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## TYPEE, OR MELVILLE AS APPRENTICE SEAMAN AND FRESHMAN WRITER

Le romancier n'est ni historien ni prophète,  
il est explorateur de l'existence.

Milan Kundera

*Typee*, c'est l'écriture melvillienne à l'état de chrysalide. Je m'attache à montrer que si l'on se donne la peine de ne pas en considérer la seule trame narrative, on découvrira dans ce premier roman de l'auteur de *Moby-Dick* tous les éléments qui font de lui aujourd'hui encore un des auteurs les plus «modernes» de la littérature américaine.

“A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard”,<sup>1</sup> says the narrator of *Moby-Dick*. This statement is true for “unlettered Ishmael”, and it is equally true for the author of the novel, who, because of the vicissitudes of a tumultuous youth, was never able to complete his studies and obtain a university degree. Herman Melville published his first novel *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*<sup>2</sup> in 1846 after a sea-voyage during which he served on two whalers, one merchant ship, and even as an ordinary seaman on the frigate *United States*. When he at last returned to Boston in

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1. Herman MELVILLE, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle, New York: The Library of America, 1983 ch. 24, p. 912. Hereafter cited as *Moby-Dick*.

2. When it was first published by John Murray in London in 1846, the novel was called: *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Island; or a Peep at Polynesian Life*. The later American edition included the word *Typee* but changed the subtitle: *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. During a four months' Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas with Notices of the French Occupation of Tahiti and the Provisional Cession of the Sandwich Islands to Lord Paulet*. The present title appeared for the first time in the 1893 English edition and has since then been retained in most modern editions of the novel.

1844, he had travelled for nearly four years. The author who had always felt attracted by the vast expanses of the ocean had thus graduated from his college of sorts; what he thought of as a way of earning his living and discovering the world was to teach him a lot about his relationship to his youthful restlessness, and it proved to be the start of his formation as a writer.

The sea-journey was for young Melville a quest for another world; he felt he was an outsider in the sedentary world in which he felt confined, and he did not recognize it as his own, as his repeated and vain attempts to settle into a career show. Melville's novels are also quests, in all of which he explores the problematic of his wandering life.

After his return, Melville started recounting the story of his journey in the circle of his family and friends. Partly because the means of the family were meagre, and partly because he had already tried to publish his "Fragments from a Writing Desk", Herman was encouraged to write down and publish his narrative. It was to prove a tremendous experience: Melville discovered that what interested him mainly was writing as such; it interested him far more than the argument and the story-line itself. Over the years Melville realized that the great adventure he was to embark on was not sea-roving and whaling but writing.

*Typee*—the result of Melville's *Bildungsreise*—is the story of successive escapes. First from "home and mother", then from the fatherly authority of the captain of the ship that was carrying him away, and eventually from what could have been a paradise regained à la *Gauguin*. The book is based on Melville's authentic experience of a month-long stay among the dreaded cannibal tribe of Typees. Although the claim of verisimilitude secured the commercial success of the book, there is more fiction in it than biographical data. His first book seemed to offer to the until then penniless Herman Melville a good opportunity to make a living, which enticed him to work on successive narratives that he was himself to regard as mere pot-boilers (*Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*). Very soon, however, he felt compelled to leave this sort of writing and escape from *Typee* as Tommo, the narrator of the novel, had had to escape from the valley of the Typees. Melville's inability to stay in the paradise he had found in the Typee valley is indicative of inner conflicts that will only find a resolution through his activity as a novelist. However distant from Melville's late production, *Typee* was cut by the yet in-

experienced writer out of the same fabric in which he would, some years later, tailor such celebrated works as *Moby-Dick*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

The necessarily limited ambition of the present essay is to show in *Typee* the first signs of the development that led Melville from the position of a simple story-teller who recounts and evokes a past experience to that of a writer whose experience is the present of the writing. Many elements indicative of an attitude towards language that makes of Melville a great writer are already present in his first novel, but the young author was not ready to accept them yet: "his running unconsciousness was always mystical and symbolical. He was not aware that he was being mystical".<sup>3</sup> *Typee* is the catalyst of his new awareness.

Several years later, as he was feverishly working on *Moby-Dick*, he said in a now famous letter to his friend Hawthorne:

Until I was twenty-five I had no development at all. From my twenty fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself.<sup>4</sup>

The development he was referring to is the expansion and the exploration of his literary space. He had settled down at last to write. He gradually realized that no heedless running around the world would teach him anything more about his art:

'Well, what dost thou then think about seeing the world? Do ye wish to go round Cape Horn to see any more of it, eh? Can't you see it from where you stand?'<sup>5</sup>

Like Ishmael, Melville felt he had to launch himself on his adventure<sup>6</sup>—"to go a-whaling [he] must"—but unlike Ishmael, he

3. David Herbert LAWRENCE, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1923; New York: The Viking Press, 1969, p. 134.

4. Herman MELVILLE, "To Hawthorne", 1(?) June 1851, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. R. Merrell Davis and William H. Gilman, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960 p. 130.

5. *Moby-Dick*, ch. 16, p. 871.

6. "Adventure" is to be understood here in the sense that Roland Barthes gives to the word *aventure*, i.e. as "c'est une *aventure*, c'est-à-dire ce qu'il m'advent", that which was to befall Melville, to "come upon" him in his experience of writing. Roland BARTHES, *L'Aventure sémiologique*, Paris: Seuil, 1985, p. 10.

did not return to sea. Ships had taken him as far as they possibly could, he had visited places that were as close as possible to paradise, but he could not stay there. The Typee valley was not—could not possibly be—Melville's Eden: it could only be his Gethsemane. He realized that there was no actual and earthly place he could escape to; no situable and namable place because “it is not down on any map; true places never are”.<sup>7</sup> The experience of *Typee* taught him (as the ensuing novels would do) that the only possible journeying space for him was in language. He settled down in the world but not in words. In his New England cottage where he took care of his cow and his horse he wrote:

I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered with snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic. My room seems a ship's cabin; & at night I wake up & hear the wind shrieking.<sup>8</sup>

The valley of the Typees corresponds in many of its characteristics to a Utopian land of plenty. It is a very secluded *locus amoenus* reminiscent of the garden of Eden. Toby and his companion—the narrator and main protagonist—have to overcome great difficulties in order to be able to enter the paradisiacal place; they experience all the paradigmatic emotions that heroes of quests go through. Shortly after leaving the safe but constraining world of the ship, they begin a kind of journey of initiation that is to determine whether they are worthy of entering the garden. Thus they are rapidly disoriented and get lost; they experience great fear and confront death while attempting to overcome all the hindrances that are to measure their valour. Finally, they are welcomed in the valley by two children—the very image of innocence—and led to a village, where—at least so it seems—they will be able to live perfectly happy.

However, from the very beginning of their stay the narrator expresses his anxiety to leave, or more exactly to “escape”. His attitude can be explained, at the start, by the fear of being a guest in the village of a notorious cannibal tribe. Cannibalism is constantly present in the protagonists' wildest nightmares and phan-

7. *Moby-Dick*, ch. 12, p. 852.

8. Herman MELVILLE, “To Evert A. Duyckinck”, 13 December 1850, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, p. 117.

tasms, but they are never able to ascertain whether the Typees actually feed on human flesh. Toby's fear of being eaten by the ogre-like savages after having been fattened as in a fairy tale, or the narrator's asking "Happar mortakee?" (Happar good?<sup>9</sup>),—with a fine play on "good"—are humorous scenes that contribute to dedramatizing the issue. Throughout the novel, and even towards the end when the narrator has what he believes to be definite proofs of cannibalism, his attitude to the subject is rather unclear:

I began to distrust the truth of those reports which ascribed so fierce and belligerent a character to the Typee nation. ... I must confess that I experienced something like a sense of regret at having hideous anticipations thus disappointed. I felt some sort like a 'prenticeboy who, going to the play in the expectation of being delighted with a cut-and-thrust tragedy, is almost moved to tears of disappointment at the exhibition of a genteel comedy.<sup>10</sup>

From this passage as well as from others it appears clearly that Tommo's urge to leave the valley is not solely grounded in his fear of ending his life as the main course of a Typee repast. His desire to leave has to do with a conflict that he perceives from the beginning and whose roots extend as far as the author's native city of New York: he feels as much a stranger and an outsider in the valley as on the American soil. He wants to "escape" in spite of the repeated injunction, "abo, abo" (wait, wait) of the natives. His status in the valley is like that of the dogs—which, not surprisingly, he hates:

[the dogs] seemed to be aware of their being interlopers, looking fairly ashamed, and always trying to hide themselves in some dark corner. It was plain enough they did not feel at home in the vale—that they wished themselves well out of it, back to the ugly country from which they must have come.<sup>11</sup>

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9. The Happars are the other tribe that peoples the island. All during their journey into the valley the two protagonists keep asking themselves the same question: "Happar or Typee?" They hope to reach the Happar (happy?) valley, but ironically they end their trip in the Typee village.

10. Herman MELVILLE, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle, New York: The Library of America, 1982, ch. 17, p. 153. Hereafter cited as *Typee*.

11. *Typee*, ch. 29, p. 249.

He is the “interloper” indeed, permanently torn between his impressions and his total lack of comprehension of the world surrounding him. His anxious desire to leave a place which is rather benevolent to him is due from the very beginning to his being in a place where he does not belong.

This psychological estrangement from the paradisiacal valley finds its way into the novel through the narrator’s conflicting relationship to his body, and reaches its peak in his disease: the moral pain becomes a physical illness. There is much importance given in *Typee* to the tension between body and soul, and the narrator’s pains epitomize this primordial tension. The natives are repeatedly described as beautiful, and the narrator takes an obvious pleasure in evoking those naked and harmoniously shaped bodies: the long hair of the women and the warriors’ smooth skin. In comparison he must have felt very much like the dogs: “big hairless rats rather; all with smooth, shining speckled hides—fat sides and disagreeable to see”.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, in that world dominated by the body, he feels “somewhat embarrassed by the presence of the female portion of the company, and feel[s] [his] cheeks burning with bashful timidity”<sup>13</sup> when he goes to wash in the lake. An even more relevant indication of his problematic relationship to his body is provided by his mysteriously wounded leg. No explanation is ever given for this illness that disables him so totally as to force him to be carried on Kory-Kory’s back, in other words to use his “valet’s” body instead of his own impotent one.

His crippled leg seems to be an implicit acknowledgement of sexual impotence,<sup>14</sup> for despite his chanting Fayaway’s beauty and his claim of attachment to “the society of virtuous and intelligent young ladies”,<sup>15</sup> his attitude to the young woman is very ambiguous: he never mentions, nor even alludes to any sort of love between them. His observations about the Typees’ marital rule which consists of a sort of reversed polygamy of “a most extraordinary nature,—a plurality of husbands instead of wives”,

12. *Typee*, ch. 29, p. 246.

13. *Typee*, ch. 12, p. 110.

14. Compare with Ernest Hemingway’s short story “Indian Camp” in which the suicide of a young Indian can be read symbolically as the result of his wounded leg, that is, of his self-mutilation and impotence.

15. *Typee*, ch. 18, p. 158.

seems to suggest that his use of Kory-Kory's body is not limited to the latter's being a porter. In fact, further in the description of the polygamy of the Typees he says that he "sometimes beheld [a "legitimate" husband] and the chief (Mehevi) making love at the same time" to Moonoony (the "legitimate" wife).<sup>16</sup> Parallel to this observation, there are several scenes in *Typee* in which we behold the protagonist, Kory-Kory and Fayaway lying together. If we admit that his disabled leg may be an image for his sexual impotence, then it is legitimate to think that Kory-Kory was not solely the narrator's walking stick.

The suggested impotence and latent homosexuality that underlie his relationships to both Kory-Kory and Toby are also indicative of the protagonist's inability to have a love relationship with Fayaway or with any other of the beautiful women he observes and describes at length. It points to his inability to create and procreate in a world that rejects him in both moral and physical terms. This castrating syndrome implies that he cannot stay in a world where he is unable to relate to the ultimate "other", i.e. the other sex, and where a full right to existence is really denied to him.

A "manful" (an important and recurrent word) existence is essential for the narrator who teaches his host Marheyo two English words: "home and mother". This is not an innocent choice for it represents the core of the world he fled to come to the valley of the Typees. As with the writer, the voluntary separation from the mother marks the need of the male child to affirm his manhood and his virility. The lonely quest and its hardships are the tests that are to make a man out of him. During the perilous way into the valley, he says, "we struggled manfully against [the obstacles], well knowing our only hope lay in advancing".<sup>17</sup> The scene features the "manful" forward progress which is naturally a characteristic of the male enterprise. When the "tabooed stranger" who visits the village omits to pay homage to the outstanding individuality of the narrator, the self-derisive remark about his hurt feelings, "prompted [by the] glori-

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16. *Typee*, ch. 26, p. 224. The sentence, "I beheld him and the chief making love at the same time", makes it deliberately unclear as to who makes love to whom; this is, I think, another clue that hints to the homosexual relationship between Tommo and Kory-Kory.

17. *Typee*, ch. 9, p. 75.

ous principle inherent in all heroic nature”,<sup>18</sup> is another indication of his insistent need to assert his heroic stance.

When after a period of relief in his illness—which corresponds significantly to the period when he feels that he may want to stay after all—the pain in his leg returns redoubled, he says “this added calamity nearly *unmanned* me”.<sup>19</sup> It suggests that the quest that brought him from the streets of Manhattan to the Typee valley is a failure: the only way out for him is to escape from the valley, to escape from the place linked to the illness that is unmanning him. It is interesting to note that the young, and therefore still optimistic and hopeful, Melville never allows his protagonist to contemplate suicide as a possible escape. In his later fictions, when his writing was marked by that “great power of blackness” which “derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free”,<sup>20</sup> then the suicidal vertigo exerted its fatal influence on his characters—like Pierre —, and during the writing of these texts Melville himself wavered on the edge of the abyss.

Commenting on *Moby-Dick*, D. H. Lawrence said that in Melville “the artist was so much greater than the man”<sup>21</sup>; I would argue that *Typee* marks the beginning of the development that leads to Lawrence’s statement. In *Typee* there is still a strong presence of a human “I”, that is, of an “I” that stands for a human counterpart somewhere or sometime. I would claim that Melville begins to be aware that this “I” is doomed; in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is the last representative of that humanity, in *The Confidence-Man* nothing of it remains. Melville first presents himself as the human counterpart of his fictional character; the fact that the “I” whom the reader is asked to identify as Herman

18. *Typee*, ch. 18, p. 164.

19. *Typee*, ch. 32, p. 268. The emphasis is mine.

20. Herman MELVILLE, *The Literary World*, 17 August 1850. Quoted in Harold Beaver, “Introduction”, *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*, by Herman Melville, Harmondsworth/London: Penguin Books, 1986. The excerpt comes from an article that Melville devoted to Hawthorne, but it certainly suits his own writing as well.

21. “The artist was so much greater than the man. The man is a tiresome New Englander of the ethical, mystical-transcendentalist sort: Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, etc. So unrelieved, the solemn ass even in humour”. D. H. Lawrence, p. 146. The emphasis is Lawrence’s.

Melville is presented under a different name is the first step of the separation between the experiencing-I who really lived the story, and the I-writer. Tommo, the narrator of *Typee*, was born of a man and he is the representative of his genitor in what is supposed to be an autobiographical narrative. However, little by little Tommo's human counterpart—Melville—recedes in the distance and he is no longer a *representative*, but the instrument of a narrative strategy. *Typee* begins like a mundane adventure, a quest full of heroic gests and prowesses, and it gradually develops into a dark drama of the human soul.

Melville felt bound by the rules of verisimilitude and exactness, providing the luxuriant descriptions of the savages' rites and customs and mixing them with educational or erudite *excursi* to comply with the literary norm in vigour in his time, that is to say to meet the readers' expectations summed up in the insistent demands of the publishers for authenticity.<sup>22</sup> *Typee* was written at a time when Melville was still aware of the audience he was writing for; nonetheless, the novel already shows the first signs of his being unable to have his writing limited by such contingencies.<sup>23</sup> The result is that there are two permanently contending narratives: on the one hand the story of Tommo in the valley of the Typees and the ensuing episodes involving the description of the place, its topography, its flora and fauna, and on the other hand the narrative of Herman Melville, the writer, who deconstructs the place—*de-scribes* it—because it is a place where he cannot stay. This opposition between the two "I"'s features nostalgia on the one hand—"I can scarcely understand how in the midst of so many consolatory circumstances, my mind should still have been consumed by the most dismal forebodings, and have remained the prey to the profoundest melancholy"<sup>24</sup>—and

22. The American publisher Harpers, to whom Melville had first submitted it, rejected the manuscript because they did not believe in the authenticity of the story. Cf. Leon HOWARD, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 1951; Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958.

23. "[W]hen he forgets his audience and gives us his sheer apprehension of the world, then he is wonderful, his book commands a stillness in the soul, an awe". D.H. Lawrence, p. 146.

24. *Typee*, ch. 16, p. 142. The present tense of "can" is indicative of the time and geographical distance that separates the moment of experience and that of writing, it emphasizes the critical distance between the experiencing "I" of the narrator and the "I" of the writer.

fear and hatred on the other. The openings of all the chapters from 11 to 17 which combine evidence of the benevolent behaviour of the natives towards him with signs of distrust on his part are symptomatic of this oscillation between the two "I"s and the narrator's inability to make sense of his situation:

The natives, actuated by some mysterious impulse, day after day redoubled their attentions to us. Their manner towards us was unaccountable. 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 to them for it?<sup>25</sup>

Melville could not stay: he had to leave the place for another that would imply neither regaining "Paradise" nor returning to "home and mother". He lets his narrator Tommo implore Marheyo to let him return to "home and mother",<sup>26</sup> but he realizes that for him, as a writer, it is neither possible to return to these nor to seek to forget them in the Typee valley. Remaining there, in that Eden of sorts, meant accepting a stagnation and an immobility of time and space that was unbearable to him, for, he says, "however ignorant man may be, he still feels within him his immortal spirit yearning after the unknown future".<sup>27</sup>

The natives are remarkably beautiful with their golden limbs and jet black hair, but they all look alike in his eyes. Even time loses any sort of direction: it is not the eternal return of a circular time pattern, it is merely stagnation: "day 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", and, on the island "[the] history of a day is the history of a life".<sup>28</sup>

Why was Tommo not happy in this "merry round of thoughtless happiness"?<sup>29</sup> Melville could not be happy there. Through his character Tommo, he staged his rejection of the mundane Utopia that necessarily implies the fixity of a world of referential language where everything is determined forever and doomed al-

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25. *Typee*, ch. 13, p. 119.

26. *Typee*, ch. 34, p. 286.

27. *Typee*, ch. 24, p. 205.

28. *Typee*, ch. 29, p. 249. *Typee*, ch. 20, p. 178.

29. D. H. Lawrence's lapidary answer to the question is: "Because he wasn't" (p. 35). It is relevant that as a writer he finds it so strikingly blatant that it was impossible for another writer to be happy in the Eden-like valley.

ways to remain the same. He had to leave for another *u-topia*, i.e. language and writing.

As the writer that he was progressively becoming, Melville knows that mobility and ambiguity are characteristics necessary to his literary space. Relativity and ambiguity are inevitable because they belong to language itself and because the art of the novel rests on these particular aspects of language and of the human condition.<sup>30</sup> The language of the cannibals is not inarticulate, on the contrary, it is absolutely precise, "they have at least twenty different terms to express as many progressive stages in the growth of the [cocoa]nut"; its intricacy matches and sometimes even surpasses that of "civilized" languages:

I saw a tabular exhibition of a Hawaiian verb, conjugated through all its moods and tenses: It covered the side of a considerable apartment, and I doubt whether Sir William Jones himself would not have despaired of mastering it.<sup>31</sup>

However efficient and practical, the language of the savages is like their valley: beautiful but silent to the ears and inexpressive in the eyes of the narrator. It is like the spectacularly colourful birds of the valley which are also silent beauties, "the spell of dumbness is on them all—there is not a single warbler in the valley<sup>32</sup>". The dumb birds deprive the valley of the only remaining possibility of an alternative non-referential language.

Although he discards the assertion according to which there is no equivalent in the natives' language for the word "virtue", he adds:

their language is almost entirely destitute of terms to express our delightful ideas conveyed by our endless catalogue of civilized crimes.<sup>33</sup>

30. "In the 'either/or' question is contained the inability to stand the essential relativity of human affairs, the inability to face the absence of the supreme Judge. Because of that inability, the wisdom of the novel (the wisdom of uncertainty) is difficult to accept.": "Dans ce 'ou bien-ou bien' est contenue l'incapacité de supporter la relativity essentielle des choses humaines, l'incapacité de regarder en face l'absence du Juge suprême. A cause de cette incapacité, la sagesse du roman (la sagesse de l'incertitude) est difficile à accepter." Milan KUNDERA, "L'Héritage décrié de Cervantes", *L'Art du roman*, Paris: Gallimard, 1986, p. 22. (All the translations from French are mine.)

31. *Typee*, ch. 30, p. 262.

32. *Typee*, ch. 29, p. 252.

33. *Typee*, ch. 17, p. 151.

Behind the apologetic statement for the Chateaubriand-like Noble Savage lurks Melville's rejection of a world from which human ambiguities, vices and virtues are banned. A closer look at the statement allows the reader to see that behind the obvious irony of the narrator's anti-missionary attack, there is his preoccupation with language. The Polynesian idiom is "almost entirely destitute", it does not have the "delightful" particularities and the expressive range—the "endless catalogue"—of "ideas", it is a language which is not "civilized". The Typees are savages because their language is savage, because it does not have those dark introspective loomings of the human soul.<sup>34</sup> Melville could not go back, return to the wild, D. H. Lawrence said, and he was right too, but it is not only to the primeval condition of mankind that Melville could not return. He could not abandon his civilized language of ambiguities, vices, lust, dream and desire to live in the savage language of innocence where he is not able to make love to Fayaway, his innocent Eve.

At two points of the novel Melville states quite explicitly—almost in the same words—that there are no snakes among the species of animals that live on the island.<sup>35</sup> The allusion to a snake-free Eden is clear enough by itself; however, it assumes an even more interesting dimension with Melville's apparently causal remark about an episode of the two deserters' perilous journey into the valley: "we glided [through the grass] much in the fashion of a couple of serpents".<sup>36</sup> "Serpent" is very relevant for the writer's presence at this point in the text and for his intentions, it is even more so when we consider the word in contrast with the synonymous "reptile", "viper", and "snake" that he uses on other occasions to evoke the animal. The "serpent" is clearly

34. "As a model of a world, founded on the relativity and the ambiguity of the human, the novel is incompatible with a totalitarian universe": "En tant que modèle de ce monde, fondé sur la relativité et l'ambiguité des choses humaines, le roman est incompatible avec l'univers totalitaire". M. Kundera, p. 29. I am not suggesting of course that the Typees lived under any sort of dictatorship, their "institutions" appear on the contrary as being very loose. Their world is nonetheless "totalitarian" because it is based on a "totality" of essence and existence that is impossible to evade.

35. "[T]he islands of Polynesia enjoy the reputation, together with the Hibernian isle, of being free from the presence of any vipers..." *Typee*, ch. 7; p. 64. "There are no venomous reptiles, and no venomous snakes of any description to be found in any of the valleys". *Typee*, ch. 29, p. 249.

36. *Typee*, ch. 6, p. 52.

an allusion to the Biblical sophist who was the first to master the ambiguity of language. Melville is the serpent of the Typee Eden. Like his Biblical predecessor, the writer is doomed to pursue his quest in despair, banished from an Eden where he *cannot* stay. He must leave the realm of non-ambiguous, purely referential language: "there appeared to be no avenue for [my] escape but the sea".<sup>37</sup> The implication of this statement is that the place he needs to escape to cannot possibly be defined geographically or confined to one particular concept (e.g. "Paradise"). He needs to leave behind him the milestones that constitute the references of landscapes, as well as the concepts, ideas and patterns that constitute the milestones of language and enter into the *seascapes* of the non-referential *espace lisse*<sup>38</sup> of the sea. Significantly, most of Melville's subsequent novels will take *place* at sea or at least on the water, where, without ever being "superficial", they have their action situated on a surface which is the thing itself: no deeper truth sustains them, leaving them extremely shifty, ambiguous, and almost entirely open. Narrative strategies and playfulness become increasingly important in Melville's later novels, but this also applies to *Typee* which shows that the author was gradually becoming a writer conscious of the responsibilities and the risks he assumed.

Melville had to expurgate the book of certain passages where the publishers felt he attacked the missionaries in the South Seas too openly. In *Typee*, several passages explicitly denounce the abuses and the outrages done to the local populations in the name of Christianity. However, Melville's reaction is not simply, like that of Diderot in his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, an anti-clerical one. He rejects the Truth preached

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37. *Typee*, ch. 13, p. 124.

38. "While in structured space forms organize matter, in non-structured space different matters point to forces or function as symptoms for these forces. It is an intensive rather than extensive space. ... [T]he sea is the epitome of the non-structured space, it is also, however, the first space to have been confronted with the compelling demand of an increasingly intenser structuring." ("Alors que dans le strié les formes organisent une matière, dans le lisse des matériaux signalent des forces ou leur servent de symptômes. C'est un espace intensif plutôt qu'extensif. ... [L]a mer est l'espace lisse par excellence, et pourtant celui qui s'est trouvé le plus tôt confronté aux exigences d'un striage de plus en plus strict".) Gilles DELEUZE et Félix GUATTARI, "Le Lisse et le strié", *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: mille plateaux*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979, p. 598.

by the Church for the same reason for which he rejects the chaotic superficiality and absence of any truth of the savages: for a writer, both ways of thinking deprive language of its openness and ambiguity. Christian thought is informed by a transcendental Truth which divides the world into essence and appearance; Melville must have been experiencing, already at that time, the first throbs of disbelief in a thought that considers the soul stripped of the body, its mortal coil, in which it "appears", and that considers the essence of things and disregards the rest. The thought of the natives is senseless for it arbitrarily divides the world into that which is "taboo" and that which is non-"taboo". It is the domain of pure body, but in its most trifling and anecdotal form. In its own way it is as dehumanizing as the former.

Both systems are equally sterile and destructive, as both the narrator's impotence during his stay among the savages, and the devastating effects of civilization on the Polynesian populations demonstrate:

The depopulated land is (then) recruited from the rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals who settle themselves within its borders and clamorously announce the progress of Truth.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, the episode of the missionary's wife and her man-powered cart illustrates the ravages of a clear-cut opposition between body and soul:

Will the tenderhearted lady, who has left friends and home for the good of the soul of the poor heathen, will she think a little about their bodies and get out, and ease the wretched old man until the ascent is mounted?<sup>40</sup>

Melville opposes with equal vehemence both transcendental loftiness and Epicurean superficiality; the only way—or "avenue"—for him is an *espace lisse* such as the sea offers and that allows him to question all the laws and truths.<sup>41</sup> This process already starts in *Typee*, in particular in Melville's increasingly

39. *Typee*, ch. 26, p. 230-31.

40. *Typee*, ch. 26, p. 232.

41. Dennis Pahl argues convincingly that in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, "all the while seeming to act with 'cool judgement sagacious and sound'", captain Vere is "actually something of a villain behind his wholly rational and virtuous exterior". The situation is, I believe, rendered possible and sensible (viz. having a sense) thanks to its happening at sea. Dennis PAHL, *The Architects of the Abyss: The Indeterminate Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989, p. 101.

ironical use of the Scriptures. It is the development of a particular kind of intertextuality, which, because of its questioning of the very fundamental assumptions on which narratives are based, undermines the “normal” or normative relationship between the writer, the text and the reader. It undermines the reader’s trust in the conventions of the written text (*Les Ecritures* and *écriture*), and marks the beginning of Melville’s confidence game. In *Typee* the quest for paradise regained, whose ritual character is emphasized, starts in a fairly traditional way:

We seated ourselves upon the *least comfortable* spot we could select, and Toby produced from the *bosom* of his *frock* the *sacred* package. *In silence* we *partook* of the small morsel of refreshment that had been left from the morning’s *repast*, and without proposing to *violate* the *sanctity* of our *engagement*, we rose to our feet...<sup>42</sup>

Hardly surprising either is the time it takes the two companions to reach the valley: after six days of hardships they are able to enter the garden and on the seventh day they rest there. Little by little, however, irony comes in to undermine this traditional pattern. Melville’s observations about the “happy valley” where, “the Scriptural injunction to increase and multiply seems to be but indifferently attended to”,<sup>43</sup> and on which “the penalty of the Fall presses very lightly”, show how he skilfully reverses the pattern he had been using in the beginning. He states as well that during his stay in the village he “scarcely saw any piece of work performed there which caused the sweat to stand on a single brow”.<sup>44</sup> The conscious play with the symbolic numbers continues throughout the novel, permanently tinged with irony and ambiguity. Thus Toby promises a deliverance to his companion in *three* days, but he never returns; there is an obvious reversal of the “valley of tears” where the narrator should be able to walk without fear, into a “happy valley”, but where he is constantly

42. *Typee*, ch. 8, p. 71. The emphases are mine.

43. *Typee*, ch. 26, p. 226-27.

44. *Typee*, ch. 26, p. 230. A revealing echo of this is to be found in another writer who, with different strategies, but in a rather similar context, attempted to question the Biblical patterns: “It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do”. Henry David THOREAU, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley, Princeton University Press, 1973, vol. I, p. 71.

frightened. In all good logic the *thirty-third* chapter that corresponds to the *third* month of his stay should have been that of his escape and his deliverance. However his escape fails miserably and the magic numbers are lost: he spends four months in the valley and the novel consists of thirty four chapters.

Melville escapes both from the valley and from the Scriptural referentiality onto the sea. His journey into the valley had assumed an air of Christian quest, but his escape relates him to a more universal myth. Like Ulysses, he escapes from the island of the lotus-eaters where he tried to obliterate his past life and his origins—"I sought to bury all regrets, and all remembrances of my previous existence in the wild enjoyment [the valley] provided".<sup>45</sup> He flees the charms of Circe (Fayaway), and makes towards the open sea, resisting the last assaults of the cyclops-like Typee chief, the one-eyed giant Mow-Mow. As with the Greek hero, much more navigation was awaiting Melville, and it did not come to an end when he eventually reached the coast of New England. He had returned to sea, attracted by the mermaids that sang to him:

This is not an allegory. There is a very dark struggle between all narratives and the encounter with the Mermaids, that enigmatic song which is more powerful for being absent. It is a struggle in which Ulysses's prudence, that part of human truth and of mystification in him, as well as the stubborn aptitude he has to never play the game of the gods, have constantly been used and perfected. That which we call the novel was born of this struggle.<sup>46</sup>

Melville's writing was born of his escape from the Typee valley and from his accepting the risks of his own destruction while listening to the mermaids. They sang to him, they drove him to the verge of insanity but he never fastened himself to the mast. As it turned out, they were not mere deceivers, they led the navigator into that space where singing was really to begin:

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45. *Typee*, ch. 19, p. 172.

46. "Ce n'est pas là une allégorie. Il y a une lutte fort obscure engagée entre tout récit et la rencontre des Sirènes, ce chant énigmatique qui est puissant par son défaut. Lutte où la prudence d'Ulysse, ce qu'il y a en lui de vérité humaine, de mystification, d'aptitude obstinée à ne pas jouer le jeu des dieux, a toujours été utilisé et perfectionné. Ce qu'on appelle le roman est né de cette lutte." Maurice BLANCHOT, "Le Chant des Sirènes", *Le Livre à venir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1959, p. 12.

What was that place? That place in which all that remained was to disappear, because music, in that region of source and origin, had itself disappeared more completely than from any other place in the world: it was a sea where the living drowned with their ears shut, and where the Mermaids, as a sign of their good will, had, one day, to disappear as well.<sup>47</sup>

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47. "Qu'était ce lieu? Celui où il n'y avait plus qu'à disparaître, parce que la musique, dans cette région de source et d'origine, avait elle-même disparu plus complètement qu'en aucun autre endroit du monde : mer où les oreilles fermées, sombraient les vivants et où les Sirènes, preuve de leur bonne volonté, durent, elles aussi, un jour disparaître." M. Blanchot, *Idem*, p. 9.

