amour sincère et passionné pour Catherine. Nous n’en disconvenons pas (79). Mais un homme aussi complexe, « ne du tout fol, ne du tout sage », compagnon de Coquillards, cette société secrète et masculine du XVe siècle, n’aurait-il pas pu s’adonner aussi, ne serait-ce qu’occasionnellement, à l’amour pédérastique ? La sodomie est un acte abominable aux yeux de l’Église médiévale, et les hommes qui en sont reconnus coupables finissent bien souvent sur le bûcher. Dans ces conditions, il n’est pas étonnant que Villon ait fait preuve de discrétion à cet égard et qu’il ait fallu l’infinie patience de la critique pour déchiffrer dans son œuvre, d’une part des attaques contre certains sodomites et, d’autre part, quelques allusifs aveux personnels laissant entendre qu’il avait peut-être lui-même parfois labouré en cette terre stérile.

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‘Enviable Isles’: Melville’s South Seas

Robert K. Martin

Melville’s first novel has undergone, over the past fifty years, a shift in critical interpretation almost as great as the controversies that surrounded it in Melville’s lifetime. In the 19th century the central issue was the accuracy of Typee as fact. Long after the other novels were forgotten, Typee remained in print precisely because of its presumed value as an accurate account of a real journey. It came to be cited in professional studies of ethnology and comparative religion. With the revival of interest in Melville in the early 20th century, it became possible to view Typee as a work of fiction, an apprentice work perhaps, but one nonetheless that bore certain relationships to Melville’s by now more celebrated works such as Moby Dick. Thus the monumental work of Charles Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, was able to show that Melville deliberately altered many of the facts of his own experience precisely because readers expected a claim to be made for the work as fiction. Typee’s inaccuracies thus confirmed its nature as a work of art.

The early critics of the Melville revival, such as Anderson, generally assumed that the work should be read as what Anderson calls a “brief against civilization”.¹ In this view, Typee is part of a Romantic tradition that makes use of a primitive culture as a way of indicting civilization. Encouraged by the primitivist spirit of the 1920’s which sought an escape from the false “progress” of Western civilization, Anderson gave the classic statement of Typee as a defense of the primitive: in his view the novel is “a whole-hearted defense of the Noble Savage and a eulogy of his happy life, his external beauty, and his inward purity of heart”². More recent critics, beginning with Milton Stern, have argued that the primitivism of Typee is “rejected”³. Such critics maintain that the escape of Tommo which concludes the book indicates the failure of an experiment in primitivism.

To some extent the two readings are ways of expressing the critics’ own social and political views. Thus Stern’s anti-primitive reading is consistent with his conclusion that it is Captain Vere, in Billy Budd, who represents Melville’s ideal as well as his own definition of “selfless circumspection”⁴. Obviously no critical reading can be free of the point of view of the critic. But it seems important when looking at a work like Typee, which almost all readers find flawed to some extent, to discover Melville’s own meaning. What concepts did he bring with him in his exploration of Typee? What did the South Seas mean in the 1840’s, and how did these social meanings get integrated with Melville’s personal experience? What kind of work did Melville finally create?

The first point to be made is that Melville was making use of the conventions of the travel narrative. To say this is not to admit that Melville’s 19th century readers were right in their demand for absolute faithfulness to experience, but to acknowledge that the account of a
journey to a distant place and of the customs of the inhabitants is a recognizable form, and one which was enormously popular in the 19th century. Within a few years of Melville’s work, for instance, Bayard Taylor undertook his journey to Egypt and the Holy Land, beginning his series of adventures which made him one of America’s most celebrated authors, and George William Curtis published his Nile Notes of a Howadji, the first of his chronicles of his journeys to exotic places. Under the guise of scientific reporting, the narrative of travel to exotic places allowed the writer to accomplish two things: to introduce an open sensuality that would otherwise be unthinkable, providing a kind of genteel pornography (one need only think of The National Geographic in more recent times to understand how this phenomenon works), and to allow for a critique of dominant mores, whether Western colonialism or Protestant evangelism, by implied contrast. Both of these functions were more than adequately performed by Typee: no American novel of the 1840’s which was set in America seems likely to have been able to present so many naked bodies, so much open sex, so many phallic jokes and innuendoes: and only the claim of authenticity permitted Melville to demonstrate the hypocrisies of the Christian missions and the arrogance of the colonizing impulse.

A more specific need could also be served by the travel narrative, one that it has again continued to serve: the form permitted the exploration of alternate sexuality. For 19th century homosexuals, in search of both justification for themselves and a possible realization of their desires, the journey to an exotic landscape offered the possibility of locating a place where there might be others like them, a place where friendship might play its legitimate part in social life. As Newton Arvin put it, in discreet terms, the “cult of physical beauty” which was associated with the Marquesas “implied inevitably a Greeklike cult of physical love also.” If Melville did not go to the South Seas in search of a homosexual paradise, his memory of his stay there included a nostalgic appreciation of a society in which deep passionate friendship played an honourable part.

The institutionalization of male friendship in Polynesia was known to Melville before his publication of Typee. In 1840 Richard Henry Dana included in Two Years Before The Mast an account of the institution he called aikane, and Melville called tayo: the “one particular friend” whom one is “bound to do everything for”, with whom one has “a sort of contract—an alliance offensive and defensive”, and for whom one “will often make the greatest sacrifices.” Melville’s treatment of friendship in Typee goes beyond this institution, of course, and indeed Marnoo the stranger plays a far greater erotic role than Kory-Kory, the tayo. Nonetheless Melville was able to use the story of a journey as a way of exploring the part that male friendship might play in the life of a man, if only he could be transported from the world of his own Western culture. Many of the tensions of Typee come from Melville’s attempt to explore this theme, and his inability to reach a full resolution of it.

Part of the evocative power of the journey described in Typee comes from the particular form it takes: the journey to what W. H. Auden has called the “garden-island”. In Auden’s view, this image joins the
qualities of the garden, its solitude, enclosure, and innocence, to the qualities of the island, its safety and its exemption from ordinary law. It is characteristic of the garden-island that "there is no conflict between natural desire and moral duty". By introducing Tommo into the island paradise, Melville creates a conflict for his protagonist. Tommo can recognize the identity of natural desire with life on Typee, but he cannot escape the recollection of moral duty, or what he takes to be moral duty. For Tommo moral duty and natural desire seem irreconcilable, and so life with the Typees is ultimately impossible.

Although it begins as one, Typee does not remain merely a travel narrative. As the escape episode which concludes it implies, it is also a captivity narrative. Like other captivity narratives, Typee expresses the narrator's ambivalence about his captivity. The retrospective narrator must celebrate his return to civilization, his narrow escape from a dreaded fate. But the period of residence in the other culture (in the American context, normally with American Indians) is also one that is remembered fondly. What renders the form particularly ambivalent is that the protagonist is frequently a woman who has married one of her captors. Thus her rescue is at once a salvation and a new captivity, although she cannot normally express any reservations about her original society in an open manner. By adopting the form, Melville identifies his hero/self with the captive woman and exposes his own ambivalences about the return to civilization.

There can, I think, be no doubt about Melville's awareness of a homosexual theme as early in his career as Typee. The reference, later deleted, to "Buggerry Island" (p. 23) makes Melville's knowledge of homosexual practices clear. At the same time, the reference provides an ironic contrast to the idealized homosexuality of the island. Although the term "homosexuality" did not exist in the 1840's, and thus buggery and sodomy were the only terms possible to describe such activity, it seems that Melville distinguished between homosexual practices as might occur on shipboard, frequently involving force and arising more out of necessity than out of affection, and a passionate love between men which he repeatedly described as an ideal and sought a place for.

The novel begins with some indication of that affection, even in the confines of the ship. After considering an escape alone, Tom considers the need for a friend—a "partner of my adventure," "some comrade with me," "what solace would a companion be!" Tom and Toby agree to undertake an escape together: "We ratified our engagement with an affectionate wedding of palms." (p. 33) The repeated use of a similar metaphor in that phrase—"engagement" and "wedding"—anticipates Melville's use of the marriage metaphor to join Ishmael and Queequeg in Moby Dick. And, in anticipation of the opening of Moby Dick, we first see Toby "leaning over the bulwarks, apparently plunged in a profound reverie." (p. 31) The union of Tom and Toby is the first suggestion of the joining together of opposites which plays such a large symbolic role in the novel.

The beginning of Typee is strikingly like the beginning of Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym—a vision of mixed delight and horror and a response
to that vision by an "irresistible curiosity." (p. 5) The mixture of delight and horror is presented as a realistic detail, but we may well consider it a depiction of a psychic state. For the narrator (Tom, or Tommo, as he is later called) is pulled toward the images of natural beauty, lushness, and pleasure. But these cannot be attained without the commission of a crime—the abandoning of the ship. Tom, as a sailor on a whaling ship, is not free, but is at the mercy of his captain. This captain, like the others in Melville's work, exercises a power of life and death over his crew, and is subject to no constraints on his behavior. The tyranny of the captain, his cruelty, the inequities of social class which seem even more acute on board ship than on land, contribute to Tom's decision to leave the ship.

In the virtual absence of the presentation of any world on shore, the ship takes the place of society. The ship is not a means of escaping society, but society itself. And that society is, we see, one of strict regimentation and authoritarianism. It is, in that sense, like a family, for, Melville frequently reminds us, the captain is a father to his crew. The "paradise of bachelors" is spoiled by the presence of the captain, representing the interdictions of society. The first act required, or desired, is an assertion of self and a gratification of desire, through the abandonment of authority. In order to gratify his desire, Tom must become a criminal. That this act does not seem criminal is beside the point, as is the fact that there is no criminal intent. The rule of the captain is absolute, from Typee to Billy Budd, and therefore natural good (as represented by the captain). Putting it another way, the gratification of desire, the search for pleasure, the Quest for the Golden Land, is always antisocial. The conflict is essential to all of Melville's work, for he seems to have recognized early Freud's insight that personal desires must always be suppressed by society, in order to provide the additional energy needed for work. The threat to society throughout Melville is the threat of play—play for its own sake. From Typee on he recognizes that the world of play has become infinitely smaller (both historically and in our own lives) and that the "fathers" will do all they can to punish those who defect, who run away from responsibility. In Typee, Melville has his hero make this choice, but he bears with him signs of his divided mind: his swollen leg, symbol of his wounded nature and also of his inability to function as "natural" man, and his constant fears that he will be eaten by the natives or that he will be tattooed, both of which may be thought of as castration fears, but which are more usefully viewed simply as impediments to his integration into the Typee community, signs that although he has defected from the ship, he has not entirely defected from its values.

Tom's companion on these adventures, Toby, has no problem with his leg and is apparently far less guilt-ridden than the narrator. Although one of the sailors, he is spiritually closer to the natives. He has a "naturally dark complexion . . . deepened by exposure to the tropical sun." (p. 32) The relationship between Tom and Toby is thus a prelude to the relationships between Tom and the natives of Typee as well as an early indication of Melville's treatment of the relationship between two young men, generally a white, European "intellectual" and a more "natural" darker Oriental or Mediterranean. Whatever the facts about the real Toby's

* Text insert: (as represented by Typee or by Billy) is always in conflict with social good
disappearance from Typee (some of them given in Melville's "Sequel"), it is clear that the symbolic role of Toby ends once the couple has reached the interior of the island. Toby is a guide, an intermediary. His darkness signals his affinities to the natural world of Typee, and his lack of origins ("He was one 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" [p. 32]) marks him off as someone not fixed either in the world of the ship or that of the island. Toby is a free spirit. It is precisely this freedom which the novel presents as the highest value. Tommo's escape, although partly motivated by fear, is also a sign of his refusal to be "typed", to become a Typee. He too must learn to rove.

With the help of Toby, then, Tom can flee the ship and begin the journey to the interior of the island. The extraordinary difficulties of this journey again remind us of Pym and derive from the book's romance structure. It has been pointed out that Melville's real-life journey was a relatively simple one, but Melville's myth required an elaborate, painstaking journey. For his Golden Land must be secret, difficult of access, and enclosed. The journey there must be perilous, so that those who journey are worthy of their rare reward.

Melville repeatedly treats Typee in terms of its superiority to "civilized" society. In every possible way he establishes the contrast between the two worlds, always to the advantage of Typee and to the disadvantage of civilization. The images are those traditionally associated with the Golden Land—lush vegetation, calm, peace, tranquillity. Typee is "like the enchanted garden in the fairy tale." It is like "the gardens of Paradise." (p. 49) The prelapsarian implications are repeated: "The penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee." (p. 195) And Melville goes on to identify specifically its unfallen nature: "I scarce saw any piece of work performed there." (p. 195) The native women have "unconcealed natural graces" compared to the "stiffness, formality, and affectation" of "coronation beauties, at Westminster Abbey." (p. 161) Beauty and grace are not the only points of Typee's superiority; its inhabitants also demonstrate superior virtue, a trait they share with other "barbarous people";

The hospitality of the wild Arab, the courage of the North American Indian, and the faithful friendships of some of the Polynesian nations, far surpass any thing of a similar kind among the polished communities of Europe. (pp. 202-203)

Tommo's perception of Typee shifts radically. He believes he has entered Paradise, then he fears he has fallen among cannibals; his leg swells, his leg heals; he comes to understand something of Typee life, and then suddenly he fears for his survival (the survival of his identity far more than that of his life). This vacillation is between two extremes, neither of which can be accurate. Each of the tribes on the island sees the other as the enemy, and defines evil in terms of otherness. Are we with the good tribe or the evil tribe? Melville's point of course is that no tribe (read nation) is ever good or evil; each has its peculiar customs which may seem evil to
those who do not understand them. The novel moves toward a recognition of the complexity of experience, a complexity which precludes simple categorization. Melville plays on the problem of naming in his reference to the tribal name.

Their very name is a frightful one; for the word “Typee” in the Marquesan dialect signifies a lover of human flesh. It is rather singular that the title should have been bestowed upon them exclusively, inasmuch as the natives of all this group are irreclaimable cannibals. The name may, perhaps, have been given to denote the particular ferocity of this clan, and to convey a special stigma along with it. (pp. 22-23)

This explanation of the name is one of Melville’s inventions. Its fictiveness serves to stress its importance in Melville’s symbolic structure. The name creates the fear; it is the category which determines our perceptions. The other tribes condemn the Typees by labelling them; newcomers cannot help meeting them with fear and hostility. But, as Paul Witherington has pointed out in a brief but fascinating comment, Melville’s reference seems to have a double meaning: it is, he says, “an ambiguity that suggests either cannibalism or sensuality and, more important, the cannibalism of sensuality, a paradox crucial to the novel.”10 The Typees are, indeed, lovers of flesh, and their voluptuousness evokes as much fear as their reputed cannibalism. To see the Typees correctly, one must forget one’s preconceptions, which means, abandon all labels (just as Moby Dick cannot be known by its etymology). By analogy, in order to see homosexuality correctly, one must forget preconceptions and categories of good and evil: homosexuality is both buggery and ideal friendship. The Tommo who flees at the end succumbs both to his sexual fears and to his cultural prejudices.

There is one noble savage in Typee, who clearly illustrates Melville’s indebtedness to Rousseau and his appropriation of the idea of the novel savage for his own purposes. The noble savage is Marnoo, the stranger. He is, as the concept implies, a strange mixture of the savage with classical ideals of beauty. He has “matchless symmetry of form,” he might have stood “for the statue of the Polynesian Apollo,” he reminds Tom of “an antique bust.” (p. 135) His striking beauty is tempered by a check “of a feminine softness,” hinting at the androgyny that Melville associated with the realization of the ideal. Here, then, is nature’s nobleman, and Tom is immediately smitten, only to be sorely disappointed when Marnoo appears to pay him no attention:

Had the belle of the season, in the pride of her beauty and power, been cut in a place of public resort by some supercilious exquisite, she could not have felt greater indignation than I did at this unexpected slight. (p. 136)

Marnoo is not quite as unreceptive as he at first seems. He tells the story of his life to Tom (like Toby, he has no family and no origins, he was an islander who was “carried to sea,” he is another rover, and a man between two cultures, embodying the best of both). And he is eventually the means of Tom’s escape.
The composite figure, Marnoo-Toby, represents Melville's ideal. Each of them is somewhere between civilization and savagery. Marnoo, for instance, has the Polynesian beauty (identified with the Greek) but he does not have the usual facial tattoos. He does have one very striking tattoo, though, a tree which is traced along his spine, suggesting to the narrator a "spreading vine tacked against a garden wall." (p. 136) Marnoo is thus identified as a life force, bearing the tree of life. He retains the original phallic power which is otherwise disappearing from the islanders. In a fascinating passage, anticipating the black god of Queequeg, Melville discusses one of the ithyphallic idols. It is in the traditional shape, but "all its prominent points were bruised and battered, or entirely rotted away. The nose had taken its departure..." (p. 178) Allowing for the prudishness of his readers, Melville seems to be as clear as he can be: the idol or tiki has lost its phallus (Poe used the nose as an elaborate phallic joke in just the same way, we recall), just as the Typee society has lost its phallic potency. Melville then turns it all into a delightful joke, bemoaning "the wood-rot malady" as a sign of "a back-slidden generation," in a wonderful parody of American Calvinism. But the point remains: it is the intermediate state, the union of civilization and savagery, which is desirable. Melville's vision is of a triumphant miscegenation, in which white and black, head and heart, male and female, will finally be reunited.

This theme reaches its fullest statement in the "marriage" of Ishmael and Queequeg. Queequeg is the logical conclusion of all the dark strangers and lovers throughout Melville's early works, and he bears with him his god, sign both of his savagery and of his phallic potency (thus giving rise to all sorts of hilarious castration fears on the part of Ishmael, just as tattooing and cannibalism provide a delicious shudder in Typee). By his marriage to Ishmael, the South Seas are wedded to New England, primitive to Presbyterian, body to soul. But the assertion of the need for such a union runs through Melville's romances. It is already present in Tommo's admiration for Marnoo and in Marnoo's part in Tommo's escape. From the patriarchal world of the ship, Tommo escapes to the maternal affections of Typee. But he is never free of the fear of retribution. What we may call his Calvinist conscience makes him doubt the virtues of a society devoted to pleasure, and that doubt, together with Melville's inability to deal with the novel's homosexual implications, drives Tommo back to the ship, abandoning the benign phallicism of a patriarchal society for the phallic aggression that comes to dominate the patriarchal world of Moby Dick.

It is clear that the society Melville depicts in Typee had been patriarchal at some not too distant time. The traces of patriarchal religion are evident, although power at the time of his narrative seems to reside in the men, and women are excluded from the sacred grove, and from the canoe. Melville does notice that a system of polyandry exists, and he is perceptive enough to see its implications. He writes:

A regular system of polygamy among the islanders; but of a most extraordinary nature,—a plurality of husbands, instead of wives; and this solitary
fact speaks volumes for the gentle disposition of the male population. (p. 191)

As Melville suggests here, the aggressive behavior of men is related to the Western concept of marriage. The acquisition of a bride in the West becomes the first step in the development of a system of private property and of the defense of that property by force if necessary. When men are not competing for the ownership of women, they are free to develop friendships among themselves, friendships like those of Polynesia described in *Typee* and *Omoo*.

Melville’s myth of the Golden Land is intricately tied up with his notion of male friendship. Toby was not, apparently, the mere random companion Melville seems to depict. Melville thought enough of the real Toby, Richard Tobias Greene, to keep a daguerrotype of him until his death, where it was found among his possessions.²⁸ Late in his life he wrote a very moving poem to Toby, now called (in an amusing erotic pun) “Ned Bumm,” in which he recalls their journey to “Marquesas and glenned isles that be/Authentic Edens in a pagan sea.” He recognizes that their world has passed with time, and that tourists now take the place of the earlier voyagers, but he still recalls with pleasure the Paradise they once knew:

But we, in anchor-watches calm,
The Indian Psyche’s languor won,
And, musing breathed primeval balm
From Edens ere yet overrun;
Marveling mild if mortal twice,
Here and hereafter, touch a Paradise.¹³

The sense of Paradise lost here is double, of course, for he has lost not only the Paradise which all men lose, the paradise which the Bible calls Eden, but also the paradise of male friendship which he knew with Ned/Toby. Many people have the sense that growing older involves a sense of loss, but when growth implies the abandonment of a potential for deep affection, as Melville felt in his own life, the sense of loss is particularly acute. The South Seas for Melville were at least three things; in descending order of abstraction: the place I was with Ned, the place where male friendship is recognized and institutionalized, and the place we all lived once, where there was plenty to eat, warmth and sunshine, happiness and harmony. These three ideas must be understood together if we are to grasp the meaning of Melville’s first romance.

Fact or fiction? Defense of innocence or rejection of the primitive? Like Melville’s later works, *Typee* evades easy definition. The “facts” of *Typee* provide a basis for Melville’s critique of society and a justification for his violation of Victorian taboos. Its “fictions” enable Melville to make his own use of this material, and to turn an apparent travel narrative into the symbolic exposition of a spiritual autobiography. Although Melville’s narrator does not have the ability to deal with the sexuality of the tale he himself relates, he does make a giant leap forward when he comes to recognize the impossibility of judging by appearances. There can be no
answer to the good/evil dilemma of Typee, since the dilemma itself is false. There is only experience. By bearing in mind, though, that innocence stands, among other things, for homosexuality (although a homosexuality that is itself in some sense “innocent”), one can understand Melville’s problem and the confusions of his critics. Typee is a work which proposes the superiority of a “savage” morality over a “civilized” one, but one which must simultaneously stay free of all definitions. Tommo does not finally reject the Typees; he flees them. In much that way Melville spent his life, as James Baldwin put it of his hero, David, “having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard.”14 Typee was a paradise that evoked both desire and fear—a fear even that desire might be fulfilled—and that could only achieve its purity when seen from afar. The “enviable isles” were those of memory, purified by time and washed free of fear. They could finally only be attained in death.

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NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 178.
4. Ibid., p. 248.
9. Herman Melville, Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life (Evanston & Chicago, 1968). All further citations are to this, the Northwestern-Newberry Edition, and are indicated in the text.
11. The joining of the tree and the vine seems to point to his symbolic androgyny, and the vine symbol itself may look forward to the “Vine” of Clarel.