime; it is not against their own consciences' reproof or their light reproaching them (Defoe 1961, 168).

Other as Primitive- Aboriginal-Ancestor

The other became primitive, aboriginal, and finally our 'ancestors'. Joseph Conrad writes: We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. . . . But suddenly as we struggled around a bend, there would be a glimpse of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands, clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying. . . . It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped . . . but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship (1950, 105)

But there remained in the minds of some a gnawing doubt. Is it possible that savages are nobler savages who are happier than we? Herman Melville describes the encounter of a French admiral and a native king:

The admiral came forward with uncovered head and extended one hand, while the old king saluted him by a stately flourish of his weapon. The next moment they stood side by side, these two extremes of the social scale--the polished splendid Frenchman, and the poor tattooed savage. . . . At what an immeasurable distance, thought I, are these two beings removed from each other! In the one is shown the result of long centuries of progressive refinement, which have gradually converted the mere creature into the semblance of all that is elevated and grand; while the other, after the lapse of the same period, has not advanced one step in the career of improvement. "Yet after all" quoth I to myself, "insensible as he is to a thousand wants, and removed from harassing cares, may not the savage be the happier man of the two? (1974, 33).