

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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TRAGEDY IN THE STATE OF NATURE:  
MELVILLE'S *TYPEE*

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There is no external evidence that Herman Melville possessed or read a copy of Aristotle's *Poetics* before the last two or three years of his life.<sup>1</sup> Yet Melville clearly had come to agree much earlier with the thrust of Aristotle's statement in the *Poetics* that "poetry is . . . of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is no better indication of Melville's long-held view that poetry is superior to history than his first novel, *Typee*, published in 1846 and begun less than two years earlier, when he was just 25 years old. Melville wrote *Typee* after the most exciting episode of his life, his abandonment of an American whaling vessel in the Marquesas Islands in 1842 and his subsequent one-month residence among the Typees, a tribe of cannibals on Nukuheva Island. But while Melville thus had fallen into a perfect source of materials for a *singular* "true adventure" story, he chose instead to write a novel which presented a narrative dealing with *universals*. Indeed, the great irony of *Typee* is that it was published and generally accepted as a remarkable but historically true account of the adventures of a "common sailor" in the South Seas, while Melville himself had intended his work to speak principally of an uncommon truth beyond mere history. In the guise of a narrative of "true adventure," Melville had presented a critique of some of the most fundamental tenets of Western civilization, and even his more suspicious early readers and reviewers did not fully appreciate the real character of the trans-historical "unvarnished truth" the author had promised in his Preface to *Typee*.<sup>3</sup>

I. *To the State of Nature*

The narrator of *Typee* is a crewman on a ship which has been "six months out of sight of land." The long and unrelieved encounter with "the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else!" has severed the connection between the society constituted by the ship and that society's roots in the land. The ship's society has been separated from the source of its life, and in every decisive respect, the ship and its society are adrift: the ship is simply being "tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific." When the narrator asks, "Is there nothing fresh around us? Is there no green thing to be seen?" he sounds the plaintive note of a member of a society which has lost its lifegiving sense of purpose, its "rootedness." Thus, the fact that

“weeks ago” the ship’s “fresh provisions were all exhausted” is important only because it points to the more crucial fact that the ship’s society has exhausted its *moral* stores in its cruise “beneath the scorching sun of the Line” (p. 3). In all, the narrator’s ship, the *Dolly*, is representative of a culture in the midst of a fundamental crisis of identity. The *Dolly* is the modern West in a condition of moral disorder.

Given this state of affairs, it is no wonder that the narrator is exhilarated by the announcement that his ship has been put on a course to the Marquesas. The very name of those Islands conjures up “strange visions,” including visions of “*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*” (p. 5). Such visions are in keeping with the fact that, unlike the ship’s society (and its parent society), the Marquesas Islands have not been introduced to Christianity. The Christian missionaries “had abandoned” the Marquesans to their “idols of wood and stone,” and while a Protestant Mission had been established at nearby Tahiti, the missionaries had despaired of ever reclaiming the Marquesans themselves from “heathenism” (pp. 5, 6). Ironically, the narrator anticipates redemption from his predicament by means of a visit to a place which has not received the message of the Redeemer.

Indeed, the narrator’s deliverance seems to require the actual destruction of all vestiges of the ship’s attachment to Christianity. Thus, with a subtlety befitting Melville’s concern for the sensitivities of his Christian readers,<sup>4</sup> the narrator inserts a comic tale about the welcomed upcoming demise of a “passenger” with a noted Christian name:

There is but one solitary tenant in the chicken-coop, once a gay and dapper young cock. . . . But look at him now; there he stands, moping all the day long on that everlasting one leg of his. . . . He mourns no doubt his lost companions, literally snatched from him one by one, and never seen again. But his days of mourning will be few; for Mungo, our black cook, told me yesterday that the word had at last gone forth, and poor Pedro’s fate was sealed. His attenuated body will be laid out upon the captain’s table next Sunday, and long before night will be buried with all the usual ceremonies beneath that worthy individual’s vest. . . . They say the captain will never point the ship for the land so long as he has in anticipation a mess of fresh meat. This unhappy bird can alone furnish it; and when he is once devoured, the captain will come to his senses. I wish thee no harm, Peter; but as thou art doomed, sooner or later, to meet the fate of all thy race; and if putting a period to thy existence is to be the signal for our deliverance, why—truth to speak—I wish thy throat cut this very moment; for oh! how I wish to see the living earth again! (p. 4)

The ironic biblical language of the narrator’s tale only emphasizes the implications for Christianity of the captain’s “last supper” before harboring

the *Dolly*. The "word" has gone forth that the captain shall prevail against "Peter," and the narrator can hardly wait for his "deliverance."<sup>5</sup>

However, the Marquesas Islands are not only devoid of the *Christian* elements of the ship's immediate and parent Western society: in fact, the Islands have been untouched by the whole of the civilization embodied in the *Dolly*. Thus, the inhabitants of Nukuheva Island, "the most important" of the Marquesas, and especially the "hostile clans" like the Typees, "retain their original primitive character, remaining very nearly in the same state of nature in which they were first beheld by white men" (p. 11). The narrator's joy at the prospect of sailing towards the Marquesas hence is premised upon his understanding that such a course represents a return to the state of nature, and his joy implies that it is precisely such a return which may promise relief from the societal malaise in which he finds himself. The narrator implies, that is, that his society has erred in its departure from the moral standards of the state of nature and that its return to health requires a renewal of its adherence to those natural standards. As the very timbers of the *Dolly* yearn for the shore (p. 4), so does the narrator seek a return to the place of origin and birth.

This last implication is confirmed as the narrator explains why he has decided to "run away" from the *Dolly*. In an argument which closely parallels *The Declaration of Independence*, the narrator declares the causes which have impelled him to separate himself from the ship's society, and he indicates his enlightened understanding that the *Dolly's* society was created by a social contract and founded upon natural rights philosophy:

When I entered on board the *Dolly*, I signed as a matter of course the ship's articles, thereby voluntarily engaging and legally binding myself to serve in a certain capacity for the period of the voyage; and, special considerations apart, I was of course bound to fulfill the agreement. But in all contracts, if one party fails to perform his share of the compact, is not the other virtually absolved from his liability? Who is there who will not answer in the affirmative?

Having settled the principle, then, let me apply it to the particular case in question. In numberless instances had not only the implied but the specified conditions of the articles been violated on the part of the ship in which I served. The usage on board of her was tyrannical. The captain was the author of these abuses; it was in vain to think that he would either remedy them, or alter his conduct, which was arbitrary and violent in the extreme. . . .

But, after all, these things could have been endured awhile, had we entertained the hope of being speedily delivered from them by the due completion of the term of our servitude. But what a dismal prospect awaited us in this quarter! The longevity of Cape Horn whaling voyages is proverbial, frequently extending over a period of four or five years. (pp. 20-21)

According to the narrator, thus, the captain of the *Dolly* derived his authority only from the voluntary consent of the crew; the captain's tyrannical violation of his compact with the crew may justly lead to their exercise of the natural right of rebellion; and while the captain's abuses may have been endured awhile, the prospect of a continued "long train of abuses" absolves the crew of any need to continue suffering. The narrator, for one, is prepared "to dissolve the political bands which have connected" him to the *Dolly*.<sup>6</sup>

The failure of the ship's captain to respect the natural rights of the crew duplicates the failure of the parent Western society to honor "the rights of humanity" in the larger world. The tyrannical actions of the conquering French, who "have ever plumed themselves upon being the most humane and polished of nations," especially demonstrate the hypocrisy of the West. While professing a belief in the rights of man, the French perpetrate "outrages and massacres" at Tahiti, "the queen of the South Seas" (pp. 17, 18). Worse still, the actions of the Western conquerors also show the hypocrisy of their Christian faith, which, the narrator implies, *should* give revelatory support to the secular notion of equal human rights. With biting irony, the narrator thus concludes an account of an earlier American "unprovoked" atrocity against the Typees by describing how the "invaders" set "fire to every house and temple in their route; . . . defaced the once-smiling bosom of the valley, and proclaimed to its pagan inhabitants the spirit that reigned in the breasts of Christian soldiers" (p. 26). In all, the narrator's account reveals the moral bankruptcy of a society which professes natural rights and brotherly love and yet acts with the most self-serving ruthlessness. Whatever may be the narrator's own relation to the other teachings of the Christian faith, he certainly believes that one sees the true character of men when one sees the fruits of their actions.

The end result of Western society's severance of its roots in the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" is that the society has become simply conventional or artificial. The inside of the bulwarks of the *Dolly* is "painted green . . . a vile and sickly hue" (p. 4), while Nukuheva Island is indented by "broad and verdant valleys" of indescribable natural beauty (p. 24). Whereas the conquering French admiral wears "a richly decorated admiral's frockcoat, a laced chapeau bras, and upon his breast . . . a variety of ribbons and orders," the "patriarch-sovereign" of the shoreline natives of Nukuheva appears "in all the nakedness of nature" (p. 29). And in the context of these and other contrasts between the conventional and the natural, the narrator dares to wonder whether the imposing battlements and sophistication of the former really do evidence a superiority to the latter. Looking upon the meeting of the French admiral and the native patriarch, the narrator concludes with these "philosophical reflections":

At what an immeasurable distance, thought I, are these two beings removed from each other. In the one is shown the result of long centuries of progressive civilization and refinement, which have gradually converted the mere creature into the semblance of all that is elevated and grand; while the other, after the lapse of the same period, has not advanced one step in the career of improvement. "Yet, after all," quoth I to myself, "insensible as he is to a thousand wants, and removed from harassing cares, may not the savage be the happier man of the two?" (p. 29).

As the novel opens, then, the narrator appears as an enlightened believer both in the "rights of humanity" and in at least that version of Christianity which is consistent with natural rights philosophy. His own society, supposedly founded on these beliefs, has abandoned them in deed and has forfeited any claim to natural justice. So radical has the narrator's disenchantment become that he has begun to wonder whether conventional civilization can ever retain its roots in nature: "Thrice happy are they who, inhabiting some yet undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean, have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man. . . and were 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" (pp. 15, 17). The narrator's disenchantment with Western civilization, that is, makes a romantic return to the pre-Christian and uncivilized state of nature a very inviting prospect. He apparently hopes to experience there a renewal of his attachment to those fundamental enlightened truths which his society has abandoned.

## II. *Into the State of Nature*

Entrance into the state of nature apparently requires a rite of purification, a rite whereby the civilized are cleansed of civilization's system and its norms. Collectively, the crew of the *Dolly* is offered this rite in the harbor of Nukuheva, where the ship is boarded by a swarm of naked young girls who cause a purgative orgy marked by "every species of riot and debauchery" (p. 15). Individually, the narrator experiences the rite when he journeys briefly in the ship's boat to the "glen of Tior," where he plunges into the cool waters of a grove and feels as if he were "floating in some new element" (p. 28). Unlike the rest of the crew, the narrator wants to take full advantage of his rite of purification, and he thus commits himself to abandoning civilization altogether. This commitment, however, immediately raises a major problem: having cast off the bonds of civilization, the narrator will enter an uncivilized world. Or, more precisely, the narrator will enter a world which he believes may have many potential perils, not the least of which is "the possibility of falling in with a foraging party

of . . . bloody-minded Typees" (p. 31). In an effort to provide for such possible dangers, then, the narrator enlists a companion, Toby, who will accompany him on his escape into the Island. But the quickly arranged "engagement" (p. 33) between the two is merely an attempt to deal with their fear of the possible perils of the state of nature, and their fate will still be dependent upon the actual character of that state.

The initial experience of the two runaways does not bode well. After climbing a steep shoreline mountain, they do not find sweeping valleys on the opposite side, but rather an elevated plateau of "ridges and inter-vales," with no fruit trees in sight (p. 41). Their meager provisions will obviously soon be exhausted, and they are able to make very little progress among the chasms in finding their way to the inhabited valleys. Moreover, while shielding himself from a heavy rain, the narrator begins to feel the symptoms of a mysterious malady: one of his legs swells "to such a degree" and pains him "so acutely" that he "half" suspects that he "had been bitten by some venomous reptile" (p. 48). Subsequently, the narrator learns that there are no snakes on the islands of Polynesia, so his suspicion about the source of his malady turns out to be ill-founded. The added mystery, for the reader, is that the narrator had previously described Toby and himself as "a couple of serpents" as they climbed the initial ridge on the island (p. 39). In any case, unexpectedly, in the midst of his feverish sensations, the narrator pushes aside a branch and finds himself looking upon a beautiful, inhabited valley. He compares the sight to "a glimpse of the gardens of Paradise" (p. 49)—their prior wandering over and into the ridges of the plateau, one ravine of which contained a pool "which seemed to penetrate into the very bowels of the earth" (p. 45), has ended in apparent salvation.

But upon which valley do the runaways look? Is it the valley of the peaceful Happers, or the valley of the cannibal Typees? The mere possibility that the valley might be inhabited by the "cruel" (p. 51) Typees induces the narrator to persuade Toby that they ought to seek out another valley, a possibly uninhabited one which might be on the other side of the far ridge which borders the valley they have discovered. However, the way to this ridge turns out to be blocked by chasm after chasm, and the narrator continues to suffer great pain in his leg. Starving and disheartened to the point of renouncing their escape from the *Dolly*, they decide to face whatever awaits them in the inhabited valley they first discovered. There they will encounter the state of nature, whether it be the peaceful Paradise promised by its aspect, or the hell implied by the various deep "circles" formed by the ridges upon the plateau above the valley. The mere possibility that it may indeed be a hell suggests to the reader that the actual experience of the narrator and Toby in the valley is meant to reveal an un-

biased view of the true character of the state of nature. Without denying any of the relevant possibilities, Melville will use their "singular" adventure to present his poetic vision of "the unvarnished truth," and the reader may well be expected to assume that the truth is as potentially dangerous and as difficult to attain as the destination of Melville's characters.<sup>7</sup>

### III. *The True Character of the State of Nature*

As it turns out, the runaways have wandered into the valley of the dreaded Typees, so the picture of the state of nature to follow is one which actually anticipates the worst possibilities. However, when the narrator and Toby come upon the Typees, they are received with great enthusiasm and concern, perhaps because when asked, the narrator allies himself with the right tribe, although he does not know "by what impulse" he chooses to say that "Typee" rather than "Happar" is "mortarkee," or "good."<sup>8</sup> In any case, the Typee natives are delighted by his good judgment, and one of them identifies himself as "Mehevi," asking the narrator for *his* name in return. Fearing that the natives may have difficulty pronouncing his "real name," the narrator gives his name as "Tom" and is called thenceforth "Tommo" (p. 72). Melville's playfulness with his narrator's name places him at the proper authorial distance from his narrator's enlightened judgments and the "true adventure" which now continues.

The Typees are not merely receptive: they turn out to be positively compassionate, giving special attention to Tommo's painful leg and assigning "Kory-Kory" to administer to his every need. The two runaways are lodged in the hut of Kory-Kory's family, where not the least added attraction is the beautiful Fayaway, a young "child of nature" who happily "for the most part clung to the primitive and summer garb of Eden" (pp. 86, 87). The presence of Fayaway, the officiousness of Kory-Kory, and the regimen of the Typean "philosophy" of "eat plenty, ah! sleep very good" (p. 88), soon begins to return Tommo to health and good spirits, a process punctuated, however, by lingering doubts about "the fickle passions which sway the bosom of a savage" (p. 76). Tommo finally persuades the Typees to allow Toby to return over the mountains to Nukuheva harbor to obtain medicine for his painful leg, but Toby is turned back and wounded by the enemy Happers. Tommo is despondent over this event and gives up "all hopes of recovery" (p. 104). His resulting melancholy continues for some time, and he finally falls "a victim to despair" (p. 109) when Toby manages to escape to some trading boats offshore and does not return to the valley.

The even kinder treatment by the natives, following Toby's departure, is astounding. Tommo is carried about by Kory-Kory, anointed daily by the girls of the house, and generally allowed to have his full of the beauty,

erotic delights, and abundance of the Typee valley. Nevertheless, Tommo observes, "I can scarcely understand how it was that, in the midst of so many consolatory circumstances, my mind should still have been consumed by the most dismal forebodings, and have remained a prey to the profoundest melancholy" (p. 118). The continuing pain in his leg and a variety of actions which clearly reveal that the Typees have no intention of allowing him to escape force Tommo finally to give himself over to the moment. This surrender has, however, one positive effect:

Day after day wore on, and still there was no perceptible change in the conduct of the islanders towards me. Gradually I lost all knowledge of the regular recurrence of the days of the week, and sunk insensibly into that kind of apathy which ensues after some violent outbreak of despair. My limb suddenly healed, the swelling went down, the pain subsided, and I had every reason to suppose I should soon completely recover from the affliction that had so long tormented me (p. 123).

Now the peaceful and joyful life of the Typees which absorbs Tommo clearly indicates that Hobbes erred when he claimed that in the state of nature "*there is always war of every one against every one.*"<sup>9</sup> According to Tommo, the Typees "seemed to be governed by that sort of tacit common-sense law which, say what they will of the inborn lawlessness of the human race, has its precepts graven on every breast" (p. 201). Nor was Locke correct when he claimed that the state of nature was not a state of war because it was governed by a "Law of Nature," or "Reason."<sup>10</sup> The Typees do not reason: their "perception of what is *just* and *noble*" is due to their "indwelling" (p. 201) intuitive and apparently pre-rational sense, something akin to natural compassion. And while Locke's notion that private property is a natural institution is affirmed by the example of the Typees' personal property, Tommo discovers that the Typees completely lack Lockean industriousness and acquisitiveness.<sup>11</sup> In all, the Typean state of nature is both peaceful and unsophisticated, and it is marked by none of civilized life's "harassing cares." The Typees are as heartful, innocent, spontaneous, natural, and simple as civilized men are heartless, sophisticated, scheming, artificial, and complex.

In depicting a simple life for the Typees, Melville could draw upon a Western tradition which reaches back at least as far as Socrates' description of the "first city" in Book Two of the *Republic*, or the historical analysis of the origin of cities in Book Three of Plato's *Laws*.<sup>12</sup> As a source for the hints about the apparent sexual freedom which reigns among the Typees, Melville possibly drew, perhaps indirectly, upon such a modern work as Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*.<sup>13</sup> However, the three most

generally relevant background sources for *Typee* are Montaigne's essay, "Of Cannibals" (1577–78), Gonzalo's utopian plan in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), and Rousseau's *First and Second Discourses* (1750, 1755).

While there is a good deal of irony apparent in Montaigne's essay, he presents a superficially laudatory view of life among cannibals in Brazil, ostensibly based on an eye-witness account. Montaigne claims that the life of innocence described to him far surpasses the notions of perfection advanced by either Lycurgus or Plato. According to Montaigne, the cannibals constitute "a nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name of magistrate or of political superiority; no use of servitude, riches or poverty; no contracts, no successions, no dividing of properties, no employments, except those of leisure; no respect of kindred, except for the common bond; no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wheat or wine. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, and pardon were never heard of." Further, Montaigne's cannibals are rarely sick; they live in the shadow of shoreline mountains; they believe in the immortality of the soul; their men have several wives; they fight bloody wars with enemies who live beyond their mountains; and they eat the bodies of their dead enemies out of revenge. Montaigne even defends their cannibalism by arguing that Western criminal punishment and religious tortures are far more barbarous. Finally, Montaigne pointedly argues that the cannibals do not adhere to their simple life merely out of bondage to custom "without reasoning or judgment," and in fact, he ends his essay with examples of their mental "capacity," as evidenced in their poetry and the egalitarian political opinions of three cannibals who were brought to France.<sup>14</sup>

Montaigne's cannibal utopia was the apparent model for Gonzalo's speeches in Act II of *The Tempest*:

I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries Execute all things. For no kind of traffic Would I admit; no name of magistrate; Letters should not be known; riches, poverty, And use of service, none; contract, succession, Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none; No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil; No occupation; all men idle, all; And women too, but innocent and pure; No sovereignty. All things in common nature should produce Without sweat or endeavor. Treason, felony, Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine Would I not have; but nature should bring forth, Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance, To feed my innocent people. I would with such perfection govern, sir, T' excel the Golden Age.<sup>15</sup>

While Gonzalo of course makes no reference to cannibalism, and while his

own picture of perfection differs in some important particulars from Montaigne's (especially in his apparent retention of families and clothing, possibly concessions to the sensibilities of *Shakespeare's* Christian audience), his general depiction of pristine innocence is clearly of a piece with "Of Cannibals."

Tommo's experience with the Typees is generally consistent with a combination of Montaigne's and Gonzalo's descriptions. Among the Typees, there is no commerce, no letters or philosophy, apparently no mathematics, no economic inequality, no business transactions, no clearly private real estate, almost no work, very little clothing, no agriculture or technology, no sickness, and no viciousness. And among the Typees there is natural abundance, innocence, a belief in an after-life, and polygamy (but with a plurality of husbands). Apparently like Gonzalo's utopians, the Typees retain a family structure, although the family is greatly extended by the practice of polygamy. And like Montaigne's cannibals, the Typees have wars, but they are "marked by no very sanguinary traits."<sup>16</sup>

While much of the substance, the language, and even some of the lesser anecdotes of *Typee* thus may derive from Montaigne's essay and/or Gonzalo's speeches, it is *Rousseau* who is directly cited in Tommo's narrative. In describing the "perpetual hilarity" among the Typees, Tommo says that their "continual happiness . . . sprung principally from that all-pervading sensation which Rousseau has told us he at one time experienced, the mere buoyant sense of a healthful physical existence." Tommo then goes on immediately to say that "sickness was almost unknown" among the "healthful" Typees (pp. 126, 127). While the allusion to Rousseau's celebration of the "sentiment of one's existence" is a reference to a notion which appears variously in a number of his works, Tommo's immediate mention of the Typees' natural health appears to suggest the *Second Discourse* as the most relevant reference, perhaps at second hand; in that work, Rousseau had argued both that there was no illness in the state of nature and that savage man's soul was "given over to the sole sentiment of its present existence."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the direct reference to Rousseau occurs amid many either obvious or subtle points which are as consistent with Rousseau's description of the state of nature in the *Second Discourse* as they are with Montaigne's and Gonzalo's utopias.<sup>18</sup>

However, the strongest connections between *Typee* and Rousseau's works occur in two particular aspects of *Typee's* presentation of the state of nature and in *Typee's* generally negative attitude towards enlightenment. First, the Typees' natural compassion is a perfect reflection of the "principle" of pity which Rousseau found in natural man. This principle "anterior to reason" is a salient element of the states of nature in both *Typee* and the *Second Discourse*, but it is either absent or very subdued in Mon-

taigne's and Gonzalo's innocent regimes.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, while both Montaigne and Gonzalo indicated that there is no philosophy in their primitive utopias, Montaigne apparently asserted that his cannibals *could* reason, and Gonzalo was not assertive in his deprecation of reason itself. *Typee*, however, follows the *Second Discourse* in its insistence that natural man's "thoughtless happiness" indicates the unnaturalness of reason: while the Typees speak, in their natural unanimity they neither reason nor dispute, and they thus could not, for instance, "support a debating society for a single night."<sup>20</sup> Finally, Tommo's narrative explicitly raises many profound questions about the value of enlightened civilization, questions which appear to have been based on some familiarity with Rousseau's *First Discourse*. Indeed, at times, Tommo's language is Rousseau's: Tommo's French admiral had been converted by progress into "the semblance of all that is elevated and grand," and Rousseau's civilized people are marked by "the semblance of all the virtues without the possession of any."<sup>21</sup> In all, thus, Tommo's direct reference to Rousseau is merely the most obvious signal of the extent to which the state of nature in *Typee* is consistent with Rousseauian principles.

However, the similarities between *Typee* and Rousseau's *Discourses* are the more remarkable when the reader notices that parts of Melville's novel seem calculated to correct certain notions commonly associated with Rousseau. While both Montaigne and Gonzalo had clearly described utopian *communities*, Rousseau had pictured natural man as a solitary creature, at least at the earliest stage of the state of nature. The Typees, however, live in a tightly organized community, one in which the communal organization far exceeds the level of regimentation achieved even in the latest stage of Rousseau's state of nature.<sup>22</sup> In their own state of nature, the Typees seem to embody almost all the innocence of Rousseau's earliest savages, even though their society is decisively a political or civil one. Tommo learns, in fact, that the notion that there is no positive or civil law among the Typees would be based on a totally superficial observation of their conduct. The Typees appear to be governed by no law precisely because their law, in the form of "the thrice mysterious taboo" (p. 177), operates so efficiently that its hand has become invisible. Tommo thus says that the "savage . . . lives in the continual observance of [the taboo's] dictates, which guide and control every action of his being" (p. 221). Oddly enough, the merely apparent lawlessness of the Typees is exactly like the merely apparent lawlessness of Lycurgus' Spartans: they appear to be lawless because their unwritten law completely dominates their souls. Rousseau's notion that men are by nature "born free" is flatly contradicted by the operation of the Typees' apparently natural "yoke," their taboo.<sup>23</sup>

Along with their reflection of the politically and legally restrained character of the state of nature, the Typees also give evidence that human

inequality is a natural phenomenon, another point which contradicts the common understanding of Rousseau. In contrast to Rousseau's notion that inequality is "almost null in the state of nature," Tommo finds that King Mehevi is a chief "highest in rank" and that his official distinction is conferred by *Nature* itself. Mehevi is a truly "*noble savage*," and he "might certainly have been regarded as one of *Nature's* noblemen." Tommo discovers, that is, that the state of nature evidences what is called "natural regality" in *Billy Budd*.<sup>24</sup> While Mehevi's regal office certainly contradicts both Montaigne and Gonzalo—who had excluded magistrates, political superiority, and sovereignty from their utopias—his "regal character" (p. 187) contradicts Rousseau, who apparently had argued for a natural human equality which far exceeded the political and economic equality advanced by Montaigne and Gonzalo.

In all, the Typean state of nature is political, hierarchical, and restrained by law. Melville's poetic visit to the state of nature shows that in certain decisive respects Montaigne, Gonzalo, and especially Rousseau had erred in describing the natural state of man. Along with his three predecessors, Melville sees original Nature as both abundant and beneficent, but he claims that Nature authorizes a political hierarchy among men, and to the simple life of Montaigne's cannibals, Gonzalo's utopians, and Rousseau's savages, Melville adds a political and legal structure worthy of Lycurgus' Sparta.<sup>25</sup> The effective natural hierarchy among the naturally compassionate and simple Typees seems to indicate that the best political community can exist not only without Lycurgus' harsh clothing, but also without Plato's philosopher-kings. The Typees, who are "wholly unchanged from their original primitive condition" (p. 170), have surpassed the perfection achieved by either statesmanship or philosophy.

#### IV. *Tragedy among the Typees*

However strongly Tommo had desired to return to the state of nature, he had always anticipated leaving whenever a "favorable opportunity" offered itself (p. 33). Even though he is treated so well by the Typees, Tommo remains apprehensive about their potential savagery and cannibalism, and he is willing even to risk trying to use "Marnoo," a visiting native dignitary, to persuade the Typees to release him. When this attempt fails, Tommo gives himself over wholly to the "wild enjoyments" of the Typee valley (p. 144). However, when the Typees indicate, some three months into Tommo's visit, that they want to tattoo and therefore "to make a convert of" him, Tommo's painful malady returns, and he is reduced to the state of a captive in "misery" (pp. 220, 231–32). His desire to escape is then heightened to the point of desperation when he discovers physical evidence of the Typees' cannibalism (pp. 238–39). But his first attempt to

escape, made in conjunction with a return visit by Marnoo, is completely cut off by the Typees. Finally, Tommo takes advantage of an unexpected visit by a whale-boat to the Typees' shore to make a headlong dash back to civilization. Only an apparent division among the Typees over whether they should continue to hold Tommo against his will allows him to go to the beach and to get into the waiting boat. But some of the natives try to swim out and intercept the fleeing boat, and Tommo's final act in the state of nature is then a tragic one:

After a few breathless moments I discerned Mow-Mow. The athletic islander, with his tomahawk between his teeth, was dashing the water before him till it foamed again. He was the nearest to us, and in another instant he would have seized one of the oars. Even at the moment I felt horror at the act I was about to commit; but it was no time for pity or compunction, and with a true aim, and exerting all my strength, I dashed the boat-hook at him. It struck him just below the throat, and forced him downwards. I had no time to repeat my blow, but I saw him rise to the surface in the wake of the boat, and never shall I forget the ferocious expression of his countenance (p. 252).

This tragic and pitiless end to Tommo's adventure in the state of nature makes it difficult to read *Typee* simply as a romantic paean to natural innocence.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the observations above about the important *differences* between the Typean and the Rousseauian-romantic states of nature would seem to indicate that Melville intended to correct rather than to praise the conceptions of man's natural condition espoused by romanticism and its "Father." Thus, it is far more *plausible* to argue, as some critics have done, that Tommo's "blow" upon Mow-Mow, or his disgust at the "man-devouring horror" of cannibalism, or his debilitating leg injury are symbolic constructs which show Melville's outright rejection of primitive utopianism, a rejection which led him either to embrace conscious civilization once again or to engage in a quasi-existentialist struggle between primitive innocence and civilized corruption.<sup>27</sup> Such a plausible argument would involve the contention that Typean life itself is radically defective in that it does not satisfy the needs of Tommo's self-consciousness, his spirit, or his intellectual strivings; such an argument would also have to maintain that, for all its flaws, civilization or contact with civilization is nevertheless the precondition for fulfilling man's more spiritual and less physical needs. However, beyond all else, this plausible argument would have to maintain that Tommo's "longing" for the things of the spirit or the mind is seen by Melville as a *natural* longing in man, one not addressed by Typean life. And it is here that the plausible argument becomes problematic.

For one thing, the "wholly . . . primitive" Typees certainly do not support the notion that serious religiosity or other forms of spirituality are

parts of man's nature. Tommo pointedly describes the "very low ebb" of "religious affairs" among the "thoughtless" Typees (p. 174), and he characterizes the primitive and natural Typees as people "sunk in religious sloth" (p. 179). More pointedly, although *Tommo* speaks of the inherent "yearning after the unknown future" by man's "immortal spirit" (p. 173), the Typees themselves show no evidence of such a yearning. Thus, when Tommo and Kory-Kory visit "the mausoleum of a deceased warrior chief," and *Tommo* becomes interested in having Kory-Kory speak of "the Polynesian heaven," Kory-Kory is simply uninterested. As far as Tommo can understand it, Kory-Kory's response to his question about the heavenly state of the deceased warrior translates as "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" (pp. 171-73). For the natural Typees, there is no immortal yearning because there is no reason to yearn, just as there is no intellectual longing because there is no reason to think. Whatever may be said of the value of faith and thought, the natural Typees do not seem to testify to Melville's affirmation of the natural occurrence of these phenomena.

The difficulty of the above plausible interpretation points to the possibility of a more radical interpretation of Melville's lesson in *Typee*. Having "corrected" the romantic utopia, did Melville seek to reject his corrected picture of the state of nature, or did he seek instead to show that his own state of nature was in fact the place of human happiness, even *if* the modern Western alien would not accept it? Is the tragedy of *Typee* due to flaws in Melville's corrected state of nature, or to flaws in Tommo, his narrator? Does the tragic and pitiless ending of Tommo's visit to the Typees point to their or to his defects?

Now, Tommo is clearly revolted by the Typees' cannibalism, although he repeats Montaigne's defense of the practice in comparison to Western "civilized barbarity."<sup>28</sup> And it is true that the "last horrid revelation" (p. 238) about the Typees' continuing practice of cannibalism is a major ingredient in Tommo's resolution to attempt his escape at all cost. However, Tommo is revolted by cannibalism precisely because *he* sees the practice as "man-eating." The Typees, however, do not eat *men*: indeed, they do not know *men*. The Typees eat only Happers and other enemy "strangers and aliens" (p. 205), and they do not recognize the common "humanity" (p. 17) perceived by Tommo. That is to say, Tommo's attitude towards the Typees' cannibalism is dependent upon his "spiritualized" cosmopolitan and rationalistic abstraction from the differences among men. The radically and naturally parochial Typees "pass away their days" in such a "little space" that it seems "almost incredible" to Tommo (p. 27). His horror at the practice of cannibalism thus points to his own radical distance from natural ethnocentricity. Having learned to reason and to abstract, Tommo has been cut off from the natural. His own fundamentally egalitarian con-

ception of "man" is at variance with the natural character of the distinctions which exist between tribes, just as his own enlightened egalitarianism was at variance with the natural distinctions within the Typee tribe.

Tommo's leg pain, which is so often mentioned, may also point to his rationalistic or "spiritualized" flaw. The pain occurs as Tommo just begins his entry into the state of nature (p. 48) and plagues him until he gives himself over to the Typean life (p. 123). The pain returns only when the prospect of being tattooed makes Tommo conscious once again of his supposed predicament in paradise (pp. 231-32). Rather than showing the problems inherent in Typean physical life, the pain indicates a force which calls Tommo away from that life. When Tommo lives the life of the Typees, the pain abates and, in fact, disappears: the life of "thoughtless happiness" (p. 204) is a life without suffering and without the consciousness of loss or want. The pain in Tommo's leg, rather than pointing to the problem of physicality, points in fact to Tommo's inability to embrace physicality, an inability which flows from his having been infected by Western consciousness, reason, and intellectuality. It is Tommo's "*mind*" which, despite the "many consolatory circumstances" of the valley, is "consumed by . . . forebodings . . . and . . . melancholy" (p. 118, italics added). Tommo bears heavily the absence of anyone "to whom [he] could communicate [his] *thoughts*" (p. 231, italics added). Tommo is surprised that the Typees, who are total strangers to modern science and technology, almost never seek to avail themselves of his "superior information" (p. 120). In all, Tommo is kept from embracing the state of nature because that state denies any place to mind, "spirit," and the very love of wisdom. The fact that Tommo's attraction towards these things is symbolized by a painful infection should be sufficient evidence of Melville's judgment of their ultimate worth.

It is no wonder, then, that Tommo had described Toby and himself as "a couple of serpents" climbing the "lofty elevation" of the Island (p. 39). Nor is it any longer surprising that Tommo "half suspected" that his leg "had been bitten by some venomous reptile" (p. 48). Nor, finally, is it surprising that a native doctor had tried to expel the "demon located in the calf of [his] leg" (p. 80). It is clear now that Tommo is flawed precisely because he represents the influence of *Billy Budd's* "urbane Serpent," the purveyor of "the questionable apple of knowledge."<sup>29</sup>

In the end, whatever may be the differences between *Typee* and Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, the novel appears to follow in his attack on reason and enlightenment. Or, perhaps more correctly, *Typee* amounts to another episode in the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry."<sup>30</sup> Melville's poetic imitation of a perfectly happy and perfectly unsophisticated state of nature amounts to a claim that the pursuit of knowledge and philosophy are destructive of the good city. Just as Tommo's erotic desire for Fayaway

once led him to break the taboo against taking women in canoes (pp. 132–33), philosophic *eros* destroys and subverts the order of the good city. For Melville, the modern West was corrupted to the same extent that it was decisively scientific, philosophic, and rational, and he thus contradicted the point of Socrates' allegory of the cave by showing Western society drifting aimlessly directly "beneath the scorching sun of the Line" (p. 3); the ultimate tragedy of *Typee* is then Tommo's inability to cleanse himself of the effects of the "bite of the serpent" of which Alcibiades had complained in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>31</sup>

While Tommo had intended to find in the state of nature standards which would renew the health of his modern Western civilization, he found instead, but he rejected, a living refutation of the worth of the very love of wisdom celebrated by both the ancient and the modern West. *Typee* is thus, in all, an appropriate poetic statement in behalf of the position Melville had presented in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne:

It is a frightful poetical creed that the cultivation of the brain eats out the heart. But it's my *prose* opinion that in most cases, in those men who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to hams. And though you smoke them with the fire of tribulation, yet, like veritable hams, the head only gives the richer and the better flavor. I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), pp. 36–37, entry 14b; and p. 134, n. 108. Leon Howard, in *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 116, sees evidence of Melville's "perhaps secondhand" familiarity with Aristotle as early as *Mardi*, written in 1847–48.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetics* 1451b 5–8. One corollary of the argument of this paper is, however, that Melville, unlike Aristotle, regarded poetry as superior also to philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Melville, Preface, in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968), p. xiv. On the contemporary acceptance of the "authenticity" of *Typee*, see Leon Howard's Historical Note in this edition, pp. 279–80, 286–88, and 293. (Unless accompanied by additional footnote material, subsequent references to this edition of *Typee* will appear in parentheses in the text.)

<sup>4</sup> Melville anticipated problems with his Christian readers in *Typee's* Preface, p.

xiv. See Daniel Aaron, "Melville and the Missionaries," *NEQ*, 8 (1935), 404-08, for a brief account of the antagonism which *Typee* actually provoked among certain Christians. The antagonism suggests that *Typee* strikes deeper than a simple critique of some of the practices of some Christian missionaries would have struck.

<sup>5</sup> The suggested interpretation of this passage will perhaps seem more plausible when one notes also the narrator's apparent amusement as he tells a story in which a Christian "goddess," the wife of a missionary, is symbolically raped in the Marquesas, pp. 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Milton R. Stern, in *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 36, considers the narrator's "legalistic argument" a mere "rationalization which will justify his actions." It is argued here, however, that the narrator, like Jefferson in the *Declaration*, presents a rational argument which shows why his principle of natural justice authorizes a "revolution" in the case at hand.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck on 3 March 1849—*The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), p. 80—Melville wrote, "For I hold it a verity, that even Shakspeare [sic], was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is, or can be?" This is only one of many instances in which Melville implied that his own insights were both clearly rare and dangerously unpalatable. (See also Melville's letters to Lemuel Shaw, 6 October 1849, and to Duyckinck, 14 December 1849, pp. 91-92, and 95-96.)

<sup>8</sup> The narrator's impulsive response adds to the mystery surrounding the Typees' friendly reception of the runaways. Note also that the narrator's inexplicable response actually occurs *after* two young Typees had given the two white men the impression that they were among the friendly Happers (pp. 69-71).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakshott (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1962), p. 100. Cf. *Typee*, p. 128, where Tommo finds that even a battle between the Typees and the Happers can be compared to "the exhibition of a genteel comedy."

<sup>10</sup> John Locke, "The Second Treatise of Government," in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: The New American Library, 1965), p. 311.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Locke, "Second Treatise," pp. 327-44 and *Typee*, pp. 150, 195, and 201-02.

<sup>12</sup> *Republic* 369b-372e; *Laws* 676a-683b.

<sup>13</sup> Melville borrowed an English translation of Bougainville's *Voyage* (1772) itself from the New York Society Library early in 1848—Sealts, *Melville's Reading*, p. 43, entry 85. The possibility of Melville's earlier acquaintance with notions derived from Diderot's *Supplement* (1796) is left open in Charles Roberts Anderson's study of Melville's early reading—*Melville in the South Seas*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature, No. 138 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 189-91.

<sup>14</sup> Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Blanchard Bates, trans. Charles Cotton and W. Hazlitt (New York: Modern Library, 1949), pp. 74-89. Cf. especially *Typee*, p. 126.

<sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Robert Langbaum, The Signet Classic Shakespeare (New York: The New American Library, 1963), pp. 67-68, II.i.152-61, 164-69, 172. Again, cf. especially *Typee*, p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. especially Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," p. 79, Gonzalo's first speech, II.i. 152-61, and *Typee*, pp. 126-30.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men," in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp. 109-11, and 117.

The direct reference to Rousseau in *Typee* illustrates the superiority of internal to external evidence of Melville's reading. Sealts, in *Melville's Reading*, p. 89, entry 429, locates Melville's only externally confirmed possession of any of Rousseau's works, a "much desired copy" of the *Confessions*, in late 1849, about five years after Melville began writing *Typee*. Anderson, in *Melville in the South Seas*, p. 130, suggests a likely second hand source of the Rousseauian elements in *Typee*, but he goes on to suggest that the young Melville actually had read Rousseau directly and carefully (p. 178).

<sup>18</sup> Cf., for instance, "Discourse on Inequality," p. 107 and *Typee*, p. 149 on the uniformity of life in the state of nature. Similar comparisons can be made concerning the robustness of savage children, natural man's love of sleep, and the absence of any fear of death in the state of nature. See "Discourse on Inequality," pp. 106, 112, and 116, and cf. *Typee*, pp. 215, 88, and 173, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. "Discourse on Inequality," pp. 95, 130 and *Typee*, pp. 200-01.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Typee*, pp. 203-04 and "Discourse on Inequality," pp. 94-96, 117-19, and 131-33.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Typee*, p. 29 and "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts," in *The First and Second Discourses*, p. 36. For other examples of Rousseauian questioning of the value of advanced civilization, see *Typee*, pp. 15, 17, 26, 112, 124, 195, 198, and 202. Also, see the startling similarity between Rousseau's and Tommo's claims that the appearance of a natural man clearly shows the character of his soul—"Discourse on the Sciences and Arts" p. 37 and *Typee*, p. 142.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., for instance, *Typee*, pp. 221-24 and "Discourse on Inequality," pp. 148-51.

<sup>23</sup> See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1954), p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality," p. 180; *Typee*, pp. 71, 90 (italics added), and 78 (italics added); and Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> See *Typee*, p. 215, where Tommo makes an explicit comparison between the Typees and the "Lacedemonians."

<sup>26</sup> For example, Anderson argues, in *Melville in the South Seas*, p. 178, that "*Typee* . . . is a wholehearted defense of the Noble Savage and a eulogy of his happy life. . . . Virtually the whole book is written in the romantic literary tradition inaugurated by Rousseau a century before."

<sup>27</sup> James L. Babin, in "Melville and the Deformation of Being: From *Typee* to *Leviathan*," *Southern Review*, NS 7 (1971), 89-114, argues that Melville rejects Typean life because it cannot meet the needs of Tommo's self-consciousness or spirit.

Milton R. Stern, in both *The Fine Hammered Steel*, pp. 29-65 and his "Introduction," in *Typee and Billy Budd* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), pp. vi-xxv, argues that Typean life is radically limited and that Melville's intended lesson in *Typee* is that man must struggle in the world outside Eden to earn his truly human nobility.

The arguments of Babin and Stern represent the most thoughtful and serious treatments of *Typee* which I have encountered.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Typee*, p. 125 and Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," pp. 82-83.

<sup>29</sup> See *Billy Budd, Sailor*, p. 52.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Republic* 607b. On this "old quarrel," see especially Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

<sup>31</sup> *Symposium* 218a.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1? June 1851, in *The Letters of Herman Melville*, p. 129.