

## ANALYSIS

*Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*

*During a Four Months' Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas* (1846)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“Whether the natives are actually man-eaters or noble savages, enemies or friends, is a doubt sustained to the very end. At all events, they are the most ‘humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures’ that the narrator has ever encountered. He is welcomed by mermaids with jet-black tresses, feasted and cured of his wound, and allowed to go canoeing with Fayaway, a less remote enchantress than her name suggests. But danger looms behind felicity; ambiguous forebodings, epicurean but inhumane, reverberate from the heathen idols in the taboo groves; and the narrator escapes to a ship, as he had escaped from another one at the outset.... He has tasted the happiness of the pastoral state. He has enjoyed the primitive condition, as it had been idealized by Rousseau...”

As for clothes, they wear little more than ‘the garb of Eden’; and Melville...is tempted to moralize over how unbecoming the same costume might look on the civilized. Where Poe’s black men were repulsive creatures, Melville is esthetically entranced by the passionate dances of the Polynesians; and his racial consciousness begins to undergo a radical transposition when he envisions them as pieces of ‘dusky statuary.’ On the whole, he believes, ‘the penalty of the fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee.’... If there is any serpent in the Marquesan garden, it is the contaminating contact of the white men. If the children of nature are losing their innocence, that is to be blamed upon their would-be civilizers. And if there is to be any evangelizing, Melville would make the suggestion that Marquesans be sent as missionaries to the United States.”

Harry Levin

*The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*  
(Knopf/Vintage 1960) 172-73

“*Typee* is not a great book, but in writing it Melville was performing a significant moral and psychological act which gives the story—on the surface so gay, romantic and jocose—a deep undercurrent of meaning. It is characteristic of Melville’s art that *Typee* should have a pronounced rhythm or inner dramatic action. The events do not occur in a succession of static scenes... The rhythm of *Typee* consists of a series of imprisonments and liberations, of withdrawals from reality and of returns.

The hero and his friend Toby escape from the ship. They are imprisoned among the thickly growing reeds as they flee inland. They escape from these to the mountains. Repeatedly they gain the top of a ridge and then plunge into a valley or dark defile. Then there is the long enforced stay among the seemingly benevolent Typees, with what might be called sub-rhythms of incipient escape. Finally there is the escape from the island at the end of the book. Despite the light tone of *Typee*, the action gives the effect of being cumulative, organic, morally and psychologically significant....

From the moral point of view the valley of Typee and its apparently idyllic life represent a kind of Eden, a state of innocence and happiness, and Melville’s romanticized version of his stay among the cannibals is certainly one of the notable Eden fantasies of literature. But notwithstanding its pleasures, this Eden is by nature illusory but because this is a partly fallen Eden, in which the effects of crime and violence, not to mention cannibalism, are real and present although held by the Typees furtively in the background. Hence, it is a fraudulent Eden and must be escaped.

From the psychological point of view the valley of Typee represents the regressive impulses of escape, of prenatal comfort and safety, of a full indulgence of what Freud calls the pleasure principle. But in an adult—even so gay a youth as the author portrays himself as being—who belongs to the nervous,

competitive, complicated Western world this indulgence produces anxiety and guilt and the fear of being unmanned—hence the symbolic leg injury of the hero. In a modern adult man the personality, in other words, must be integrated at a higher level than is afforded by Typee. The pleasure principle must be in part foresworn in favor of the reality principle.

Having rejected Typee as false, though not without retaining considerable nostalgia for it, he was determined to discover those truths—moral, philosophic, religious, political, aesthetic—which would make sense of the civilized world and provide a means of feeling in harmony with it. This quest, sometimes inspiring, sometimes agonized and despairing, is a central theme, though not necessarily the only theme, of Melville's writings at least through the late poem *Clarel* (1876)."

Richard Chase  
*Major Writers of America I*  
(Harcourt 1962) 884

"Herman Melville's first book, *Typee*, was the literary result of the most exciting adventure of his life--his escape from an American whaling vessel in the Marquesas Islands of the South Pacific and his residence in a valley of cannibals where he was kept captive until an Australian whaler came to his rescue. During a period of financial depression in the United States and while unable to find employment he had shipped out of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, as a common seaman on board the *Acushnet* on January 3, 1841, and had deserted in Nukuheva on July 9, 1842.

Accompanied by another young man, whom he knew as Toby, he made a difficult trip through mountainous territory to the edge of a valley which he hoped was inhabited by friendly natives of the Happar tribe. Instead, after making a precipitous descent to its floor, he discovered the dreaded Typees who were notorious in Nukuheva for their ferocity and for their cannibalism. Typees treated the two adventurers hospitably and allowed Toby to leave the valley and seek medical assistance for Herman, who had developed some obscure trouble with his leg. When Toby failed to return, Melville remained in a state of sociable but anxious captivity until he was rescued by the *Lucy Ann*, out of Sydney, on August 9.

When he reached home, more than two adventuresome years later, Melville had a store of yarns to spin and little to do except spin them. He settled down with his widowed mother, four unmarried sisters, and a younger brother in the little village of Lansingburgh, near Albany, New York, and regaled them and their friends with tales of the South Pacific. He was then twenty-five years of age with little formal education and no preparation for a vocation which would be appropriate to his upper-middle-class family background. But he was an extraordinarily vivid and dramatic storyteller (as Sophia Hawthorne was later to testify), and before going to sea he had written pieces for the local newspaper which had given evidence of some literary talent and ambition. It was probably inevitable that he should have decided or have been persuaded to write about his most exciting experiences in a part of the world which was still being explored but had not yet been exploited by romancers....

*Typee* was never a best-seller, even by the standards of the 1840's. In round numbers, 6,500 copies were printed and sold by Wiley & Putnam, and 4,000 by Harpers. Murray printed a total of 7,342 copies during Melville's lifetime.... The English pirates may have printed at least as many more.... Yet throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century it was the best-known book of an author who lost his early popularity but gradually acquired a small but select group of admirers. Most of these were in England... During the first decade of the twentieth century *Typee* was more often reprinted than *Omoo*, *Moby-Dick*, or *White-Jacket*, which followed in that order and were the only books by Melville in print, except for *Pierre* and *Battle-Pieces*.... But an inquisitive reader could find little in the existing histories of American literature either about Melville or the relationship of *Typee* to his other books. He was treated seriously by a literary historian for the first time in *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917)....

In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (published in 1923 but first written in 1917-1918), D. H. Lawrence, by identifying himself with Melville, found in *Typee* the deeply rooted psychological stress of an individual's passion to escape the world of humanity while feeling the white man's inability to retreat into his past and live in savagery.... Most critics during the 1920's and 1930's admired *Typee*, for the same reason that they admired Thoreau's *Walden*, as an account of escape from the conventions and the

economic ideals of the time.... [Later critics] justified the skepticism of John Murray and many early reviewers concerning its complete veracity but demonstrated that it was actually based upon real experience.... The book can now be seen as Melville's germinal work of art."

Leon Howard

Historical Note

*Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*

eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle

(Northwestern 1968) 277-78, 298-301

"Melville's knowledge of Polynesian religion has remained a matter of debate ever since the publication of *Typee*. He has been considered everything from a major authority to a mere literary pretender to a downright liar. Charles Anderson has pointed out that 'Melville is cited as an authority in such studies as those of Sir James George Frazer, Robert Wood Williamson, and Louis Rollin,' and Frazer alone 'quotes *Typee* with approval more than a score of times.' But Anderson has shown Melville's heavy reliance on literary sources, and he therefore tends to suspect the accuracy of Melville's knowledge, preferring to rely on the findings of modern anthropological expeditions, even if they in turn were forced to rely on the memories of the surviving natives. Melville did have probably the most intimate contact of any Westerner with the Marquesan tribal civilization, but, as Anderson observes, 'Melville was the first to confess his lack of any real understanding of the theology of the Typees'...

He saw in the Typee mythology and theology the fundamental enigmas of all mythology and all theology; that is, he saw the fundamental enigmas in all human knowledge. He saw all knowledge as more or less mythic. For almost half a century, beginning in *Typee* and not ending until his death, Melville explored these enigmas with the tools, methods, and vocabulary of comparative mythology."

H. Bruce Franklin

*The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*

(Stanford 1963) 9-10

"The greatest seer and poet of the sea for me is Melville....because Melville doesn't sentimentalize the ocean... Melville at his best invariably wrote from a sort of dream-self, so that events which he relates as actual fact have indeed a far deeper reference to his own soul, his own inner life. So in *Typee* when he tells of his entry into the valley of the dread cannibals of Nukuheva. Down this narrow, steep, horrible dark gorge he slides and struggles as we struggle in a dream, or in the act of birth, to emerge in the green Eden of the Golden Age, the valley of the cannibal savages. This is a bit of a birth-myth, or re-birth myth, on Melville's part--unconscious, no doubt, because his running unconscious was always mystical and symbolical....

Here at last is Rousseau's Child of Nature and Chateaubriand's Noble Savage called upon and found at home. Yes, Melville loves his savage hosts. He finds them gentle, laughing lambs compared to the ravaging wolves of his white brothers, left behind in America... But Melville couldn't go back: and Gauguin couldn't really go back: and I know now that I could never go back. Back towards the past, savage life.... So these many 'reformers' and 'idealists' who glorify the savages in America. They are...life-haters... We can't go back, and Melville couldn't....

If you prostitute your psyche by returning to the savages, you gradually go to pieces. Before you can go back, you have to decompose. And a white man decomposing is a ghastly sight. Even Melville in *Typee*... Poor Melville! He was determined Paradise existed. So he was always in Purgatory... The past, the Golden Age of the past--what a nostalgia we all feel for it. Yet we don't want it when we get it. Try the South Seas.... There is no Paradise."

D. H. Lawrence

*Studies in Classic American Literature*

(1923; Viking 1968) 131, 134-39

"The young rebel knew how simultaneously to reveal and conceal his rebellion.... A salty, sailorly humor—a commonplace humor—a rather unobvious humor—this is the first impression of the humor of

*Typee*....a humor which only an excessive sober-sidedness will rob of its geniality.... It is this tolerance, this humanity, which makes the humor of Melville's *Typee* so rare and so delectable.... Cannibals become 'unnatural gourmands, taking it into their heads to make a convivial meal of a poor devil'.... Melville...is able to argue with Toby that 'a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific.' When confronted with the actual evidence of cannibalism, he abandons the humor of incongruity for sheer horror; but the horror has all along been implicit in the humor [like Postmodern black humor].... He points out the advantages of savagery over civilization.... Melville satirizes man: by placing civilized manners against a backdrop of primitive life to attain perspective by incongruity; and thus, by showing how certain human foibles are to be found in both civilized and primitive societies, he avoids the worst excesses of a Rousseauistic adulation of primitive man....

In describing Fayaway's nudity, Melville evidently burlesques the prose of contemporary fashion magazines.... Such humor could have appealed only to persons who had some urbanity as well as some of Melville's salty rebelliousness against convention. It would require the same sort of person to appreciate Melville's mockery of the self-righteous and horrified religious man's observation of a native's abusive treatment of a god.... Such burlesque sermonizing could perhaps have deceived some and angered others; but the heartier spirits of the age were probably delighted with the utterance of polished proprieties to conceal a probing skepticism....

With becoming sailorly geniality he laughs at the primitive even while admiring it, as a father might lovingly ridicule his children's sober play. Even while laughing at it, moreover, he makes it the basis of serious reflections about his own adult and civilized sobriety. There is nothing startlingly new about making the primitive a basis for satire on civilization. A pervasive geniality however is the special contribution of Melville's humor. It suffuses his treatment both of savage custom and civilized foible. When he is genuinely angry, the humor sometimes becomes savagely ironic: the rebel in Melville sometimes conquers the humanist and the humorist. But in the main his richly tolerant humor is the palliative of his rebellion.... A less humorous man would have been less of a rebel."

Joseph J. Firebaugh  
"Humorist as Rebel: The Melville of *Typee*"  
*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9  
(September 1954) 108-20

"*Typee* and *Omoo* [1847] should be read as one continuous work just as they recount one continuous adventure. Moreover, the informing sensibility in each is identical, and the serious thematic content does not alter. In a prefatory note to the second volume, Melville said that *Omoo* 'necessarily begins where *Typee* concludes, but has no further connection with the latter work.' In other words, *Typee* and *Omoo* form one continuous picaresque tale which is divided merely for the sake of convenience into two volumes. Melville himself fills the central role of the wanderer.

Neither strictly a travel account nor by any means a conventional novel, *Typee-Omoo* is a half-humorous, semi-serious narrative of episodic adventure. Like a medieval Romance portraying the hero's quest for the Holy Grail, *Typee-Omoo* dramatizes the protagonist's search for an innocent and untouched Garden of Eden. Early in the first volume the hero exclaims of the pagans, 'Thrice happy are they who, inhabiting some yet undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean, have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man.'

In the recurring pattern of exploration, discovery, and flight throughout *Typee-Omoo*, the constant thread is the quest for the 'undiscovered island.' Like the Holy Grail, the uncontaminated isle surrounded by the sea glitters in bright vision luring the seeker on. The pace of the narrative is at first slow and relatively serious but gradually livens into a kind of frolicsome vagabondage as one island after another is examined and found wanting. Typee Valley is succeeded by Tahiti, followed by Imeoo, and, finally, the isolated inland village of Tamai. But the Garden remains at the last unfound, the perfect innocence undiscovered. The ultimate meaning of *Typee-Omoo* is to be found not primarily in the successive primitive societies scrutinized but in the increasingly complex reaction of the rover-observer to the pagan life he witnesses.

Although *Typee* and *Omoo* are basically episodic in nature, the high narrative interest sustained in them is evidence of an artistic instinct in process of self-discovery. '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!' So opens *Typee*. And many pages later, *Omoo* closes: 'By noon, the island had gone down in the horizon; and all before us was the wide Pacific.' Out of the wide Pacific, back into the wide Pacific: Melville in *Typee* and *Omoo* looms up suddenly, is vividly there, and then returns to the vast, rolling waters, a true son of the sea. But while he is there, the wanderer Melville leaves his mark.

Grown restless at the confinement of a whaler at sea, Melville decides while his ship, the *Dolly*, is harbored in the Marquesas to desert with his companion Toby to go exploring among the islands. Melville asserts that Toby is of 'that class of rovers you sometimes meet at sea, who never reveal their origin, never allude to home, and go rambling over the world as if pursued by some mysterious fate they cannot possibly elude.' Melville understands this nature because he partakes of it himself. After struggling across a rugged, mountainous area and becoming lost, the two sailors find themselves, not in the land of the peaceful Happers, which they were seeking, but in the land of the dreaded Typees, warlike and cannibalistic--at least by reputation.

Two narrative threads tighten the loosely connected adventures: Melville--or Tommo, the name he assumes--is beset by recurring fears that he will become the victim of the cannibalistic appetites of the Typees; and the sailor's romance with a beautiful, young island girl. A dash of realism is added by the annoying injury to Tommo's leg which causes it to swell and to immobilize and confine him periodically. By and large, however, *Typee* consists of a systematic account of the social organization of the Typees, their mores and customs, their government and their religion, their marriage practices and their food habits, their rituals and their taboos.

Interspersed with this account is an idyllic picture of island life as Tommo lives it with his constantly present and ingratiating servant Kory-Kory, and with his innocent and affectionate female companion, Fayaway. When Toby one day disappears, perhaps into food for the Typees, Tommo's fears for his own fate increase. But finally, through the help of the handsome, taboo islander, Marmoo, he discovers the opportunity to escape and does so over the physical protests of his captors. Years later he discovers that Toby had not been eaten but had also escaped.

*Omoo* (a Marquesan word meaning rover or wanderer) begins with Melville's escape from the Typees aboard the whaler *Julia*. The first half of the book is devoted largely to the appalling state of the life of a sailor aboard ship and the subsequent attempt by the crew, when the *Julia* reaches Tahiti, to escape. This whole affair, like the escape from the Typees, though matters of the utmost seriousness are implicit, seems somewhat lightly treated...

As Melville watches, at the opening of *Typee*, the gratification of the 'unholy passions' of the crew, he observes of the 'Savages': 'Unsophisticated and confiding, they are easily led into every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruin thus remorselessly inflicted upon them by their European civilizers.' Though civilization is evil, can primitive life in its innocence be preferable? If so, we are then confronted with the paradox of Tommo's flight, not only from the valley of the Typee, but also from his pleasant incarceration in Tahiti, his idyllic life on the farm in Imeeo, the attractive life discovered in Tamai, and, finally, his desertion of the primitive South Sea islands altogether for a whaling ship that will carry him home eventually to civilized America.

At first glance, indeed, it would seem that Melville had discovered Paradise in the South Seas. From the time that he and Toby stumbled upon the lovers of Typee Valley, the boy and girl, both innocently naked and oblivious of their nakedness, we seem to be entering a society as guileless as the garden of Adam and Eve before the Fall.... But if Melville really discovered Paradise in Polynesia, why did he repeatedly flee? ...The reality turns out to be far short of the expectation.... Discovery of decay in the inviting fruit proves to be a recurring experience.

There are two counts upon which Polynesian life is apparently declared superior to civilized life in *Typee-Omoo*: primitive man is happier and he is more virtuous than civilized man.... 'But the continual happiness which, so far as I was able to judge, appeared to prevail in the valley, sprung principally from that all-pervading sensation which Rousseau has told us he at one time experienced, the mere buoyant sense of a healthful physical existence.'... Throughout *Typee*, the primitive society is depicted as far more materialistic than America's. In Typee Valley there is abundance and life seems to consist of one sensual satisfaction after another in almost dreary succession. Such a gluttoned happiness might well begin to cloy.... 'To many of them, indeed, life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap.' Such a life might be happy, but for one of restless intellect it cannot seem very significant. So nearly devoid of any life of the mind or of the spirit, the Typees seem subhuman, closer to fine, healthy, instinctive animals than to human beings.... The recurring child and animal metaphors tend to deprive the Typees of those distinctively human attributes, a mind and a soul....

Fear of the cannibalistic tendencies of the Typees reaches a climax in the confirming discovery of the three human heads, mummylike in appearance, two of them islanders but one of them a white man. The revulsion and horror Tommo feels at the sight of his fantastic discovery is Melville's overwhelming commentary on the society and nature of the Typees. That they could place so small a value on human life has been half-glimpsed already in the minute examination of their essentially materialistic culture. With life so empty of intellectual or spiritual content, it is no wonder that they place such casual value on it. Their cannibalistic deed is exceeded in horror only by their feelings of innocence about it....

Jolted out of his passive state by his discovery, Tommo plots his escape and in the execution becomes aggressively hostile to the savages who would detain him, giving one a deathblow in the fierce struggle. The act of escape symbolizes the ultimate recognition of the deficiencies of the Polynesian culture, a recognition of the horror that exists not far beneath the placid surface. For as Tommo feared at the beginning of his residence among the cannibals, they are swayed by 'fickle passions.' Like children or animals, their affection and sweetness can be instantly converted to hate and treachery. That same instinct and spontaneity which make them so charming and attractive can also render them repulsive and horrible. In *Omoo*, Bembo, the New Zealand harpooner, acts as second mate aboard the *Julia*. Rumored to be from a tribe of cannibals, he is universally distrusted. In a fit of pique after a minor quarrel, Bembo takes the helm and attempts to wreck the ship....

In his debate with himself as to whether to settle down in Polynesia, Tommo-Omoo-Melville had before him the frightening examples of two white men who had actually gone native. In *Typee* a tattooed 'grizzled sailor,' an 'old rover' by the name of Jimmy, proved to be a 'heartless villain'...[and] one Lem Hardy, whose most peculiar feature is the tattooing on his face...there is a revulsion at this white man's reversion to savagery even though there is sympathy for the unmerited misfortune that plagued him in the civilized world. The life of pure instinct led by the Polynesians is characterized by its intensities...a horrifying hostility can at any moment flash to the surface and strike out in senseless destruction.

What Tommo-Omoo-Melville set out to discover at the opening of *Typee* remains unfound at the end of *Omoo*. But the search has been exhilarating and revealing. In a curious reversal of the Garden of Eden myth, Tommo is bitten by a snake in the rugged, mountainous country before he reaches the blissful valley. Perhaps the reversal is symbolic of the ultimate failure of the search for Paradise.... Though full of his island wisdom--Melvillian rather than Rousseauistic--Melville is uncommitted as only a rover can be.... Perhaps that 'undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean' can be found--or created--in the midst of a man's soul."

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1962) 21-23, 27-35

"Everything Melville said about Typee was apparently, verifiably, true; what is deceiving is to think that Melville himself had seen all that he told or that he reported *only* what he had seen. No travel writers, or few, ever write from such close a connection to the 'first-hand' report—especially not Melville. What he tells about Typee had, much of it, been related by earlier but little read voyagers and explorers, especially in two volumes by Charles S. Stewart, *A Visit to the South Seas*.... The bulk of the book is about Typee and

not about Tommo, the narrator, or Toby, his friend. What further troubled the doubting Thomases of Melville's day was that his writing was so lively and charming that it couldn't be true—truth, to many people, must be dull.... Richard Tobias Greene, his former shipmate and Typee companion, upon seeing complaints that *Typee* was 'too romantic to be true,' wrote to the editor of the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* saying that he himself was 'happy to testify to the entire accuracy of the work, so long as I was with Melville'....

The book was an instantaneous and almost universal success, the only captious commentary coming from readers sensitive to Melville's adverse criticism of the missionaries and to his attack on the role of the western world in raiding and ruining Polynesia. More discriminating readers such as Washington Irving, Margaret Fuller, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were delighted. It even stirred transcendental Bronson Alcott to write in his journal, 9 December 1846, 'Read *Typee*, by Melville—a charming volume, as attractive even as *Robinson Crusoe*.'

Howard P. Vincent  
*Guide to Herman Melville*  
(Charles E. Merrill 1969) 8-10

"As soon as Tommo [Melville] begins his descent to Typee, his leg swells, a frightening malady that wanes and recurs regularly throughout his sojourn and restrains his flight. According to [Larzer] Ziff, this phlebitis signifies Tommo's inherent connection with America and his insuperable alienation from Typee. However, it seems to me that, if the swelling is a symbol at all, it probably signifies his *attraction* to Typee, to that dim, half-conscious part of himself that holds him captive through captivation and has to be curbed with the repulsive visions of cannibalism and tattooing. This would be true if we accept the frequent observation that the swollen leg is a phallus [!], and so expresses an attraction [?] to Typee by a part of Tommo's consciousness that is separate from his desire for supremacy."

Mitchell Breitwieser  
"False Sympathy in Melville's *Typee*"  
*American Quarterly* 34.4 (1982)

Michael Hollister (2014)