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Early American Captivity, Transcendental Flights: Contending Versions of National Identity in Herman Melville's *Typee*

FRANK KELLETER

I. Typee and the Critics

The success of *Typee* at the time of its first publication in 1846 can be considered one of the great ironies in American literary history as it would overshadow the recognition of Melville's later, more ambitious work for years to come. Up until the 1920s, this first novel (if it is a novel) was taken to be the standard against which all of the author's subsequent writings had to be measured — and were usually found deficient. Today, *Typee* has virtually no readers outside academia, and if it were not for the reputation of *Moby-Dick* and "Bartleby," Melville's debut would hardly be available in numerous paperback editions.¹ To a modern readership, then, there is something decidedly mysterious about the original reception of *Typee*. How could contemporary readers of the book have overlooked its obvious shortcomings in composition, the inconsistencies in plot and tone, and, above all, the narrator's constant shift in ideological position, his blatant inability to make coherent sense of his adventurous stay on a Polynesian island? The answer is, they did not. Thanks to Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker's compilation of early reviews (a supplement to Parker's *The Recognition of Herman Melville*), we can trace the development of critical reactions to the three different editions of Melville's book on both sides of the Atlantic. What is striking about those early reviews is that the issue of the book's authenticity, while certainly on everybody's mind, did not create as belligerent a debate as more recent critics

¹ *Typee* did not even manage to become a children's classic, which would have been the customary fate of a nineteenth-century tale of adventure — and the one predicted by Melville himself. Almost despairing of the extraordinary selling success of his first novel, he wrote to Hawthorne in June 1851: "To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a 'man who lived among the cannibals!' When I speak of posterity, in reference to myself, I only mean the babies who will probably be born in the moment immediately ensuing upon giving up my ghost. I shall go down to some of them, in all likelihood. 'Typee' will be given to them, perhaps, with their gingerbread" (Melville 1993:193).

would have us believe. There were two contending views: one holding Melville's narrative to be a factual account of Polynesian Life, the other forcibly disputing the narrator's veracity, a position that not even the spectacular re-emergence of Richard "Toby" Greene, Melville's only eyewitness, could soften.² But the majority of readers seem to have taken the novel's ambiguous status for granted and willingly accepted *Typee* as a semi-authentic romance, a work of fiction interspersed with anthropological observations — an amusing mixture of Defoe and Cook, so to speak. In fact, while most contemporary critics were quick to point out the book's internal contradictions, including the narrator's rather irritating wavering between mutually exclusive interpretive stances, these deficits generally did not diminish their enjoyment of Melville's tale of adventure. A typical example of this attitude can be found in the third *Athenaeum* review (October 1846), which includes the following passage:

All we can say as to the authenticity of Mr. Herman Melville's narrative is what we have said before — it *deserves* to be true — *si non è vero è ben trovato*. We vouch for the verisimilitude — but not the verity. (Higgins/Parker 1995:65)

Interestingly, then, most of the critics who regarded the book as a romance (and this was the prevailing opinion) would readily acknowledge Melville's artistic achievement and his success in having created a world that was, if not factually real, imaginatively true. It seems worth noting that this particular assessment of *Typee* can be found mainly in British reviews. Even more remarkably, non-American commentators frequently perceived a link between the novel's romantic qualities and the nationality of its author. The London *Athenaeum*, for example, approvingly described "Mr. Melville's manner" in *Typee* as "New World all over" (Higgins/Parker 1995:3). This is an intriguing statement if we remember that not a single episode of Melville's narrative is set in the United States. The term "New World" thus seems to carry an unusual double meaning: not only does it identify Tommo, the novel's narrator, as an American, but it also denotes the very motivation of Tommo's adventurous desertion, namely his desire to escape the strictures of Western civilization and find a more authentic way of life among the Marquesans. In other words, *Typee* figures as a "New World" book not only because it was written by an American author, but also because it tells the story of a white man who wishes to free himself from his Euro-American cultural heritage. The implication of

2 Compare the reviews in the Albany *Evening Journal* (July 1846), the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* (July 1846), the London *Athenaeum* (October 1846), the London *Literary Gazette* (December 1846), and the Washington *National Intelligencer* (May 1847); all are available in Higgins/Parker (1995).

this thought would seem to be that Melville — or Tommo — has produced a quintessentially American piece of writing precisely by having fictitiously relinquished his social, and thereby national, identity. This may not be as paradoxical a thought as it first appears, once we decide to distinguish the age-old European utopia "America," the culminating stage in the westward march of occidental civilization, from the political and cultural construct "United States of America," a complex of institutions which was struggling to disengage itself from its Old World origins. In the case of *Typee* then, the utopian impulse that gave rise to the invention of "America" has simply redirected itself towards the South Seas, after the United States no longer qualified as a "new" world. This is probably not what the reviewer of the *Athenaeum* had in mind when he called Melville's manner "New World all over." *Typee* itself, however, leaves little doubt about Melville's evaluation of the political situation in the United States after the end of the early national period. In various passages, the narrator parallels European and American cultural arrogance, thus effectively exorcising the eighteenth-century myth of America as redeemer nation.³ The United States, Melville holds in *Typee*, have no right to claim any sort of moral or historical exceptionality but are partaking in the crimes of the Old World as if they were an extension of it. When the narrator refers to the Indian policies of his "own favored land," for example, he expressedly collapses the difference between Europe's and America's Christian imperialism: "The Anglo-Saxon hive have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North American continent; but with it they have likewise extirpated the greater portion of the red race."⁴

These and similar passages show Melville at a remove from early American nationalism, which was based on the assumption of a "glorious contrast" between the Old World and the New World. Rather than perpetuating this traditional ideology of pastoral simplicity and agrarian millenarianism, Melville was on his way to a more controversial version of national self-conceptualization that would finally break forth with full force in Emerson's post-Christian antinomianism and in the transcendental patriotism of Walt Whitman. And yet it would be mistaken to regard *Typee* merely as a product of the American Renaissance. If today we find it hard to account for the novel's success at the time of its publication, this may have to do with the presence of an older tradition in *Typee* — a tradition that is missing from books like Thoreau's *Walden* or Melville's own *Moby-Dick*, both of which were

3 For the term "redeemer nation", see Tuveson (1968).

4 I cite from the edition by Hayford, Parker, and Tanselle (Melville 1968:125, 195), hereafter quoted parenthetically. The quotation above was omitted from the revised American edition of August 1846.

spectacularly unpopular with American readers when they first appeared. The present paper wants to describe *Typee* as a transitional work, situated inbetween a republican and a transcendentalist discourse of national self-definition. For this purpose, I will discuss the convergence of various genres in the novel and argue that Melville uses central conventions and modes of eighteenth-century American literature with the explicit aim of subverting them. Unlike other commentators, however, I can detect no deconstruction of these very conventions and modes in *Typee* because, as I will show, Melville still remains suspended between two mutually exclusive versions of cultural identity. I shall discuss *Typee* as (1) an ethnocentric comedy of manners that aims at a critique of Euro-American ethnocentrism, (2) a tract on Jeffersonian "independence" that is illustrated by a tale of Emersonian "self-reliance," and (3) an Indian captivity narrative that intends to undermine this earliest genre of American fiction but remains confined within its ideological limits.

II. Comic Exchanges / Mistaken Identities

One would not guess it from contemporary studies on Melville, but *Typee* is first and foremost a humorous book. If Tommo's jokes do not strike us as funny anymore, this is only partly Melville's fault. The specific kind of humor employed in *Typee* belongs to a tradition of comic writing that in our postcolonial days may not only be hard to take but actually hard to recognize. We can term this a tradition of "ethnocentric comedy" or "intercultural satire." Read in this context, Melville's first novel could be understood as a rather straightforward eighteenth-century comedy of manners, translated into a colonialist vocabulary of cultural domination.

Even a cursory reading of the book will detect that large parts of the narrative are structured in an anecdotal manner. More than once, the narrator seems to lose sight of his romantic adventure-plot and enters into jocular tales of intercultural encounter, most of which are based on hearsay. Some of these anecdotes are not even set in the Marquesas but on Hawaii and the Sandwich Islands and so are completely unrelated to Melville's main story line. But then, the ability to differentiate has never been a prominent characteristic of the colonial gaze. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that all of Tommo's anecdotes work according to the same principle: all of them achieve their comic effect by applying familiar terms and viewpoints to unfamiliar phenomena and occurrences. Tommo invariably describes the strange in terms of the known. This is a conventional, and maybe even necessary, strategy of negotiating cultural differences: you need to re-late the foreign to the canny in

order to be able to verbalize (or relate) it at all.⁵ About the Polynesian breadfruit tree, for example, Tommo writes: "[It forms] the same feature in a Marquesan landscape that the patriarchal elm does in New England scenery" (114). Elsewhere, he tries to make sense of the odd kinship structures of the Typees by translating them into Euro-American social stereotypes. Marheyo thus becomes the senile and somewhat eccentric "patriarch," his wife Tinor plays the busy "mistress of the family," and the sons of the community turn into drunken male "good-for-nothings," while their sisters reveal themselves as "savage" mirror-images of the gossiping "young ladies" and "lovely damsels" of genteel Euro-American society (85).

As befits a comedy of manners, most of Tommo's intercultural relations concern the question of clothing as an indicator of social status and gender hierarchy. Throughout the novel, the representatives of the civilized world find their feelings of propriety shocked by savage etiquette concerning dress and sexual behavior. One such scandal, a veritable case of mistaken identity, is quoted at the very beginning of the novel, when Melville tells of an "Island Queen" (7) who is invited aboard a French man-of-war. The "royal lady" (8) shows herself much more impressed by the elaborate tattoos of an old sailor than by the respectable uniforms of the French officers. Full of admiration, she starts to undress the man, obviously taking his skin marks to be signs of social status, if not sexual prowess. When she lifts her skirt to display her own tattoos — a gesture of recognition that can be interpreted as a "savage" form of intercultural re-lation — the Frenchmen flee in fright.

It is hard to say who is the butt of the joke here. On the one hand, Tommo's anecdotes are clearly meant to establish the cultural supremacy of the teller of the tale and can be seen as "rituals of civilized self-affirmation" (Herbert 1980:158). The story about the Queen of Nukuheva, for example, is funny because this female representative of an allegedly primitive culture applies her own social values to a situation that seems to transcend her understanding. Her reversal of established social hierarchies is not the result of cultural self-affirmation, as seems to be the case in Tommo's gestures of recognition, but simply a sign of ignorance. She reveals herself to be a savage precisely by failing to acknowledge the cultural superiority of the civilized dress code. Similarly, Tommo can count on the amused laughter of his nineteenth-century readers when he compares the seemingly absurd taboo rules of the Typees, the only laws they have, to complex Euro-American systems of legal transaction. Again, the joke is on the natives and on their pretense to act like civilized human beings. The alleged complexity of their social interaction, as it is established by Tommo's habit of translating the strange into familiar terms,

5 I am indebted to Winfried Herget for this pun.

stands in humorous contrast to the evidently primitive state of their communal life. Tommo's anecdotes are thus comparable to parental stories about children who play adult. Much of the comedy of *Typee* is based on this paternalistic form of ethnocentrism.⁶

On the other hand, however, we should not forget that the anecdote about the Queen of Nukuheva ends by poking fun at the prudishness of the French, who are so "polite" (8) that the sight of a naked leg literally scares them off their boat. Nor is Tommo spared such ridicule. In fact, Melville repeatedly positions himself at an ironic distance from his narrator — "and those whom he typifies" (Samson 1989:39). The following scene is instructive in this context: at their first meal in the Typee valley, Tommo and his companion Toby are served a bowl of "poe-e-poe," a sticky breadfruit mush:

I eyed it wistfully for a moment, and then unable any longer to stand on ceremony, plunged my hand into the yielding mass, and to the boisterous mirth of the natives drew it forth laden with the poe-e-poe, which adhered in lengthening strings to every finger. [...] This display of awkwardness — in which, by-the-by, Toby kept me company — convulsed the bystanders with uncontrollable laughter. (73)

Their breach of table manners turns the white visitors into awkward objects of humor. A comic exchange has occurred, and the representatives of civilization are reduced to ignorant savages, eating with their fingers. But Tommo has not reached his punchline yet:

As soon as their merriment had somewhat subsided, Mehevi, motioning us to be attentive, dipped the forefinger of his right hand in the dish, and giving it a rapid and scientific twirl, drew it out coated smoothly with the preparation. With a second peculiar flourish he prevented the poe-e-poe from dropping to the ground as he raised it to his mouth, into which the finger was inserted and drawn forth perfectly free from any adhesive matter. This performance was evidently intended for our instruction. (73)

6 Herbert traces this "note of loftiness" even in Tommo's language: "[He] establishes his aristocratic credentials by displaying control of a cultivated picturesque rhetoric that demands from the reader a response on grounds of shared cultural superiority. [...] His awareness of the power of idiom [serves] to establish social identity" (1980:153). Thus, Tommo uses an elevated style to distinguish himself ironically both from the Western sailors whom he criticizes and from the natives among whom he resides: "The presence communicated by Melville's rhetoric is of a person so civilized that he can hold civilization itself up for criticism" (1980:154).

The humor of this scene resides in the word "scientific." Again, on one level of understanding, the joke is on the natives, because the notion of scientific method obviously clashes with the act of dipping a forefinger into gooey mush. At the same time, Tommo is truly in need of this sort of instruction, as he recognizes when he tries to adopt Mehevi's way of eating — without much success at first. Evidently, there is more at stake in this scene than simply a question of table manners. While Tommo seems to be telling his ethnocentric jokes, Melville establishes an ironic subtext that makes us visualize the narrator's face smeared with glutinous pulp. As a result, a second comic exchange takes place: he who thought himself a grown-up watching children play adult is suddenly revealed as a helpless, but nonetheless presumptuous child himself. The exchange of the parent/child-position pervades the entire narrative. Tommo may believe he is mocking the savages when he notes how they incomprehendingly regarded him, the envoy of the civilized world, as "a froward, inexperienced child" (89), but his laugh must be uneasy, because Melville repeatedly places his narrator in situations where he is forced to behave like someone who has not come of age yet. The Typees have to teach Tommo how to eat, how to wash, how to speak, and even how to walk. This instruction of civilized man by childish primitives evokes an ambiguous laughter at best, because without such seemingly absurd help, Tommo would not even have gotten the chance to tell his comic tale.

There is, then, a subtext to Melville's comedy of manners — a subtext which, despite the faddishness of the term, we may choose to call subversive. Tommo's ethnocentric laughter backfires; without quite grasping it, he becomes the object of his own jokes. The same is true for his Euro-American readers who delight in seeing child-like primitives described in terms of Western social clichés but fail to realize that Tommo's intercultural satire also works the other way round. If old Marheyo amusingly represents the Typee-version of a Victorian patriarch, then the real Victorian patriarchs, not quite as amusingly, may be nothing but well-dressed savages. To familiarize the unfamiliar always in turn implies the defamiliarization of what was thought to be familiar. It could be argued, of course, that this subversion of cultural hierarchies fails to take the particular cultural difference of the Polynesian islanders into account, for Melville simply uses his natives to unsettle traditional notions of Euro-American identity. The Typees, as Melville presents them, indeed seem to be a people without autonomous cultural identity. But while they may not qualify for the role of "the subaltern who speaks," they certainly return the colonial gaze — and they do so in such a manner that alert readers may start to wonder if Tommo's cultural pretensions are not rooted in the same kind of ignorance with which the natives interpret *his* social standing.

Tellingly, the Typees neither regard him as the representative of a superior culture nor as a threatening enemy. When Tommo first enters the valley, the chiefs of the community rather inspect him as an object unaccountably, if not ridiculously strange. Here is how Tommo describes the scene:

One of them in particular, who appeared to be the highest in rank, placed himself directly facing me; looking at me with a rigidity of aspect under which I absolutely quailed. He never once opened his lips, but maintained his severe expression of countenance, without turning his face aside for a single moment. Never before had I been subjected to so strange and steady a glance; it revealed nothing of the mind of the savage, but it appeared to be reading my own. (71)

Thus the white colonizer's civilized self-confidence crumbles under the "savage gaze" — a comedy of mistaken identity, indeed. This double-edged humor pervades the entire book, turning *Typee* into something of an optical illusion, similar to a Necker cube where the visual image jumps from foreground to background, depending on which plane the eye selects for focus. Accordingly, those readers who exclusively tune in on Tommo's anecdotal voice will read an eighteenth-century ethnocentric comedy of manners, while those readers who keep in mind Melville's plot — not to mention his numerous auctorial commentaries — will read a nineteenth-century critique of Western (i.e. transnational) colonialism.

If we consider that the Typees are entitled to their own imperial gaze and thus their own cultural misunderstandings, while at the same time they are not allowed to speak in a meaningful manner, we can say that Melville's critique of Euro-American colonialism is based on cultural perspectivism rather than cultural relativism, i.e. on a switch in point of view rather than a recognition of autonomous otherness. The novel's strategy of undermining cultural binaries by a reversal in ranking reaches its climax in Melville's suggestion that the natives should reciprocate Christian attention by sending a handful of their own to the United States as missionaries.⁷ Another subversive switch between two hierarchically ordered points of view can be found in Melville's habit of

introducing terms such as *savage* or *barbarous* with the phrase "what we call."⁸ The result of such perspectivization is intriguing, because it not only undermines the established cultural hierarchy (civilized vs. primitive) but actually exchanges the semantic valuations on which this hierarchy is founded. Thus, a whole array of neologisms and seemingly oxymoronic figures of thought occur in *Typee*. There is, according to Melville, such a thing as "civilized barbarity" (125); there is barbarous rationalism and savage technology ("the fiend-like skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines" [125]).⁹ In his most outspokenly critical passages (all of which were cut from the second American edition), Melville indeed sounds surprisingly modern, almost prophetic even of the reactionary fundamentalism of postcolonial times, hinting that any attempt at positive cultural self-definition remains spellbound both by the factual results of cultural dis-possession and the half-mythical image of a monolithic Western oppressor. Being "civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden" (196), Melville's natives can hope for no liberation that would not negatively reproduce their former exploitation; thus the colonized are made "the victims of the worst vices and evils of civilized life" (182) even long after the colonizers have gone.

It should therefore be observed that the recurring formula, "what we call," serves to introduce dialogic rather than unilateral misconceptions. The epithet "savage" acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy here. "Thus it is that they whom we denominate 'savages' are made to deserve the title" (26), Melville writes, alluding to the necessity of "primitive" resistance against "civilized barbarity."

7 "The term 'savage' is, I conceive, often misapplied, and indeed when I consider the vices, cruelties, and enormities of every kind that spring up in the tainted atmosphere of a feverish civilization, I am inclined to think that so far as the relative wickedness of the parties is concerned, four or five Marquesan Islanders sent to the United States as missionaries might be quite as useful as an equal number of Americans despatched to the Islands in a similar capacity" (125). This intercultural exchange program is not mentioned in the expurgated American version of the book.

8 "[W]ere civilization itself to be estimated by some of its results, it would seem perhaps better for what we call the barbarous part of the world to remain unchanged" (17); "here, as in every case where Civilization has in any way been introduced among those whom we call savages, she has scattered her vices, and withheld her blessings" (198).

9 In a particularly impressive passage, Melville describes how the French keep the savages in check with "floating batteries, which lay with their fatal tubes ostentatiously pointed, not at fortifications and redoubts, but at a handful of bamboo sheds, sheltered in a grove of cocoa-nuts!" (16) The *disproportionate* use of violence, made possible by technological reason, brings to mind Marlow's encounter, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with a French man-of-war, "firing into a continent" (1988:41; I am indebted to Jochen Achilles for this comparison). Marlow's famous indictment of European colonialism as "just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale" (31) also finds itself preformulated in *Typee*, when Melville writes: "The enormities perpetrated in the South Seas upon some of the inoffensive islanders wellnigh pass belief. [... There is] many a petty trader that has navigated the Pacific whose course from island to island might be traced by a series of cold-blooded robberies, kidnappings, and murders, the iniquity of which might be considered almost sufficient to sink her guilty timbers to the bottom of the sea" (26). For a comparison of *Typee* and *Heart of Darkness*, see also Pullin (1978:1).

There are numerous such passages in which Tommo (or rather Melville) justifies indigenous cruelty as a legitimate reaction against unlawful encroachment.¹⁰ As far as the unity of the narrative is concerned, these apologies for the natives' use of violence are problematic in a twofold sense. First, they mix up the narrator's voice with the author's comment, thus threatening to distort the subversive *trompe l'oeil*-effect Melville's plot is working towards. Second, they conflict with Melville's statement that "those reports which ascribe so fierce and belligerent a character to the Typee nation" are actually inventions, "nothing more than fables" (128). There is an obvious contradiction between Melville's critique of intercultural mythmaking — the warfare of the Typees is frequently rendered in mock-heroic terms¹¹ — and Tommo's attempt to explain why the natives are just as ferocious as ethnocentric missionary documents describe them to be. The novel's inability to free itself from the traditional stereotype of the ignoble savage poses one of the major problems in evaluating *Typee*. This ideological and artistic inconsistency, however, does not diminish the achievements of Melville's myth-criticism, his description and analysis of "a self-sustaining structure of prejudice" (Herbert 1980:175). Impressively, the exchange of perspectives and identities in *Typee* works in such a way that it becomes clear that the islanders are actually aware of the prejudices held against them. As Melville frequently insinuates, the Typees actively play up to the expectations of their white colonizers. Thus, by enacting the very identity staked out for them, the so-called savages instrumentalize white fantasies to their own advantage. The charge of cannibalism proves especially helpful in this respect, because it actually allows the Typees to keep white colonizers off the island. The "terror of their name" (138), we learn, is nothing but a white fiction which the natives do everything to uphold, as it guarantees their happy isolation. Being considered uncivilized helps them to actually remain so. In that sense, their behavior towards Western intruders must be seen as an interested attempt to appear precisely as "savage" and "barbarous" as, in the words of Tommo, "we call them."¹²

10 "The cruel invasion of their country by Porter has alone furnished them with ample provocation; and I can sympathize in the spirit which prompts the Typee warrior to guard all the passes to his valley with the point of his levelled spear, and, standing upon the beach, with his back turned upon his green home, to hold at bay the intruding European" (205).

11 As Anderson puts it, Melville "represents their wars with the Hapas [sic] as being little more serious than the sham battles of American schoolboys" (1939:134).

12 Apart from the wish to frighten away intruders, there may have been other reasons that made the Polynesian islanders confess to cannibalism. Anderson suspects that the natives actually tried to "win the favor of their questioners" or were "anxious to please

If this is so, however, the question arises why Melville's novel winds up affirming the very myths it has set out to dismantle. In the end, the threat of cannibalism is not only present in Tommo's strained imagination but is actually verified by Melville's plot. How can we account for this contradiction? This question returns us to the problem of *Typee* as a New World book.

III. Transnational Discontent / National Transcendence

Typee can be called a New World book not only because it was written by an American author but also because it partakes in a long tradition of utopian literature — a tradition which forcefully contributed to the construction of an image of America as the ideal, God-given locus of European cultural self-transcendence. Melville's refusal to perpetuate the rhetoric of the "glorious contrast," however, shifts the focus of this millennial ideology from the North American continent to — in Tommo's own words — "a different sphere of life" (32). As this expression seems to indicate, the destination of Tommo's travels has a rather curious status. On the one hand, the Marquesas figure as a *concrete* utopia; they lie "within the parallels of 8°38' and 9°32' South latitude, and 139°20' and 140°10' West longitude from Greenwich" (11). If this is paradise, it is paradise with a geographical location, much in the same way as post-revolutionary America tended to regard itself as a newfound agrarian Eden, ideologically exceptional and yet topographically definable by its distance from — or proximity to — Greenwich. On the other hand, life in the Typee valley seems to be placed quite *outside* European notions of time and space. In terms of spatial location, Tommo resides in a "secluded abode of happiness" (126): "I was in the 'Happy Valley,'" he enthuses, "and [...] beyond those heights there was nought but a world of care and anxiety" (124). In a later passage he states:

by exaggeration": "[I]t must have been perfectly obvious to them that their Christian teachers were anxious to record the most revolting accounts of heathenism that could be collected, so as to heighten the contrast between savages before and after conversion" (1939:103). Similarly, Tommo describes a white story-teller who has "domesticated [himself] among the barbarous tribes" and, when faced with a white audience, "knows just the sort of information wanted, and furnishes it to any extent" (170). About missionary reports on savage cannibalism, Melville ironically remarks: "Did not the sacred character of these persons render the purity of their intentions unquestionable, I should certainly be led to suppose that they had exaggerated the evils of Paganism in order to enhance the merit of their own disinterested labors" (169). Tommo himself knows about the appeal of this sort of savagism; when he finds out that the Typees are not as barbarous as he had come to expect, he writes: "I must confess that I experienced something like a sense of regret at having my hideous anticipations thus disappointed" (128).

[T]he 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 as he at one time experienced, the mere buoyant sense of a healthful physical existence. (127)

If this sentence seems a little odd, this is mainly because Tommo's comparison is actually dependent on a contrast, namely the contrast between the islanders' ever-present ("continual") happiness and Rousseau's merely transient joy (experienced "at one time"). Residing among the Typees, Tommo apparently manages to realize for himself the age-old dream of a more than momentary happiness — a happiness that lasts. His living conditions are not only ecstatic (he dwells outside the known world, in "a different sphere of life"), but indeed *atemporal*. One of the main characteristics of life in the Typee valley is the complete absence of history and change; the European intruder finds himself in a world where, as Melville beautifully puts it, "the history of a day is the history of a life" (149). Not even changes in the weather seem to occur in this otherworldly yet earthly paradise.¹³ Nor can the threat of death, this preeminent reminder of human temporality, harm the extended ecstasy of the natives. As Kory-Kory tells Tommo, the Typees are aware of their own mortality, but the hereafter which they imagine to be a "very pleasant place" does not seem to differ in any notable way from the world they actually inhabit (172). It is as if they were already living their — "very pleasant" — afterlife.

Evidently, Tommo's emphatic self-relocation, his escape to a New World, aspires toward nothing less than a *prelapsarian* kind of contentment. In a rhetoric reminiscent of the book of Genesis, he repeatedly emphasizes that the existence of the inhabitants of the valley is "exempt from toil" (147):¹⁴

The penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee; for, with the one solitary exception of striking a light, I

13 "[D]ay follows day in one unvarying round of summer and sunshine, and the whole year is one long tropical month of June just melting into July" (213).

14 This is not to say, of course, that the natives are simply lazy. Their uniform existence is distinguished precisely by the absence of that kind of busy boredom that characterizes leisure activities in Western industrial societies. Tommo claims that "it would be no light task to enumerate all their employments, or rather pleasures" (150). Chief among those pleasurable "employments" are smoking narcotics and sleeping, the latter of which Tommo calls, in an endearingly paradoxical metaphor, "the great business of life": "[T]he Marquesans [...] pass a large portion of their time in the arms of Somnus. The native strength of their constitutions is no way shown more emphatically than in the quantity of sleep they can endure. To many of them, indeed, life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap" (152). For a discussion of *Typee* as a variation and commentary on *Genesis*, cf. especially Ruland (1968).

scarcely saw any piece of work performed there which caused the sweat to stand upon a single brow. (195)

As many critics have noted, Melville's insistence on the absence of work and exploitation in the Typee valley was probably motivated *ex negativo* by what he had seen in the urban slums of Great Britain.¹⁵ But what sets *Typee* apart from earlier American critiques of European industrial civilization — one may think of Timothy Dwight's *Greenfield Hill* — is Melville's formulation of a *transnational* discontent with the cultural conditions on both sides of the Atlantic. Talking about the "endless catalog of civilized crimes" (126), Melville does not hesitate to count in his "own favored land":

Heaven help the "Isles of the Sea!" — The sympathy which Christendom feels for them has, alas! in too many instances proved their bane. How little do some of these poor islanders comprehend when they look around them, that no inconsiderable part of their disasters originates in certain tea-party excitements [...]. (195)

Thus including the United States and their revolutionary heritage in his indictment of Western civilization rather than offering the political and ideological constitution of the United States of America as an ideal alternative to European degeneracy, Melville situates himself at a transitional point in the development of national utopian self-conceptualization. In fact, despite his attacks on a transnationally defined Western civilization, Melville still formulates a characteristically *American* utopia. This becomes particularly evident in the elaborate justification that Tommo gives for his desertion from the *Dolly*. It could be argued, of course, that such a justification is made necessary by Melville's critique of the missionary movement. If he wants his political opinions to be taken seriously, it is in Melville's interest that his readers do not consider him an irresponsible mutineer. But there is more at stake than the prevention of *ad hominem* arguments when Tommo tries to give "reasons for resolving to take this step" and "offer some explanation of my conduct" (20). With these words, Tommo links up his liberation from the criminal strictures of his own culture (represented by the microcosmic world of the ship) with central tenets of the very culture he wishes to escape from: the account of his flight is modelled on the rhetoric of the *Declaration of Independence*. Deliberately following Jefferson's rhetorical design, Tommo establishes a syllogistic argument, first quoting contract-theory, then offering a long list of grievances in order to show how the captain of the *Dolly*, whom he describes as "tyrannical" and "arbitrary and violent in the extreme" (21), broke

15 For a more detailed discussion, cf. Woodcock (1981:12).

the contract, and finally deducing the legitimacy of his own act of "separation." Thus, Tommo's utopian flight into an altogether new world seems to be in nominal keeping with traditional American ideologemes, much in the same way as Thoreau begins his experiment in living at Walden Pond on a 4th of July. What distinguishes these rebellions from their eighteenth-century models is their romantic frame of reference. In fact, Tommo's escape from the *Dolly* seems to be impelled as much by legal considerations as by a transcendentalist yearning for social self-isolation.¹⁶ In that sense, the protagonist of *Typee* can be seen as an Emersonian hero par excellence, a radical individualist whose "independence" is much more a matter of "self-reliance" than of Jeffersonian "separation" (a figure of thought closely linked to notions of communal institution). Interestingly, then, Tommo's "unnatural avoidance of familial and social relationships, based primarily upon a desire for independence" (Samson 1989:42) gives a completely new meaning to the concept of "independence," defining it in terms of a post-Christian, radically subjective antinomianism that holds that "[n]o law can be sacred to me but that of my nature" (Emerson 1939, 1:139).

The valley of Typee thus represents much more than a typically Western vision of "the good life." While it cannot be denied that Melville's Polynesian utopia contains all the elements of traditional European fantasies of self-escape,¹⁷ the novel's critique of civilization seems to originate in a sensibility that is unmistakably nineteenth-century and unmistakably American. In fact, Tommo's New World offers a vision of radical freedom that is thinkable only in a postrevolutionary egalitarian society which has come to perceive the early

16 It should be noted, for example, that there is a good deal of adventurous curiosity in Tommo's rebellion. His "strange visions of outlandish things" — evoked by the name "Marquesas" alone (another instance of intercultural mythmaking) — seem to suggest that his desertion would have occurred even without the arbitrary rule of a tyrannical captain (the first of many in Melville's fiction). For a discussion of the theme of rebellion in *Typee*, cf. also Siebald (1979:19-27).

17 Cf. Tommo's long list of "negatives" that brings to mind Gonzalo's famous speech in Act II, Scene I of *The Tempest*: "There were none of those thousand sources of irritation that the ingenuity of civilized man has created to mar his own felicity. There were no foreclosures of mortgages, no protested notes, no bills payable, no debts of honor in Typee; no unreasonable tailors and shoemakers, perversely bent on being paid; no duns of any description; no assault and battery attorneys, to foment discord, backing their clients up to a quarrel, and then knocking their heads together; no poor relations, everlastingly occupying the spare bed-chamber, and diminishing the elbowroom at the family table; no destitute widows with their children starving on the cold charities of the world; no beggars; no debtors' prisons; no proud and hard-hearted nabobs in Typee; or to sum up all in one word — no Money! That root of all evil! was not to be found in the valley" (126).

republic's rage for government as a subversion of the nation's original individualistic venture (and it would take until *Leaves of Grass* for nationalism and individualism to be reconciled again). In that sense, Tommo's yearning for cultural self-isolation is indicative of a deeper yearning to find and follow what Thoreau calls "my particular calling" (1966:49); Tommo's utopian list of "negatives" does not promote a *tabula rasa* that is waiting to be inscribed with new social meanings (as was still the case in Crèvecoeur's interpretation of the New World),¹⁸ but rather an antinomian vision of personal transcendence — a radically subjective attempt to "live deliberately" (1966:61). Tellingly, then, even the communitarian aspects of life in the valley originate in the natives' rejection of any form of external authority, human or divine. Political or religious law has no power over the islanders. As a result, theirs is a society without party politics or confessional fanaticism.¹⁹ There is no need for expansion, no class-structure, no belief in private property, no sexual inhibition.²⁰ *Typee* reads like a transcendentalist pipe-dream of individual freedom combined with communal responsibility — a Polynesian Brook Farm, based on "cooperative anarchy" (Milder 1988:430).

18 Cf. *Letters from an American Farmer*. "[American society] is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything, and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury" (Crèvecoeur 1986:67).

19 "I do not conceive that they could support a debating society for a single night" (203); "in the celebration of many of their strange rites, they appeared merely to seek a sort of childish amusement" (174).

20 The question of sexuality in Melville's novel is an intriguing one. Most early reviewers commented on the islanders' rather liberal conduct which they thought betrayed *Typee* as a fictional romance. The critic of the London *Spectator*, for example, wrote: "[A]n absence of anything like jealousy or female restraint, realize the Pantisocracy which Southey, Coleridge, and others, fancied the perfection of society during the phrensy of the French revolution" (Higgins/Parker 1995:7). In our century, Samson suspects a "sly ambiguity" in Melville's wording when Tommo tells us that the term *typee* means "a lover of human flesh" (1989:43). I wonder, though, how serious Melville really is in presenting this sexual utopia. Fayaway, Tommo's love interest (whose name appears to be meant as a joke), is strangely absent as a character. A clichéd figure in the Pocahontas-tradition, she seems to be Melville's half-heartedly granted concession to his heterosexual readership. As becomes obvious throughout the novel, Tommo is much more drawn to Mehevi's extra-domestic "paradise of bachelors." With what may be "sly ambiguity," he describes the rituals of male bonding on the island: "The Ti was a right jovial place. It did my heart, as well as my body, good to visit it. Secure from female intrusion, there was no restraint upon the hilarity of the warriors, who, like the gentlemen of Europe after the cloth is drawn and the ladies retire, freely indulged their mirth" (152). For a discussion of the problem of gender in a related story by Melville, cf. Serlin (1995).

So while Melville's description of life in the Typee valley is directed specifically against the social realities of postrevolutionary America, his novel simultaneously works to inaugurate a contending version of national identity: one which defines the *homo americanus* as a democratic "nay-sayer" whose liberation from socio-political strictures serves a communal aim primarily by relying on an antinomian tradition of civil disobedience. Compare, once more, Thoreau's *Walden* about the dependence of social liberty on *individual* self-realization:

[My neighbor] had rated it as a gain in coming to America, that here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day. But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things. (1966:137)

Tommo seems to find "that country" — Thoreau's "only true" America — in the valley of Typee. It is no coincidence, in this context, that Hawthorne, five years after Melville had published *Typee*, characterized the romance — i.e., that sort of fiction that is concerned with the invention of alternative visions of life — as the quintessential genre of American literature. Linking the issue of national character to the construction of "what is not, but might be," Hawthorne defined American identity as an identity of imaginative dissent — as an identity of possibility. Herman Melville's first novel has to be seen in the same ideological context. The version of national identity proposed in *Typee* is, to a large extent, the version of national identity introduced during the American Renaissance.

If Melville fails to take the Typees' cultural difference into account, it is precisely because of this national ideological framework. His blindness is a deliberate one. It is necessitated by the attempt to create an American transcendentalist counter-myth to the Western mythmaker's ethnocentric "collection of wonders" (170). Hence, Melville is interested in the culturally strange not for its specific selfness but for its utopian otherness. His appreciation of an allegedly more authentic way of existence is governed by an interested perception and affirmation of "negatives." Significantly, all positive characteristics of Marquesan life are derived from its being *not* like life in the Western world. However, by relying on a national rhetoric of individual transcendence in order to overcome his transnational discontent with Euro-American culture, Melville falls victim to his own strategy of perspectivization and counterdistinction. In one of the most impressive examples of subversive

role-switching, *Typee* inverts the cultural hierarchy between perceiver and perceived, American subject (author or reader) and exotic object:

Having had little time, and scarcely any opportunity to become acquainted with the customs he pretends to describe, [the scientific voyager] writes them down one after another in an off-hand, haphazard style; and were the book thus produced to be translated into the tongue of the people of whom it purports to give the history, it would appear quite as wonderful to them as it does to the American public, and much more improbable. (194)

But Melville himself only stayed four weeks among the Typees instead of the four months he claims and borrowed freely from the very sources he pretends to criticize.²¹ As a matter of fact, Melville probably could have written the same book without ever having visited the island. In any case, if *Typee* had been translated into the language of "the people of whom it purports to give a history," Tommo's hosts would have found Melville's positive account as "wonderful" as the more negative descriptions of other "learned tourists" (170).²² More than that, the Typees, had they ever gotten the chance to read about themselves, probably would have been quite bewildered by those parts of Tommo's narrative that seem to revoke both Melville's attempts at cultural perspectivism and his transcendentalist fantasy of "cooperative anarchy."

IV. Indian Captivity / Cannibal Eden

It has been observed by various commentators that Tommo creates a rather ambiguous cultural identity for himself. He is neither the proud representative of Euro-American civilization nor the white man "gone native." He neither feels content with his original cultural background nor does he accept Typee as an alternative home. He is neither civilized nor savage and yet, he is both, an anti-colonialist colonizer and a savage with a sense of propriety. He entertains, in the terminology of Herbert, the perspective of the "gentleman beachcomber" who "compar[es] Western and Marquesan ways from a 'third viewpoint,' the vantage of a man viewing the peculiarities of both cultures from a tenuous position somewhere outside both" (1980:156). Interestingly, it

21 Mainly Georg von Langsdorff's *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World*, David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean*, and Charles S. Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas*. For a discussion of Melville's sources, cf. Anderson's still invaluable *Melville in the South Seas* (1939).

22 We know today that the Typees, far from being the idling epicures Melville makes of them, actually lived in a rather sophisticated, agriculturally organized, and hierarchically structured society. Cf. Woodcock (1981:22).

was precisely this in-between status of the narrator that characterized Melville's novel as an American book in the eyes of some early British reviewers. Many critics on both sides of the Atlantic took the narrator's uncertain identity as evidence of the book's fictionality. The protagonist pretended to be a common sailor but the novel was clearly written by a man of letters. Is it possible to have Defoe and Selkirk in one person, the reviewer of *John Bull* asked?²³ But other British critics were less skeptical. According to the London *Spectator*, it is possible to have Defoe and Selkirk in one person — if that person is an American:

Had this work been put forward as the production of an English common sailor, we should have had some doubt of its authenticity, in the absence of distinct proof. But in the United States it is different. There social opinion does not invest any employment with caste discredit; and it seems customary with young men of respectability to serve as common seamen, either as a probationership to the navy or as a mode of seeing life. Cooper and Dana are examples of this practice. The wide-spread system of popular education also bestows upon the American a greater familiarity with popular literature and a readier use of the pen than is usual with classes of the same apparent grade in England.

(Higgins/Parker 1995:7)²⁴

Emerson would have been delighted. There is indeed something profoundly American about Tommo's self-presentation as a sailor-gentleman. Melville's synthetic figure of the civilized savage finds its predecessor, of course, in Cooper's Leatherstocking, another hybrid character that condenses two cultures in one body and soul. Melville's "American" willingness to imaginatively transgress his own caste and culture may explain why Hawthorne, the champion of the American romance, was quick to praise the courageous "freedom of view" in *Typee*.²⁵ The problem with such transgressive imaginings, in Cooper and Melville, is that the cultural exchange only works in

one direction. Tommo's horizons may be widened by his self-transformation into a half-native, but as soon as the natives partake in Western civilization they are destined to be corrupted, as Melville's numerous references to the perverse "semicivilization" (Anderson 1939:178) of the Sandwich Islands seem to indicate. Maybe with the same thought in mind, Leatherstocking never tires of pronouncing himself a "man without a cross."

But there is an additional problem with Melville's fantasy of cultural hybridity in *Typee*. Apart from serving as an exercise in cultural counterdistinction and apart from formulating a transcendentalist national utopia, Melville's novel avails itself of one of the oldest genres of Euro-American fiction-writing, the Indian captivity narrative. This may not be surprising, for any attempt at myth-criticism would seem to demand that use is made of the conventions that are to be undermined. And, true enough, the stereotype of the ignoble savage is repeatedly called upon in *Typee* in order to be disproven. Melville's strategy of hierarchical inversion shows itself particularly effective when applied to the imputation of cannibalism. When Tommo and Toby meet their first natives, a boy and a girl, they try to make them understand that they are hungry:

The frightened pair now stood still, whilst we endeavored to make them comprehend the nature of our wants. In doing this Toby went through with a complete series of pantomimic illustrations — opening his mouth from ear to ear, and thrusting his fingers down his throat, gnashing his teeth and rolling his eyes about, till I verily believe the poor creatures took us for a couple of white cannibals who were about to make a meal of them. (69)

The subversive message of this comic passage is clear enough: it does not take much — maybe not even bad intentions — for intercultural encounters to fail and attempts at communication to be misinterpreted as physical threats.²⁶ Frequently in the novel, the issue of cannibalism becomes an occasion for humor rather than for fear, as when Tommo, after his wounded leg has been treated by a medicine man, ironically notes: "My unfortunate limb was now left much in the same condition as a rump-steak after undergoing the castigating process which precedes cooking" (80). These comic subversions, at times, conflict with Tommo's attempt to act as an apologist for the savages,²⁷ but, in

23 "Like Robinson Crusoe, however, we cannot help suspecting that if there really be such a person as Herman Melville, he has either employed a Daniel Defoe to describe his adventures, or is himself both a Defoe and an Alexander Selkirk" (Higgins/Parker 1995:13).

24 The London *Times* (April 1846) adds: "We have called Mr. Melville a common sailor; but he is a very uncommon sailor, even for America whose mariners are better educated than our own" (Higgins/Parker 1995:44).

25 Hawthorne wrote in the Salem *Advertiser* (March 1846): "[The author] has that freedom of view — it would be too harsh to call it laxity of principle — which renders him tolerant of codes and morals that may be little in accordance with our own" (Higgins/Parker 1995:23).

26 It seems interesting, in this context, that the Typees' reputation for cannibalism may actually originate in a mistranslation of the word *kis-kis* with which other Marquesan tribes described them to their white interlocutors (Anderson 1939:103).

27 At one point, Tommo tries to present his readers with what could be termed "cannibalism with a human face": "But it will be argued that these shocking unprincipled wretches are cannibals. Very true; and a rather bad trait in their character it

general, the overall effect is one of consistent demythologization. In a similar fashion, the clichéd dichotomy of “good Indian” vs. “bad Indian” is both reproduced and dismantled by Tommo’s fearful question, upon first meeting the natives of the valley, “Typee or Happar?” — cannibal or noble savage? For in the following, all of Tommo’s ethnocentric preconceptions are proven wrong; “it is as if he has stumbled into Cooper’s forest unable to tell a Mingo from a Mohican” (Samson 1989: 27).

And yet, at the end of the novel, the traditional cultural binaries are safely reinstated and Tommo has to recognize that his hosts, “kind and respectful as they were to me, were, after all, nothing better than a set of cannibals” (118). It is ironic that Tommo, who has praised the Typees for not being acquainted with the principle of exchange (no money exists on the island), constantly asks himself what returns the natives could possibly expect from him. Why would it be *profitable* for them to hold him captive? What is their *purpose* in thus befriending him?²⁸ From the beginning, there are dark intimations that even Kory-Kory’s concern for Tommo’s physical well-being hides nothing but the wish to fatten the pig that is to be slaughtered. Tommo’s belief that the friendly behavior of his hosts or captors serves to cover up “some treacherous scheme” (239) is finally verified by the novel’s plot itself.²⁹ The ultimate

must be allowed. But they are such only when they seek to gratify the passion of revenge upon their enemies; and I ask whether the mere eating of human flesh so very far exceeds in barbarity that custom [of quartering] which only a few years since was practiced in enlightened England” (125). Later he adds that cannibalism is practiced “to a certain moderate extent” among “several of the primitive tribes” in the Pacific, “but it is upon the bodies of slain enemies alone; and horrible and fearful as the custom is, immeasurably as it is to be abhorred and condemned, still I assert that those who indulge in it are in other respects humane and virtuous” (205).

28 “But what dependence could be placed upon the fickle passions which sway the bosom of a savage? His inconstancy and treachery are proverbial. 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); “Surely, thought I, they would not act thus if they meant us any harm. But why this excess of deferential kindness, or what equivalent can they imagine us capable of rendering them for it?” (97); “A thousand times I endeavored to account for the mysterious conduct of the natives. For what conceivable purpose did they thus retain me a captive? What could be their object in treating me with such apparent kindness, and did it not cover some treacherous scheme?” (239).

29 The first suspicion that the Typees plan to eat their captive arises when Toby does not return from his journey to Nukuheva. The inconclusive behavior of the natives after Toby’s disappearance is clearly calculated to heighten the reader’s apprehension of things to come. We should not forget that the readers of the first American and British editions never learned what really happened to Toby. All of Melville’s earlier attempts at myth-criticism are finally annulled when Tommo finds human skeletons in the valley

message of *Typee* thus seems to be that cannibals will be cannibals. In the beginning of his stay in the arcadian valley, an astonished Tommo still asks himself: “Are these the ferocious savages, the blood-thirsty cannibals of whom I have heard such frightful tales!” (203). In the end, he answers his own question: yes, they are.

Tommo thus lives “under an inner compulsion to escape from his Eden” (Woodcock 1981:19), but not because he is “repelled by its easy luxuriance,” as Faith Pullin suggests (1978:6). His desire to return to the very civilization he hates should rather be seen as the logical outcome of a plot that demands savagism and “hair-breadth escapes.” Melville indeed sacrifices his subversive jokes to the maintenance of narrative suspense. As a result, the novel falls back behind its own critique of intercultural mythmaking and winds up sustaining the very binary oppositions it has set out to subvert. This may sound like a rather predictable criticism, coming from a twentieth-century reader, but many of Melville’s contemporaries were equally irritated by this sort of ideological schizophrenia.³⁰ The truly interesting question, however, is why Melville chose to cast his cultural critique in the self-defeating shape of an Indian captivity narrative. One could, of course, answer this by saying that only a captivity plot allows the novel to be written at all. Which is to say that the threat of cannibalism may act as a dramatic pretext to get the protagonist out of his own tale, the narrator out of his own utopian fantasy-world, thus allowing him “to tell thee,” whereas Melville left the island probably not because he felt threatened but simply because Typee never was the kind of transcendentalist

and when Marnoo, unaccountably, tells him that he will have to die if he does not escape.

30 Evert A. Duyckinck wrote in the New York *Morning News* (March 1846) that the reader of Melville’s novel is left “impressed by a salutary horror of the savages whom we might otherwise have fallen in love with!” (Higgins/Parker 1995:17). The *American Whig Review* (April 1846) strikes a more hostile tone: “We take it for granted, as Mr. Melville has now reached home, that he is again duly sensible of the great hardships and evils of civilization, and that he will hasten his return to the society he has so cleverly described in these volumes. The charming Fayaway — the simple-hearted trustful maiden whom he left weeping on the lone island shore — no doubt waits his return with tearful eye: and besides this allurements, a score of Typeean gourmands are also waiting, in the shade of lofty cocoa-trees, for their noon-day meal. How can Mr. Melville resist such temptations?” (Higgins/Parker 1995:36) The reviewer of the *American Whig* has a point here. One of the most striking characteristics of the novel, given its praise of the paradisiacal living conditions on the island, is the almost complete absence of nostalgia on the narrator’s part. The only example I can find — Tommo’s fond remembrance of three palm-trees which he used to see from his sleeping place (244) — is neutralized by another “lasting impression that Tommo takes away from Typee” (Pullin 1978:26), namely the ferocious expression of the chief Mow-Mow whom Tommo kills with a boat hook in order to effect his escape.

paradise he made of it. But I want to suggest an additional possibility: Melville's employment of traditional cannibalist topoi may actually indicate a profound incertitude as far as the narrator's cultural identity is concerned. I propose we read Tommo's fear of cannibalism, which underlies all intercultural exchanges described in the novel, as a fear of the strenuous act of acculturation.

Significantly, the threat of cannibalism is linked in Tommo's mind to a second threat that equally contributes to his decision to escape from the island: the threat of having his body tattooed. Tommo immediately interprets the desire of the islanders to have him tattooed as an attempt to "convert" him (220). There is an obvious contradiction here between Tommo's insistence that the Typees' system of religious belief is not much of a system to speak of and his fear of being turned into a cannibal convert. Furthermore, it should be noted that the threat of cannibalism and the threat of being tattooed, linked as they are in Tommo's mind, actually exclude, if not annul each other, for Tommo would have no reason to fear cannibalism if the natives really wanted to tattoo him. Conversely, if they really planned to eat their captive, they would not be interested in making him become "visibly a member of their society" (Samson 1989:32).³¹ Also Tommo's insistence that the Typees practice cannibalism only on the bodies of slain enemy warriors takes some of the terror out of his tale. These contradictions, then, seem to indicate a deep-seated fear of cultural self-loss that goes hand in hand with Melville's creation of a utopia of cultural hybridity. After all, what could be a more perfect metaphor for being assimilated than being eaten? It should be observed in this context that the skin-marks of the Typees appear uncanny to Tommo precisely because they are expressive, not of the natives' natural primitivism (their alleged otherness to culture), but of their *cultural* strangeness. Kory-Kory, we are told, "embellishes" his face "with a view of improving the handiwork of nature" (83). It is an incomprehensible but nonetheless cultural sign-system that Tommo is confronted with, an indication of the Typees' *distance* from complete innocence and naturalness. Tommo, it becomes clear, fears cultural exchange, not physical death — and he does so because the possibility of exchange threatens to turn his American escape-fantasy into a social reality. If

31 According to Samson, the name given to Melville by the Typees — "tommo" — is a Marquesan verb signifying "to enter into, to adapt well to." "The name indicates, as does the natives' subsequent conduct, that they wish him to enter into their society, but ironically, Tommo not only fails to understand his newly given name, he never adapts" (1989:27). The Typees' desire to make Tommo one of their own, together with their tendency to regard him as a child in need of instruction, may also account for their strange behavior after Toby's disappearance: perhaps it is out of solicitude that they hold him captive (and keep him ignorant).

Tommo really were to "go native," he would inevitably feel repressed by yet another system of cultural codification and the transcendental, imaginatively a-cultural, vantage point on which his entire utopian vision hinges would be lost immediately. Despite his "freedom of view," Tommo, like Cooper's Leatherstocking, is determined to be and remain "a man without a cross."

V. Eagle-Eyed Readers / Dead Letters

Why did Melville then choose to sacrifice his comedy of mistaken identity to the thrills of an early American captivity narrative? Why did he subvert his own subversions? Leaving aside the inherent contradictions of Melville's transcendentalist vision — the problem of a cultural hybridity that is based on a wish for social self-isolation — there may be yet another, more profane but at the same time more compelling reason for the inconsistencies of *Typee*. Melville must have known that his attacks on the missionary movement would not be taken lightly by his Christian readers. It is one thing to paint the utopian picture of a more innocent and more authentic non-Western life (doing so can even be seen as a distinctive feature of Western culture), but it is quite another to combine this traditional desire for cultural self-transcendence with an analysis of concrete mechanisms of economic exploitation, social repression, and intercultural mythmaking. Melville's indictment of Euro-American crimes in the South Seas is as harsh as it is astute, and contemporary scholars of nineteenth-century colonialism would do well to pay attention to *Typee*. Is it surprising, then, that Melville felt the need to formulate his attacks on Western civilization in the disguise of an adventure story?³² What Melville claimed for Hawthorne's tales, namely "that some of them are directly calculated to deceive — egregiously deceive — the superficial skimmer of pages," may hold true for his own novel as well; already in *Typee* (and not just in *Pierre* and the works to follow), Melville may have counted on what he calls "eagle-eyed readers" to take note of these hidden deceptions and discern his unsettling *trompe l'oeil*-effects (Melville 1987:251).

But we should be careful here. Of course it would be possible to crank up the machinery of New Historicist jargon in order to construct a "subversive" subtext even for Tommo's captivity plot. In a critical climate where the mere fact of subversion is taken as proof of a position's validity — where repression in itself becomes a mark of truth, regardless of the particular features and attributes of the thing repressed — this may even be the only possible way to

32 "Encoding," says Hershel Parker, "is a desperate strategy independent of gender" (1989:2127).

"recover" Melville's novel. But the question is, what would be gained by subordinating *Typee* to a discourse that finds radical resistance even in the most innocuous and unlikely texts because otherwise it could not afford to take notice of them at all? In the case of *Typee*, there can be no question that Melville endowed his narrative with a rich deposit of subterranean meaning, turning *Typee* into one of the first "transcendentalist" novels of American literature. Furthermore, however, it appears clear that Melville's subversive subtext fails to assert itself against the powerful conventions of the novel's surface narrative, which are primarily taken from eighteenth-century literary models. How can this failure be explained? As suggested above, the narrative of *Typee* falls victim to the internal contradictions of its own transcendentalist utopia. Moreover, Melville may simply have miscalculated the odds involved in trying to write a book for two readerships.³³ At one point in the novel, he asserts: "[T]hose things which I have stated as facts will remain facts, in spite of whatever the bigoted and incredulous may say or write against them" (199). As it happened, the bigoted and incredulous did react — but in a way not anticipated by Melville; for not only did they take offense at the novel's irreverence,³⁴ they actually changed its text. The criticism of the Christian public finally resulted in an expurgated version of *Typee*. This new edition, it is true, proved as popular as its predecessor, but it lacked all those passages that modern readers easily recognize as the most Melvillean, the passages looking forward to *Moby-Dick* and *The Piazza Tales*. During Melville's lifetime, no complete version of the novel that made his name would reappear in America. He did not have to wait until the summer of 1852 and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" to find himself an author of dead letters. As it turns out, there can be no "eagle-eyed" readings of undelivered messages.

33 Whenever criticizing the missionary movement, for example, Melville employs a strategy of openly praising "that glorious cause" while attacking the "proceedings of some of its advocates" (xiv). But such disclaimers could not deceive the proponents of the mission. The reviewer of the London *Critic* discerningly calls this a "tone of mock respect" (Higgins/Parker 1995:16).

34 Among the negative reviews, the following criticize Melville's assessment of the missionary movement: The London *Critic* (March 1846); the London *Eclectic Review* (April 1846); the New York *American Whig Review* (April 1846); the New York *Evangelist* (April 1846) which is also the review that brought Melville's novel to the attention of Richard "Toby" Greene; the New Haven *New Englander* (July 1846); the Boston *Christian Observatory* (May 1847); and, especially, the New York *Christian Parlor Magazine* (July 1846), which is analyzed in Herbert (1980:184-189).

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