

Melville's Quest for Art in *Typee*

Harumi HIRANO

Abstract

The rudiments of the *Typee* plot are two escapes: the narrator's flight from a whaling ship, and his running away from the native valley where he has sojourned, to another whaling ship. What furnish the tension of the story are the contradictory images of the native people: the Typees as noble savages and the Typees as ignoble fearsome cannibals. Most modern *Typee* interpretations are still on the lines of D. H. Lawrence, who expounds that the book shows Melville's aspiration for a primitive Eden and his final repudiation of it, for, Lawrence says, he finds the return to the past impossible and unbearable. But Melville does not intend such either-or reading, and under the disguise of an autobiography or a travelogue *Typee* has a more carefully worked out fictional construct than has been thought. Melville's description of the conflicting images is from the early 19th century American popular philosophical ideas which he incorporates into his fictional creation in the book. The characterization of the narrator is based on the symbolical use of Christian mythology. The ambiguity of the objects and their complex interaction with characters are Melville's characteristics, which are also found in his later works as well. We can see the genesis of this art in his first novel.

The distinct difference of the modern reading of Herman Melville's *Typee* from the contemporary one is its additional interest in understanding the book as having a thematic construct, that is, *Typee* is a book of art rather than a real travelogue. The biggest problem then is the constant wavering of the narrator as to the images of the native people: Are they noble savages or ignoble cannibals? Why does the narrator run away from the valley he zealously admires?' These questions lead to another controversial issue: Is the narrator pro-primitivism or pro-civilization?

At the time of publication the issue was its authenticity. A few reviewers did not hide their doubt about the author's being a common sailor, and particularly the English publisher Murray could not eradicate his suspicion of the fictitiousness of the book for a long time. So that Melville's brother Gansevoort who was acting on behalf of Herman in London had to assure Murray that "the

adventurer and the author were one and the same.”²

We know, however, from this vantage point that the narrator, the adventurer, and Melville, the author, are not one and the same. The former stays in Typee valley for nearly four months and the latter’s sojourn is four weeks. Yet the narrator is a character through which Melville experiences a series of adventures and examines their meanings, putting them in a literary form. He is Melville’s alter ego. It is through this narrator that readers can see Melville’s artistic development in his first novel

When Melville was revived in the early twentieth century after some decades of neglect, *Typee* was cited as a reliable source of anthropological studies by E.C. Craighill Handy. He was a member of the Marquesas party of the Bayard Dominick Expedition made to Polynesia in 1920-1921.³ Around the same time of Handy’s expedition, critical essays by D. H. Lawrence were published. His essay on *Typee* interpreted the inconsistency in the narrative as Melville’s strong desire for seeking an ideal paradise, his discovery of it and then his disappointment in it followed by his desertion from the paradise.⁴ Lawrence served as a precursor for *Typee* interpretation in the modern criticism and many critical essays have been written in variations on this theme.⁵

The publication of these works at the earliest stage of Melville’s revival symbolizes the ways *Typee* is studied in the twentieth century. I agree with John Samson that criticism of *Typee* tends to be either scholarship or interpretation, lacking the integration of the two: in other words, the integration of history and fiction.⁶ This tendency, however, is not without reason. The book is the amalgam of history and imagination but it refuses to create a unified image of a people and does not allow the kind of coherent explanation that the modern literary criticism tends to give. We must look at this novel from a different direction: its purpose is not unity but dividing and differentiation. If we examine the narrator’s wavering as not a fault of an immature writer but as a vital constituent of thematic construct, and if we can prove Melville is not altogether lost or random in pursuing the plot, we can get closer to what Melville intends in this book.

The question of primitivism is the basic subject. Since all of the authorized editions bear “A Peep at Polynesian Life” as a part of their sub-titles, the book is about the life of primitive and pagan people observed by a hasty traveler from the viewpoint of the civilized world.⁷ Peculiarities are most important. The narrator mentions two books that he thinks are worthy of notice: David Porter’s *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* and Charles S. Stewart’s *Journal of a Residence in the Sandwich Islands*. It is evident from his reading that Melville was well aware of the popular philosophical ideas of early nineteenth century America on South Sea

Islanders.⁸ They fall into distinctly different viewpoints on primitive people. Porter holds the belief in the tradition of Captain Cook and other explorers that Polynesians are honest and noble savages. Stewart, who speaks for missionaries, considers the Polynesians are sinners who should be saved by the light of God.⁹

Primitivism as a philosophy of history and a theory of values is one of the oldest and most tenacious ideas of western thinking.¹⁰ This is the belief that the condition of man and of society at the earliest stage of history was the best. Nature had the highest energies and was capable of producing better things. Men were innocent and perfect in their morality. History since then is the succession of degeneration from this remotest ideal model. Although primitivism of necessity induces one to look back to the past with nostalgia and acknowledge the present degenerated and weakened mankind and society, it also urges one to look forward into the future as well. If man and society had once been perfect, we can recover the same ideal state by returning to this original way of life and society. Thus past ideal conditions can be turned into a future goal.

The kind of primitivism that reached a climax in the eighteenth century comes from a strong sense that there is something wrong with civilized life: too much complexity, rivalry, desire, more art and less nature. A primitive man, on the other hand, acts according to a natural law which is based upon benevolence and compassion. Rousseau glorified with eloquence the goodness and happiness of the original state of man and his simple life. If modern man has been so degenerated due to vile practices and customs that he is no longer able to find goodness in himself, then an ideal model of man and life can be found among the contemporary "savage" people: they are innocent, good and benevolent and their life is filled with affection toward each other. Captain James Cook's three voyages which were carried out in the latter half of the eighteenth century had great influence upon later accounts of voyages and helped form the stereotype of the Polynesians as noble savages and children of nature in the minds of the nineteenth century American reading public.¹¹

The protestant missionaries who went to the South Seas with evangelical zeal reported a different image of the Polynesian. They did not hide their New England background in their appraisal of the islanders. To them Polynesia was not Eden but a sinful wilderness, and the natives existed in a deplorable sunken state. A derogatory description of Hawaiians by Reverend Hiram Bingham, the leader of the American Board of Missionaries, is cited by Strauss as follows: "The heathen are reckless of life, extremely poor from mere degradation of intellect; stupid to all that is lovely, grand, and awful in the works of God; low, naked, filthy, vile, and sensual; covered with every abomination and stained with blood."¹² More than anything else the missionaries considered cannibalism as a prime example of cruelty and immorality. They believed that

Polynesians must be encouraged to be elevated to a high standard of living, and that depended upon their spiritual transformation by the power of God. Evangelizing the pagans meant almost the same as civilizing them.¹³

The Polynesians in the minds of early nineteenth century America are the composite of two visions: the noble savages who live in an idyllic Eden and “depraved and polluted cannibals.”¹⁴ These are the contexts available for Melville to put a singular culture he witnesses into a recognizable terms to the reading public, specifically to the “fire-side people” who are interested in something “strange and romantic.”¹⁵ Melville highlights both of these visions, employing Christian myths when necessary, although he is sharply critical of Christian civilization and the work of missionaries.

I hereby suggest Melville’s strategy for dealing with the framework of the novel. He writes in the preface that “the author lost all knowledge of the days of the week” (xiv), inviting his readers not to be meticulous about specifying dates of the events he is to narrate. But close reading reveals that he is meticulous in his sequencing of events, change of phases in the course of narrator’s adventure and his altering frames of mind.

There are three main events that comprise the beginning, middle and the last parts: the first is the narrator’s plan of flight from the whaling ship *Dolly* and its execution, the second is a day in the middle of his stay in *Typee* valley on which he has a pleasurable excursion on the pond with *Fayaway* and soon after he meets *Marnoo* and is reminded of his frightful apprehensions of his fate, and the third event is the narrator’s escape from the valley to another whaler, *Julia*. Between the first and second there are three phases through which the narrator proceeds in chronological order: his wandering in the mountains for six days, his first month in the valley in an unhappy mood, and another month in a happy mood. Between the second and the third events there are two phases: his happy sojourn again for another month and then another unhappy sojourn for a month and ten days. It is very obvious that the narrator’s four and a half month stay on the island is segmented and arranged almost symmetrically. I must add that the narrator fears the natives during the days of his unhappy sojourn, and considers them noble and idle savage when he is in a happy mood, which lasts for two months, interrupted only for a short time on a day in the middle of his stay.¹⁶

The whole adventure is a round-trip not only because the narrator comes back to the almost identical place where he left: the sea and a whaler. He also returns to what he was: one who is fearful of the cannibalistic *Typees*. In chapter 4, the word, “*Typee*”, is introduced for the first time and we know that it signifies “a lover of human flesh” (24) and that of all the cannibal tribes the *Typee* alone is particularly connected with some revolting stories of its practice. The narrator

shudders at the mere thought of going ashore at their bay. The last month of his stay sees the verification of the rumors among the sailors. Horrified that he might someday be a victim, he seeks escape from this deadly valley. He is, at the end, what he previously was without any sign of development. Yet a deep and lasting impression we are left with after the first reading is not the negation but the affirmation of the almost physical reality of a happy innocent primitive people in an Eden-like valley.

The opening chapter, although its style is conversational, laconic and light, is the elaborate outline of perspectives Melville plans to reach in the following chapters: the ironical criticism of Christian civilization and the longing for the idyllic Polynesian world. The narrator is certainly Melville's alter ego but we should not forget that he is only a part of the writer. Melville as an author illustrates a world for the narrator to go through the real nature of which he does not fully understand.

Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm-whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line, and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific—the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else! Weeks and weeks ago our fresh provisions were all exhausted. There is not a sweet potatoe left; not a single yam....

Oh! for a refreshing glimpse of one blade of grass—for a snuff at the fragrance of a handful of the loamy earth! Is there nothing fresh around us? Is there no green thing to be seen? Yes, the inside of our bulwarks is painted green; but what a vile and sickly hue it is, as if nothing bearing even the semblance of verdure could flourish this weary way from land. Even the bark that once clung to the wood we use for fuel has been gnawed off and devoured by the captain's pig; and so long ago, too, that the pig himself has in turn been devoured.(3)

Associated biblical episodes are conjured up in satirical and contradictory treatments. Noah's ark saves his family and the lives of every species of animal from the flood, while the members of this ship are exposed to the danger to their lives and its purpose is to catch and kill a particular type of animal. The sailors are deprived of all sorts of life-giving nature. The only green that comes in view is artificially painted green which looks abominable. Even an implicit cannibalism on the ship is jocularly related.

The narrator deplores the present situation rather light heartedly; but Melville presents the

dominating air of forlornness, want, desolation and loss of life in the society on board the ship. Here are a tyrannical captain and the sailors who are “a parcel of dastardly and mean-spirited wretches” (21). The captain is called “Lord of the plank” (21), and the contract the “Lord” closed with his men is no longer valid because it is He who fails to fulfill his share of the compact. All his men yearn to get to an island, and this is possible on the condition that the “Lord” devours the only living animal left, a cock that bears a biblical name Pedro, at a mock religious rite of the Last Supper.

Diametrically opposed and standing in sharp contrast to the ship which represents civilized society, the Marquesan island is meant as a place of abundance, verdure, and life, and also a place notorious for the practice of dreadful cannibalism—the devouring of human life. The sensational revitalizing experience the narrator has under the shade of “cocoa-nut trees” on his first landing makes him feel he is “floating in some new element” (28). The division of two worlds is furnished: one is the enlightened Christian world now in darkness, and the other is a dark savage world that seems to be bright and promising.

The much-discussed two images of Polynesians and the narrator’s wavering between them are introduced from the beginning, although they are not clear cut at first. When he is informed that the course of the ship is directed to the Marquesas, the image of the place springs up in his mind as follows.

"The Marquesas! What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up!
Naked houris cannibal banquets groves of cocoa-nut coal reefs tattooed chiefs
and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with bread-fruit-trees carved canoes
dancing on the flashing blue waters savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols
heathenish rites and human sacrifices.(5)

These are the initial ideas of the Marquesas embraced by the narrator. The mixed images of the islanders haunt him during the sea passage to the island, and in a way all the while he is on the island as well. But Melville carefully modulates the extent and depth of the images from vague and "jumbled anticipations"(5) at the outset, to more specific and material depictions with the development of the story. At this stage islanders and their culture are inseparably expressed in a cluster of words without any specific concomitant just as the narrator is no more than one of the unsatisfied sailors without an articulated name. We can, however, hear out of these jumbled anticipations a high note of longing for a strange, exotic, and romantic world.

The real adventures of the narrator start after his flight from the ship. According to Charles

Anderson, Typee valley is less than five miles from the bay of Nukuheva, which was then a last outpost of civilization, and it takes about four hours if one takes the same route the narrator and his associate Toby do.¹⁷ Melville extends the four hour walk to their six day wanderings, devoting four chapters to it, from six to nine. When he is on the Dolly, the narrator is an irresponsible meditator. His philosophy on primitive and civilized people which arises in his mind when he witnesses the ceremonial parley between a naked native king and a uniformed French admiral was not seriously mentioned. From the chapters set in the mountains, the relations of his thoughts and actions become strained.

After crossing a brook the narrator finds his flight altogether contrary to his expectations. His will and plan are no longer realized and only disappointments await him. Soon after their flight from the bay to a nearby mountain ridge through woods, the narrator and his associate Toby find their way blocked by tall yellow reeds. It seems they are confined in a prison with "so many rods of steel" (37). If the reference here is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the brook they cross at the entrance is nothing more than the Acheron.¹⁸ The narrator and Toby take the same path as Dante and Virgil do. In fact Toby roars this is "an infernal place" (47). Fruit is nowhere to be found. The narrator flees from the dearth of wholesome food at sea to the prospective abundance of nature's bounty but ironically he ends up in real starvation. He suffers not only hunger but also bad weather: it is either cloudy or rainy and nights are freezing cold. Darkness hangs over the mountains. The two runaways scale many ridges which lead nowhere. This is a sphere where the narrator can not control himself or rather he is controlled by some unknown force. They lose sense of direction and think they are "fairly snared" (38).

While the pilgrims in *Divine Comedy* travel the world of the after-life, Melville's characters travel the before-life. Six day wandering corresponds to the time of creation in Genesis. Melville's application of Christian mythology serves to suggest that the narrator and Toby are running away not only from civilization but also from their present historical time. The heart of the mountains severs them from their former selves as well. Melville takes every opportunity to invest the narrator and Toby with the attributes of snakes that are about to crawl into Eden. Getting through a prison-like thicket, they climb up the mountain gliding through the grass like "a couple of serpents" (39) so that they are not observed by anyone. They are somehow deprived of their human nature: the cold, dark and dismal first night makes the narrator feel he is "unmanned" (46). To cap the metamorphosis the narrator suffers a strange pain in his leg which he suspects he has been bitten by "some venomous reptile," although he adds that "all the islands of Polynesia enjoy the reputation...of being free from the presence of any vipers" (48). Right after, the narrator, in a feverish condition chances to push aside a branch and finds himself looking on a beautiful valley

which can be likened to “the garden of Paradise”(49).

The narrator and Toby are given peculiar personalities and roles. The former, a man of knowledge and full of curiosity and proposer of the flight, plans it in detail, speculates about matters, makes decisions, and first glimpses the Eden-like valley, while the latter plays the role of the “body” of the former’s “brain,” taking actions according to his instructions. In representing Toby, Melville deliberately uses similes of animal behavior. Toby clears a brook “like a young roe” (37), he jumps down a cliff “with the activity of a squirrel” (45), and he awakens in the morning “as blithe and joyous as a young bird” (55) while the narrator suffers under unbearable pain. The distinction of the two is strikingly symbolical when the narrator reluctantly agrees to descend to the valley they have espied. They are desperately desirous of getting food and shelter from the natives while fearful of being eaten by the same cannibal tribe. The narrator recognizes his impotence in this paradoxical condition and, filled with apprehension, can no longer give instructions, as though robbed of his cleverness. For the first time Toby takes the initiative not as a result of deliberate intention but out of animal instinct.

“What’s to be done?” inquired I, rather dolefully.

“Descend into the same valley we descried yesterday,” rejoined Toby, with rapidity and loudness of utterance that almost led me to suspect that he had been slyly devouring the broad-side of an ox in some of the adjoining thickets. (56)

The dilemma the narrator faces here is whether the natives are “Happas” or “Typees,” meaning friends or enemies. It is a peculiar tradition in western seafaring history to classify islanders by this simple dichotomy. Since the age of global circumnavigation, the navigators, just as the narrator, needed to know, at their first encounter with unfamiliar islanders, whether the natives were friends or adversaries. Long term cruises far away from home countries compelled them to deprive the natives of their fresh water, vegetables and meat during their journey. If the natives accommodated the invaders with their requirements they were praised and called “friends.” The navigators’ final goal of declaring the island their possession may also have been well under way. A group was classified as being “hostile” when westerners were not welcomed to an island and their visit incurred a violent confrontation. The book Melville calls “a small volume entitled ‘Circumnavigation of the Globe’ ” provides us with ample examples of this peculiarity in the tradition of sea voyages in the past.¹⁹ It is, therefore, a twist of irony that the narrator decides to descend into the notorious enemy of sailors for food and shelter.

The parts of the story dealing with the mountains bear a heavy load of symbolism. The two

runaways decide, on the sixth day, to descend into an Eden-like valley they had descried on the previous day. The two are God-like in the way they behold the village and think it is very good, but at the same time they are Milton's Satan-like characters in hell plotting the opportunity to invade a newly-created world. This is still a lifeless place soon after the Creation: dark clouds brood over the interior of the island and the sun appears not once to light on the gloominess. In truth the narrator says, "The whole landscape seemed one unbroken solitude, the interior of the island having apparently been untenanted since the morning of creation" (44). No wonder they cannot find any fruit trees to sustain them. The creation is not yet completed. They are some strange beings that pass through the world of darkness to the expected bright world of life. This is also a place for those who have lost Paradise: food is not provided here unless one toils for it. The strange pain the narrator suffers unmistakably suggests the mark imprinted on fallen men. Then they are Adam before the Fall and Adam after the Fall as well.²⁰ The narrator thinks of himself as a common runaway sailor, but he is no longer so through Melville's ironic and paradoxical attitude to Adam and Eden. He is some unidentified multiple being that enters a mythical world.

The issue of representing the first month of their stay in the valley is that the situation presented by the narrator is not altogether the same as that which he perceives to be. The narrator carries out the function of separating the overall situation in which he is put, from the conditions under which he believes he is in: the former reflects Melville's vision, though rather obscurely and indirectly, and the latter indicates the narrator's limited vision. Here contradictory images of Typees correspond to these plural views. For example, the narrator says that the exchange of names signifies "ratification of good will and amity" (72) and the behavior of the natives which he sees indicates nothing but the kindness that is true to the agreement. But the narrator remains distressed because he is deeply suspicious of them, saying "Might it not be that beneath these fair appearances the islanders covered some perfidious design, and that their friendly reception of us might only precede some horrible catastrophe?" (76) The strange leg ailment, the mark of fallen man, relates strongly to his mental distress. Whenever he has suspicions, fear and a desire to escape, the condition becomes aggravated.

Appearances indicate that the narrator and the Typees establish a surer footing as time passes. Their apparently intimate relationship is the process of his initiation into their society. Having passed through the deathly wandering in the mountains, he is reborn as a new baby named "Tommo." The Typees treat and care for him as a little child. He says, "Kory-Kory...as if I were an infant, insisted upon feeding me with his own hands" (88). The fact he gives them a false name may be a symbolic act of hiding his real self but the false name serves him as a mask to wear to

signify a different self who enters into a new world. He is carried to a stream and forced to take a bath in the mode of immersing his whole body enjoined by his Typee servant. The rite of baptism is thus taken place. Toby, in contrast, gives his real name and, receiving no special favors, soon disappears from the valley.

The phases of the narrator's second and third months in the valley must be what Melville is most desirous to create. We know through a series of symbolic actions that the narrator's rebirth is almost completed. But this accomplishment is still an external and visual phenomena. Melville depicts a world of people who are all good-will incarnate while the narrator fears it a deceptive expression. In order to become cognizant of the designated state of the people the narrator needs to undergo another process of metamorphosis. It is divesting himself of what the leg-ailment symbolizes: a suspicious mind, curiosity, reason, consciousness and intellectuality. These are characteristics of western minds unknown to the natives. The native physician cannot cure the pain because to the Typees it is caused by "some imaginary demon located in" (80) the calf. It is only through the healing that the narrator can ascend to the original state of man and the society, which is naturally a world beyond the boundary of time.

Gradually I lost all knowledge of the regular recurrence of the days of the week, and sunk insensibly into that kind of apathy which ensues after some violent outbreak of despair. My limb suddenly healed, the swelling went down, the pain subsided, and I had every reason to suppose I should soon completely recover from the affliction that had so long tormented me. (123)

The opening part of chapter 17 is charged with the highest dramatic tension. The narrator finally succeeds in getting to the heart of his adventures: he feels with physical reality what it is to be among the primitive people he has been acquainted with so far only ideologically. Melville ingeniously tells us that whether you think the native noble or ignoble is a matter of your frame of mind. The narrator's fear of cannibalism disappears together with the leg-ailment he has suffered. Viewed "in the altered frame of mind" (126) the little valley surrounded by steep mountains and sea is now turned into a paradise filled with "perpetual hilarity" where innocent, happy people live with "no cares, griefs, troubles, or vexations." It is notable that Melville excludes every vestige that reminds one of anything related to death: the narrator does not see a funeral, finds no burial ground and, though he sees only one invalid, says "sickness was almost unknown" (127). This is a place of eternal life. If "the central doctrine of all religion is the denial that death implies the automatic annihilation of the individual self" as Edmund Leach tells

us,²¹ Melville's Typee is a mythical and sacred world where mortality is totally banished, a world contrastive to the secular present historical time to which the narrator belongs.

The narrator's observations of the Typees during the days after he met Marnoo are characterized by the inborn nature of primitive man in comparison with the current state of civilized western countries. "Everything went on in the valley with a harmony and smoothness unparalleled, I will venture to assert, in the most select, refined, and pious associations of mortals in Christendom"(200), he says and continues that the Typees are governed "by an inherent principle of honesty and charity towards each other" which are the common-law of their society. He insists that the human race all over the world is by nature given the "perception of what is *just* and *noble*" (201), and that this is the basic attitude in their associations with each other in Typee. This means that since virtues and benevolence are inborn characteristics of man, they are shown naturally by the primitive people. So that if civilized people fail to show these virtues, that is the evidence of their degeneration. The point to note is that the narrator is most impressed by the unanimity of feeling the Typees display on every occasion. "With them there hardly appeared to be any difference of opinion upon any subject whatever," he claims (203). Class differences are hard to be noticed here. It is only after the Feast of Calabashes that the narrator discovers that "noble savage Mehevi" (189) is the chief of chiefs.

In depicting idealized Typee life, Melville could find in the literary tradition models and examples in which a simple society is highlighted as a utopia.²² Melville's narrator, however, steps further into the mythical world. He is not a mere romancer as his predecessors were, but he is a direct experiencer as well. His sympathies with the natives and their life are most affectionately and explicitly expressed in the scene of his visit to the mausoleum for a deceased warrior chief. An effigy of the chief is seated in the stern of a beautifully decorated canoe which is raised on a frame. The effigy in a robe of brown tappa reveals only a wooden head and hands which are holding paddles in the act of rowing. The narrator learns that the chief is paddling his way to the Polynesian heaven.

Whenever in the course of my rambles through the valley I happened to be near the chief's mausoleum, I always turned aside to visit it. The place had a peculiar charm for me; I hardly know why; but so it was. As I leaned over the railing and gazed upon the strange effigy and watched the play of the feathery head-dress, stirred by the same breeze which in low tones breathed amidst the lofty palm-trees, I loved to yield myself up to the fanciful superstition of the islanders, and could almost believe that the grim warrior was bound heavenward. In this mood when I turned to depart, I bade him

“God speed, and a pleasant voyage.” Aye, paddle away, brave chieftain, to the land of spirits! *To the material eye* thou makest but little progress; but with *the eye of faith*, I see thy canoe cleaving the bright waves, which die away on those dimly looming shores of Paradise. (173, emphasis added)

He shows in his imagination remarkable conformity in looking at the effigy with “the eyes of faith” to prove that he, a civilized man, still retains and shares the “immortal spirit” (173) the primitives have. Melville seems to suggest if one sees Typees and their society with “the eye of faith” one can identify them as the prehistoric primitive people that Rousseau vehemently admired. The narrator’s adventure to a mythical world thus reaches the climax in his sense of identity in the happy valley which innocent, noble savages inhabit.

The narrator’s suggestion of two ways of looking at things also explains his descriptions of Typean religious practices. With his “material eyes” he makes careful observations of their religious customs which he says he witnesses almost every day and concludes that the “thoughtless inhabitants” are not at all serious about their religious affairs and that their proceedings of rites look like “a parcel of children playing with dolls and baby houses” (176). That the natives are childish, thoughtless and ignorant is the interpretation made from his faith, a strong belief that the Polynesians are the nearest-model of the original or infant state of man. But Melville’s artistic execution conflicts with history. The meaning of the childish religious rites eludes the narrator, for he says in irritation, “I saw everything, but could comprehend nothing” (177). His use of symbolism loses its implications here by suggesting he is not fully in control of what he is relating.²³

Every adventure comes to an end. The narrator’s return to the present state of affairs is a matter of course. Suffice it to say that all he needs is to resume his “material eye” in every way and dismiss the “eye of faith” from his mind. A new danger prompts him to face the state he finds himself in. The native practitioner of tattooing shows his interest in working on the narrator’s face and becomes persistent in demonstrating his artistic skill. “This incident opened my eyes,” the narrator says. “I now felt convinced that in some luckless hour I should be disfigured in such a manner as never more to have the *face* to return to my countrymen” (219). The lost sense of time is recovered. He recognizes the time that has passed by. “I had now been three months in their valley, as nearly as I could estimate” (231), he says. He again longs to leave the valley and his fear of cannibalism returns together with the leg-ailment. It becomes clear that cannibalism is a symbol of the fear of death embraced by Adam only after the Fall.²⁴

During the last month of his stay the Typees are no longer innocent and noble but poor and

shabby natives who seem to be practicing ugly vices. He witnesses three human heads in a package, one of which is that of a white man, and by chance he sees a dismembered skeleton of someone who he suggests is a recent victim of a cannibalistic rite. The following narrow escape is possible due to the fact that, when he manages to get to the forbidden shore, differences of opinion arise among the natives and they fall to quarreling. The final act for the narrator to ensure his escape is to dash the boat-hook at the throat of a native chief. The narrator behaves like one who displays “civilized barbarity” (125) which he had formerly been sharply critical of. He is now once more a mere common sailor.

The mixed images of the natives and the narrator's corresponding ambivalent feelings toward the Typee people are elaborated as the story develops and yet they are kept unreconciled to the end. We know that the contradictory images are caused by his alternating frames of mind, and the images themselves are the reflections of the western philosophy of ideas. Melville's art resides in his quest of finding a path down to the depths to have a glimpse of natural goodness and the nobility of man, morally and aesthetically the best state of mankind, and giving it a reality.

The narrator's journey is both physical and ideological. Geographically and culturally the Typee valley is isolated and preserved from the outside world. The barriers between them serve as protection against the destructive invasion of current western civilization as well as from its neighboring valleys, which are already eroded by its influence, showing the proof of this in the deterioration of the inhabitants' physical welfare. Ironically, the isolation of Typee is brought about by the rumors that the natives are the most vicious and ferocious savage whose very name is proof enough. For the narrator to descend to the bottom of the valley and to escape from there by way of the sea obviously requires risking his own life. His journey is the process of undertaking the roles allotted him: a common sailor, a mythical being in the mountains, an initiated novice in the valley and a common sailor again.

The narrator is rescued from the primitive valley and restored to his present self just as Ishmael is picked up after the turmoil of a sea battle to recount the whole story. The tattooed white man in *Omoo*, Lem Hardy, might have been his possible fate if he had “a musket and a bag of ammunition” and lost his face by having it permanently marked with designs from ear to ear.²⁵ The narrator, however, pursues chances to escape and at the first prospect of safety he falls back “fainting into the arms of Karakoe” (252). His unconscious return to his own world is highly suggestive that his adventure might have taken place in a dream. The Typee life of noble savages transcends the narrator's time and space. Such worlds are not a place to stay but a

place to visit periodically or metaphorically. Now that he has come back to his own self, he may set out on another journey, which we know he does in the next book.

Typee is Melville's first experimental voyage as a writer. It is a successful one in terms of its popular acceptance by his contemporary readers. They accepted the contradictory images of the Typees: opinions differ and ambivalent perspectives are the proof of the objective mind of the author.²⁶ If Melville relies on this literary tradition of his time, he consciously incorporates it into his art of fiction in sober seriousness, for here we can see the genesis of his ambiguous and complex attitude toward the subjects, which stays with him throughout his career as a writer. Melville gives us the nature of the Typees in contradictory forms, though the eyewitness is one and the same character. Melville finds this art of writing to be an effective method of showing how cultural ideas define and limit both the knowledge and proper perspectives of the objects observed. The complex interplay of objects and subjects is to be represented in a more dramatic and compact form later in *Moby Dick*, in the diverse interpretations, made by the members of the Pequod, of the figures and descriptions on a doubloon.²⁷ Melville is harsh on Christian civilization but ironically he makes symbolical use of Christian mythology for the very creation of the book as well as the characterization of the narrator. The use of symbolism may be confusing in some parts, but Melville is always conscious of the thematic construct ordering most of his materials in the writing of his first novel.

Notes

- 1 William Ellery Sedgwick says in his *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (1944; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 20, "The narrative climax is deeply at odds with great parts of the book."
- 2 Leon Howard, "Historical Note" to Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, eds. Harrison Hayward, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and the Newberry Library, 1968), 279. For the skepticism of reviewers in London, see Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography Volume 1, 1819-1851* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 399-401.
- 3 E. S. Craighill Handy, *The Native Culture in the Marquesas*, Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 9, Bayard Dominick Expedition Publication Number 9 (Honolulu: The Museum, 1923, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971), 90, 101, 105, 121 and et al. Melville is cited along with Krusenstern, Porter, Langsdorff, Stewart and other travelogues.

- 4 D. H. Lawrence, "Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*," in *Studies of Classic American Literature* (1920; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 139-52.
- 5 For the interpretations of the narrator on this line, see Richard Ruland, "Melville and the Fortunate Fall: *Typee* as Eden," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 23: 3 (1968), 312-23; Sedgwick, 19-36; Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (1949; rpt. New York: Hafner, 1971), 9-15; Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (1950; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 77-88; Milton R. Stern, *The fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), 29-65; Faith Pullin, "Melville's *Typee*: The Failure of Eden," in *New Perspective on Melville*, ed. Faith Pullin (Edinburgh: Univ. Press, 1978), 1-28; John Wenke, "Melville's *Typee*: A Tale of Two Worlds," in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Typee*, ed. Milton Stern (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 250-58. Milton Stern writes most extensively.
- 6 John Samson, "The Dynamics of History and Fiction in Melville's *Typee*," *American Quarterly*, 36(1984), 272-90.
- 7 "Historical Note," 343-44.
- 8 Charles Anderson in his *Melville in the South Seas* (New York; Columbia Univ. Press, 1939) provides biographical and ethnographic contexts in *Typee*. He examines in detail Melville's use of other travel books especially that of David Porter although the narrator says he has not met with this book. T. Walter Herbert, Jr. depicts three perspectives shown by representative Americans who faced Polynesian natives in 19th century in his *Marquesan Encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization* (Cambridge; Harvard Univ. Press, 1980). For a short summary of the history of philosophy behind sailors and missionaries and their perceptual conflict reflected upon the narrator, see Samson.
- 9 See Herbert, 51-77, 78-118, and Strauss, 158,159.
- 10 I owe the history and theory of primitivism to A. O. Lovejoy, "Forward" to Louis Whitney's *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1934), xi-xx.
- 11 W. Patrick Strauss, *Americans in Polynesia* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ., 1963), 148-69.
- 12 *Ibid.* 48.
- 13 William Oland Bourne, "Typee: The Traducers of Mission" in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Typee*, 46.
- 14 See Herbert, 76 and Bourne, 50.
- 15 Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, Vol. , *The Writings of Herman*

- Melville*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern-Newberry Edition (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), xiii. Further references are made parenthetically in the text.
- 16 See Paul Witherington "The art of Melville's Art," *Arizona Quarterly* 26, 1970, 136-50. Witherington suggests (139-40) six major phases, segmentation of which is very different from the one I put forward here.
- 17 Charles Roberts Anderson, "Melville's South Sea Romance," *Eigo Seinen*, 115 (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1969), 481.
- 18 See Merton M. Seats, Jr., *Melville's Reading* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1988), 39, 171. Among the books he bought in late 1847 and 1848 is Dante Alighieri's *The Vision: or Hell, Purgatory and Paradise* but it is not clear if Melville read Dante before 1947.
- 19 Anon., *Historical Account of the Circumnavigation of the Globe and the Progress of Discovery* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1836, rpt., London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, Paternoster Row, 1849). I refer to this book as *Circumnavigation* for further references. This is also one of the books mentioned in *Typee* and exceptional attention is paid to it in the footnote in chapter 25. The historical accounts of the nautical enterprises by the European navigations in this book range from Ferdinand Magellan in the early sixteenth century to Captain James Cook's third voyage in the latter half of eighteenth century. These navigations were carried out under the auspices of the then monarchs that had territorial ambitions outside of their countries. The perilous expeditions around the globe were projects of imperialist European nation-states, like Portuguese, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Britain, France and Germany and the practices of colonization were done by explorers especially in the South Seas after Magellan found a way there on his expedition of 1519. Most cruises lasted from two to three years and the recorded annals were made public on their return home. Referring these documents and explaining political and historical backgrounds the author of the book gives an outline of each expedition, sums up impressive and memorable events and thus reproduces the cruises in chronological order in plain language and in a style that sustains the readers' interest.
- 20 Cf. Witherington, 143-4; Samson, 284.
- 21 Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols Are Connected* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), 71.
- 22 See Thomas J. Scorza, "Tragedy in the State of Nature: Melville's *Typee*," *Interpretation*, 6, no. 1 (January, 1979), rpt. in *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Typee*, 233-37. Scorza takes up Socrates' description in *Republic*, Plato's *Laws*, Diderot's

Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage and special attention is paid to Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals," Gonzalo's utopian plan in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Rousseau's *First and Second Discourses*.

- 23 This is also Melville's excuse for the biased and fictional understanding of a people through certain ideological frames of mind though ironically his excuse gives additional color of ambiguity to the novel. T. Walter Herbert for the first time poses the question by saying, "What I will not be able to provide is a comparative understanding of what it meant to be Marquesan...But the opportunity to create such an understanding has almost surely been lost." (*Marquesan Encounters*, 19) Tony Horwitz's *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before* (New York: Picador, 2002) is a record of recapturing the adventures of James Cook which took place two hundred years ago. At many places Cook visited Horwitz learns negative impressions of Cook which people passed down to posterity.
- 24 Samuel Otter in his *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999) introduces the literary narratives of "theatricality" of cannibalism, some of which are the sources Melville relies upon. Otter claims that the narrator's discovery of cannibalistic rites is not convincing and says "the emphasis on cannibalism at the end of *Typee* diverts attention from the deeper threat" (19) of tattooing.
- 25 Herman Melville, *Omoo*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern-Newberry Edition (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 27.
- 26 See Sheila Post-Lauria's excellent analysis of contemporary popular narrative forms and multiplicity of readerships in *Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 27-46.
- 27 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or The Whale*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern-Newberry Edition (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 430-35.