

HAUNTED UTOPIA: COLONIALISM AND THE SEARCH FOR A USABLE FUTURE IN ARTHUR GORDON PYM, TYPEE, AND THE CRATER

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In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin describes a painting of Paul Klee which shows an angel who stares back in apparent horror at a pile of ruins behind him. Benjamin thinks that this must be the "angel of history" who is irresistibly blown into the future by a storm coming from Paradise, while he glances backwards on the broken fragments of the past which appear to him not as they would to us, a mere series of events, but as a catastrophe. The paradisiacal storm does not leave him any time to stop, to awaken the dead and try to mend that which has been destroyed. While the angel is propelled into the future, the heap of fragments he looks back on grows to heaven. "This storm" Benjamin writes, "is what we call progress".¹

About one hundred years earlier, Tommo, the autobiographical protagonist of Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846), is fascinated by the effigy of a dead warrior in the valley of Typee on the island Nukahiva in the Marquesas, where he is detained by a group of indigenous people. The effigy is seated in the stern of a handsomely carved canoe. Its head is surmounted by an arch of plumes which nod and wave in the wind:

The long leaves of the palmetto drooped over the eaves, and through them you saw the warrior holding his paddle with both hands in the act of rowing, leaning forward and inclining his head, as if eager to hurry on his voyage. Glaring at him for ever, and face to face, was a polished human skull, which crowned the prow of the canoe. The spectral figurehead, reversed in its position, glancing backwards, seemed to mock the impatient attitude of the warrior.²

Tommo's native companion Kory-Kory explains that the warrior was paddling to the "realms of bliss, and bread-fruit" where there "was no end to the cocoanuts and bananas", where everybody reposed on finely woven mats or "bathed their glowing limbs in rivers of cocoanut oil". Tommo asks Kory-Kory whether he does not wish to accompany the chief to this place of abundance, but Kory-Kory responds that for the time being he is happy where he is – after all, the Polynesian heaven is only marginally more attractive than life in Typee. Tommo thinks he has understood his companion to use a proverb to express his opinion, "something equivalent to our old adage -- 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'". He is perplexed by

1. Walter Benjamin, "Ober den Begriff der Geschichte", *Illuminationen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1977, p. 255.

2. Herman Melville, *Typee: a Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), Introduction by George Woodcock, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 237, f.

this "shrewdness" and remains fascinated with the chief's mausoleum. Though the chief does not seem to make a lot of progress materially, he surmises, "with the eye of faith, I see thy canoe cleaving the bright waves, which die away on those dimly looming shores of Paradise". And he concludes: "This strange superstition affords another evidence of the fact, that however ignorant man may be, he still feels within him his immortal spirit yearning after the unknown future".³

With this last sentence, the otherworld of the Marquesan islanders, to which the chief paddles, but which Kory-Kory does not seem too curious to visit before his appointed time, has mutated into the Paradise mentioned by Benjamin. No matter how "ignorant" the Typees may be, Tommo moreover implies, they too have already eaten of the tree of knowledge and thus exhibit an irresistible, and apparently not altogether metaphysical, "yearning" for the "unknown future": Benjamin would call it a spirit of progress. Their history, too, we are invited to believe, is seized by that storm blowing from Paradise with such velocity that there is no time to heal the wounds of the past. The Typees, in short, are no exception to the universal state of depravity which spurs mankind to undertake ever-new acts of discovery in their effort to regain their lost Paradise. There is only *one* history, Melville's text suggests, and no place for prelapsarian bliss on earth. Typee may appear a Utopia, a place outside of God's sacred plot, but in reality it already partakes of the bitter fruit of fallen mankind.

As we shall see later on, Tommo's imposition of a troubled Calvinist narrative of innate evil and man's search for redemption on Kory-Kory's carefree assertion of terrestrial content forms the ideological core of Melville's text; it endows it with that ambiguity which guarantees both suspense and narrative closure. But Tommo's translation of the medieval theme of *vanitas* (symbolized by the skull which obstructs the chief's vision of the realm of bliss) into a modern search for knowledge is connected with one of the most powerful symbols of contemporary United States cultural discourse: the Typee chief is the Polynesian equivalent of the notorious figure of the dying Indian. From the earliest reports on New England onward, the motive of the Vanishing Indian has served to sentimentalize the process of Westward expansion. *Typee*, too, taps this powerful sentimental discourse, which rhetorically legitimates the destruction of indigenous peoples even while bewailing it. Tommo's assertion of the Arcadian lifestyle in the valley of Typee is followed by one of those sighs about the "futurelessness" of indigenous cultures which we know so well from American romantic writings:

Ill-fated people! I shudder when I think of the change a few years will produce in their paradisaical abode; and probably when the most destructive vices, and the worst attendances on civilization, shall have driven all peace and happiness from the valley, the magnanimous French will proclaim to the world that the Marquesas Islands have been converted to Christianity! ... The sympathy which Christendom feels for them, has, alas! in too many instances proved their bane.⁴

For someone writing in 1845, three years after the French conquest of the Marquesas, there was a welcome third party to blame for the fatal effects of mission

3. *Ibid.*, p. 239

4. *Ibid.*, p. 256 f.

and colonialism. In commenting on his previous attack on Typee in 1813, by contrast, the American commander David Porter, on whose report Melville has heavily relied for information on the islanders, is less fortunate. After mentioning the killings and burnings of his extremely bloody and violent invasion of Typee, Porter concludes with the words:

When I had reached the summit of the mountain, I stopped to contemplate that valley which, in the morning, we had viewed in all its beauty, the scene of abundance and happiness — a long line of smoking ruins now marked our traces from one end to the other; the opposite hills were covered with the unhappy fugitives, and the whole presented a scene of desolation and horror. Unhappy and heroic people! the victims of your own courage and mistaken pride, while the instruments of your own fate, shed the tears of pity over your misfortunes, thousands of your countrymen (nay, brethren of the same family) triumphed in your distresses!⁵

In the face of so much sympathy with the self-imposed fate of the natives, one may be tempted to forget that Porter's Americans were themselves the perpetrators of the "desolation and horror" which he tortuously seeks to ascribe to native internal conflict or fatal courage. But Porter's regret about the destroyed Paradise is part and parcel of the project of colonialism he serves, which is built on such acts of destruction.

Melville articulates a scathing critique of the "unprovoked atrocities" committed by Porter and his like:

The enormities perpetrated in the South Seas upon some of the inoffensive islanders will nigh pass belief. These things are seldom proclaimed at home; they happen at the very ends of the earth, they are done in a corner, and there are none to reveal them. But there is, nevertheless, many a petty trader that has navigated the Pacific whose course from island to island might be traced by a series of cold-blooded robberies, kidnappings, and murders, the iniquity of which might be considered almost sufficient to sink her guilty timbers to the bottom of the sea. ... It may be asserted without fear of contradiction, that in all the cases of outrages committed by Polynesians, Europeans have at some time or other been the aggressors, and that the cruel and bloodthirsty disposition of some of the islanders is mainly to be ascribed to the influence of such examples.⁶

Here as elsewhere, *Typee* is very straightforward in its critique of Western colonial practice, though the bulk of the blame is placed on the traders, not on people like Porter (who is previously praised as a "brave and accomplished officer").⁷ The harshness of this verbal onslaught was quite exceptional at the time. Still, as we shall see, the moral outrage of such passages stands in dialectical tension with less approvable aspects of the text.

The Typee of Melville's semi-autobiographical narrative is not just a real geographical area but also an exemplary *rhetorical site* of contemporary imperial

5. In Aderson, Charles Roberts, *Melville in the South Seas* (1939), Dover, New York, 1966, p. 97 f.

6. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 63 f.

7. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 62 f.

discourse in the United States. We will return to *Typee* once again, but before doing so it is necessary to sketch some of the general ideological context in which the text is implicated.

From its beginnings, the settlement of America presented an uneasy alliance between the attempted fulfillment of utopian hopes and the violent dispossession of America's indigenous population. Thomas More anticipated this conflict between utopianism and colonialism, which may be regarded as the motor of American expansion. Utopia, we are told, was conquered by Utopus who subjugated the original inhabitants and brought them to a higher level of culture.⁸ Similarly, if the population of Utopia became too numerous, the citizens would plant a colony "wherever the natives have plenty of unoccupied and uncultivated land". This is precisely the same argument John Winthrop and John Cotton would use one hundred years later in legitimating the settlement of New England. Those natives who chose to stay, More continues, would have to adapt to the culture of the Utopians:

But if the natives will not join in living under their laws, the Utopians drive them out of the land they claim for themselves, and if they resist make war on them. The Utopians say it's perfectly justifiable to make war on people who leave their land idle and waste, yet forbid the use of it to others who, by the law of nature, ought to be supported from it.⁹

The argument is proto-Lockean in its derivation of property rights from an ideal notion of cultivation and labor. Four years after the publication of *Utopia*, the "discovery" of the highly developed agrarian culture of Mexico in 1520 would complicate European strategies of colonial legitimation and lead to elaborate legal debates about the legitimacy of conquest, particularly in Spain. In England, however, the "protestant" notion of property-through-(the right kind of)-labor had always prevailed. It still resonates powerfully in all later romantic evocations of the "idle" lifestyle of native cultures, which was seen as a desirable condition but excluded them from equal property rights.

Reality looked different, of course. The Indian tribes encountered in North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did cultivate the land, and the first settlers, as we know, actually depended on the native labor force for their own survival. In spite of all rhetorical assertions about the superiority of European-style agriculture over the indigenous systems of mixed planting, it was the *Europeans'* love of idleness which led to the introduction of slavery in America. But this did not prevent the "lack-of-native-agriculture" argument from booming in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in the guise of the romantic image of the Indian as noble, lonely, and regrettably dying, male hunter. Until today, the image of the dying noble savage, which saturated antebellum expansionist discourse, works wonderfully to veil the moral scandal of the Jacksonian Removal policy of the 1830s.

Besides the omnipresence of the Vanishing Indian myth, American colonial discourse exhibits a strong wish to deny the presence of original inhabitants altogether. It extends from the sixteenth century myth of Prince Madoc to the theory of America as vacuum

8. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Trans. by Robert M. Adams, Norton, New York, 1975, p. 34 f.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

domicilium all the way to Thomas Jefferson's and James Otis' adaptation of the English revolutionary Norman Yoke myth to the situation in America. In identifying the revolutionary Americans with the ancient Saxons suffering anew from the oppression of the Norman Tyrant (King George), they elegantly analogize America's first inhabitants away and turn their own party into American "natives" exposed to foreign tyranny.¹⁰ But at the time of the Early Republic, the denial of Indian presence was extremely difficult in areas with a dense native population. It was similarly difficult to deny that most Eastern tribes were sedentary farmers, with the Five Civilized Tribes having recently adopted many European institutions and technologies, from slavery to the printing press. Jacksonian removal rhetoric therefore increasingly turned to racist and historical-determinist justifications of conquest. In a message to Congress, Andrew Jackson bewailed the "fate" of the Indians in lachrymose prose:

Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aboriginies of this country, and Philantropy has been long busily employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth. To follow to the tomb the last of his race and tread on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections.¹¹

Jackson's philanthropic philosophy of melancholy genocide was largely shared by the United States Supreme Court judges who, in the 1831 decision *Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia*, declined the responsibility of human institutions and displaced it onto the inscrutable dynamics of history. "If it be true that the Cherokee nation have rights", Chief Justice John Marshall writes,

this is not the tribunal in which those rights are to be asserted. If it be true that wrongs have been inflicted, and that still greater are to be apprehended, this is not the tribunal which can redress the past or prevent the future.¹² (my italics)

The 1832 Supreme Court ruling *Worcester v. Georgia*, by contrast, asserts full Cherokee land rights. It could safely do so because by then Indian removal was irreversibly decided upon and in full swing. But even here, Marshall contrasts legal doctrine (the law of nations of Vattel) with the rules of reason:

[A] sound national policy does require that the Indian tribes within our States should exchange their territories ... or eventually consent to become amalgamated in our political communities" (my italics).¹³

The Cherokees, apparently having a different understanding of "amalgamation" than the Anglo-Americans, were finally removed to Oklahoma by force in 1838 in

10. On the Norman Yoke in America, cf. Robert William, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought. The Discourses of Conquest*, Oxford, 1990, chapter 6. On the original Norman Yoke myth, Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, Penguin, 1986, chapter 3.

11. In Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror. A History of Multicultural America*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1993, p. 88.

12. Edward H. Spicer, *A Short History of the Indians of the United States*, Van Nostrand, New York, 1969, p. 189.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

what has come to be known as the Trail of Tears. Alexis de Tocqueville gives a moving account of the hardships of Indian removal, during which thousands died, when he describes a band of Choctaws crossing the Mississippi in the winter of 1831:

It was then the middle of winter, and the cold was unusually severe; the snow had frozen hard upon the ground, and the river was drifting huge masses of ice. The Indians had their families with them, and they brought in their train the wounded and the sick, with children newly born and old men on the verge of death. They possessed neither tents nor wagons, but only their arms and some provisions. I saw them embark to pass the mighty river, and never will that solemn spectacle fade from my remembrance. No cry, no sob, was heard among the assembled crowd; all were silent.¹⁴

At the end of his section on the "Three Races in the United States", Tocqueville's unsentimental observation finally gives way to darker tones. Whenever native territorial interests compete with state interests, he writes, the Americans "kindly take [the Indians] by the hand and transport them to a grave far from the land of their fathers":

The Spaniards were unable to exterminate the Indian race by those unparalleled atrocities which brand them with indelible shame, nor did they succeed even in wholly depriving it of its rights; but the Americans of the United States have accomplished this twofold purpose with singular felicity, tranquilly, legally, philanthropically, without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world. It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity.¹⁵

But its rhetorical power notwithstanding, Tocqueville's moral outrage obscures the fact that the Indian Removal of the 1830s did indeed present a violation of the "laws of humanity", as well as of International Law. It also tends to divert attention from Tocqueville's own acquiescence to the dictates of *Realpolitik* elsewhere in his text. The Indians, he writes one page prior to his condemnation of United States expansion policy, will "perish if they continue to wander from waste to waste, and if they attempt to settle they still must perish".¹⁶ This precis of the vicious circle of colonialist logic has the merit of honesty.

Jacksonian Removal policy, which must be regarded as the epitomy of the century-old dream to keep America morally and racially clean (without "blot or mixture on its surface", in Jefferson's memorable phrase), has gained critical comments from such diverse writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson in the United States and the European author Adelbert von Chamisso across the Atlantic.¹⁷ Lucy Maddox has recently argued that the traumatic effect of this event, not just on the Indians but also on the cultural psyche of the United States, has probably been much underrated in

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1963, 2 vols., vol. 1, p. 340.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

17. On Jefferson, cf. Reginald Horsemann, *Race and Manifest Destiny. The Origin of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 93; on Emerson, Lucy Maddox, *Removals. Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs*, Oxford, 1991, p. 16; Chamisso's critique is in a poem on the Indian removal, Adelbert von Chamisso, *Werke in einem Band*, Munich, 1975, p. 305 ff.

American Studies. Maddox shows in a number of intriguing textual analyses how various antebellum literary texts have knowingly or unknowingly dealt with the subject of removal – a subject, Maddox thinks, which could not possibly be ignored at the time.¹⁸ Toni Morrison has made a similar argument with regard to the topic of slavery. In *Playing in the Dark*, she writes:

It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population. Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature ... reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence — one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist [and, I'd add, Native American] presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness.¹⁹

The “coded language” by which Morrison claims early United States culture expressed and simultaneously concealed its secret awareness that it owed its economic growth to the employment of slave labor on recently appropriated Indian land, as well as its concern with the “racial disingenuousness ... at its heart”, included various rhetorical strategies, above all the strategy of displacement. It is probably due to the ‘literal’ orientation of literary scholarship that the topics of slavery and dispossession have almost exclusively been looked for in those texts which make them their thematic center (such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Leatherstocking romances) rather than in texts that on their thematic surface do not deal with the issue of “America's three races” at all. In the remainder of this essay, I want to suggest that the topic of Indian removal is negotiated in three texts which are all in one sense or other “utopian”: Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846), and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Crater* (1847).

Toni Morrison herself, and many scholars before her, have called attention to the fact that Poe's imaginative travel account *Arthur Gordon Pym* is crucially concerned with the issue of race. The narrative builds up to a massacre of the British shipcrew by a band of wholly degenerated black savages on the imaginary Antarctic island Tsalal. Pym, the adolescent narrator, and Dirk Peters, his part-Indian companion, manage to escape in a boat and are carried toward the South Pole by an irresistible current. Their native hostage Nu-Nu dies of pure fear of the increasing whiteness of the atmosphere. The narrative concludes with the boat rushing

into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.²⁰

18. Lucy Maddox, *Removals. Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs*, Oxford, p. 199.

19. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Picador, London, 1992, p. 5 f.

20. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, (1838), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1983, p. 239.

The black-white dualism pervades the text and at times borders on absurdity: the Tsalalians express deadly fear of everything white, while they themselves are completely black, teeth included. As Poe the editor explains in the postscript, the inscriptions which Pym and Peters find in a subterranean cave point to an eternal conflict between the antagonistic principles of "darkness" and "light" staged in the "region of the south" (241). The hyperbolic dualism of the text leaves little doubt that Poe is imaginatively rehearsing the racial future of the United States, in particular the American South. The text is obsessed with the topic of black revolt (first a mutiny on the ship led by a black cook, then the massacre of the crew on Tsalal).

But Pym is also concerned with the topic of Indian-White relations. Though Morrison is correct when she says that the text's narrative terminates with the appearance of the huge shrouded figure, the postscript informs us of the (quite miraculous) return of Pym and Peters, of Pym's recent death (which renders his narrative incomplete), and of Peters' disappearance to Illinois. A good hoax indeed. But rather than putting the "open ending" down to an incapacity of composition on Poe's part, as has sometimes been done, I would tend to regard the unresolved conclusion of Pym as the result of an ideological conflict, as a symptom of the cultural dilemma of coming to terms with America's racial policy. After all, the book appeared in the year of the Cherokee removal, which was preceded by an intense public debate in the previous years. 1838 also saw the first edition of the autobiography of the Sauk and Fox chief Black Hawk, who died in the same year, as well as the death of the Seminole leader Osceola in prison after a desperate struggle against Jackson's troops to prevent the Seminoles' removal to the Oklahoma territory. Significantly, the "hybrid" Dirk Peters, son of a European fur trader and an Upsaroka woman, "removes" himself to Illinois, the region of the late Black Hawk's War (240). While enacting a quasi-metaphysical struggle between Black and White, then, Pym at the same time contains the narrative of the only survivor of the expedition, a kind of mixed-blood *coureur de bois*, a Natty Bumppo with a "cross".

The text has divided sympathies for Peters – he is sometimes portrayed as a self-sufficient hero who rescues Pym's life, but then again as a "demon" and "fiend". It was left to Jules Verne to turn him into a tragic figure in his sequel to *Pym*, *Le Sphinx des Glaces* (1897). Verne has Peters, the dutiful servant, die of a broken heart upon finding Pym, after a lifelong search, nailed to the polar magnetic rock by the barrel of his own gun. (An odd reversal of the broken-hearted deaths of Indian chiefs whose white antagonists, unfortunately, did not share Pym's fate). But *Arthur Gordon Pym* lacks such tragic conventionalism. In its inconclusiveness it rather seems to express a mixture of anxiety and curiosity about the national future of the United States, exploring the potentials of theories of racial amalgamation.

Even in *Pym*, of course, Peters remains the single exception, the only non-Anglo-Saxon who is portrayed with at least some degree of sympathy. Much different is the text's portrayal of the Tsalalians, who first comport themselves like the innocent Arawaks of Columbus' *Diary*, only to turn into "the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe" without any perceptible reason.²¹ In insisting on the unmotivated capriciousness of these archsavages, the text reiterates the most powerful ideologue

21. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

of colonial discourse: the myth of the innate depravity and treacherousness of indigenous peoples. Colonial texts from the sixteenth century onward abound in examples of the settlers "discovering" native hospitality is a mask to lure their guests to security in order to render the intended strike the more effective. Bred on the Calvinist ideology of the innate depravity of all mankind, English colonizers were particularly obsessed with the fear of native treachery.²² Poe echos this discursive practice at the same time as he seems to mock it through the sheer absurdity of the Tsalal episode. Melville's South Seas narrative *Typee*, by contrast, is actually organized by it.

Arthur Gordon Pym frustrates any reader's expectation of narrative closure. To the extent that "plot" depends on a "sense of an ending", Pym may thus be seen to be a narrative without a plot. *Typee*, on the contrary, seems to be primarily concerned with fulfilling the demands of plot and, inseparable from it, of suspense. This formal concern is inseparable from the ideology of native treacherousness which saturates the text, as will be shown.

Based on Melville's personal sojourn on the Marquesan island Nukahiva in July and August 1842, *Typee* is an account of the narrator Tommo's and his friend Toby's desertion of their ship, their stay at the secluded village of the Typees, of Toby's disappearance and Tommo's final escape from his benevolent detainment by the natives. On publishing his account, Tommo/Melville is reunited with Toby, whose own story is rendered in a sequel to the second edition. In spite of their reputation as fierce cannibals, the Typees treat their visitors with the most affectionate attention, and Tommo gives delightful accounts of their simple and self-sufficient lifestyle. "The penalty of the Fall", he assures the readers, "presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee", and the business of "digging and delving for a livelihood" is "altogether unknown" to its inhabitants:

Nature has planted the bread-fruit and the banana, and in her own good time she brings them to maturity, when the idle savage stretches forth his hand, and satisfies his appetite.²³

The rhetoric is utopian, picked up from writers like Rousseau and Montaigne, but actually leads back to Ovid's description of the Golden Age, in which, according to the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, "[the] earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful", and in which the people fed on strawberries, grapes, acorns, and other delicacies without having to cultivate anything.²⁴ In the Golden Age, there was likewise no law, "no fear of punishment, no threatening words ... to be read on brazen tablets". There was no trade, no war, "no swords or helmets" but everybody "passed the years in gentle ease". Imitating the grammar of negation in which the ideal state of mankind is traditionally described, Tommo finds in Typee

none of those thousand sources of irritation that the ingenuity of civilized man

22. Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters. Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, Methuen, London, 1986, p. 163 f.

23. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

24. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Trans. F.J. Miller, London, 1956, p. 9.

has created to mar his own felicity. There were no foreclosures of mortgages, no protested notes, no bills payable, no unreasonable tailors and shoemakers, perversely bent on being paid; no duns of any description; no assault and battery attorneys ... no poor relations, everlastingly occupying the spare bed-chamber, and diminishing the elbow room at the family table.²⁵

Another half page with promising "nos" follows: Melville's hyperbolic list of negations, which may be directly modelled on a very similar passage in *Gulliver's Travels*,²⁶ tends to ridicule the naive utopianism of South Sea romantics even while pretending to share it. It does not precisely seem to take seriously the *political* dimension of Rousseau's primitivism. Moreover, the insistence on the absence of any form of cultivation in Tommo's Polynesian paradise recalls the negative use to which this argument has been twisted by the Lockean promoters of colonialism referred to above.

The quoted utopian passages, and others of a similar thrust, are usually coupled in *Typee* with an occasionally scathing critique of the practice of colonization. The beginning of the following passage actually had to be dropped from the second edition to soothe the wrath of the American public:

The Anglo-Saxon have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North American continent; but with it they have likewise extirpated the greater portion of the Red race. Civilization is gradually sweeping from the earth the lingering vestiges of Paganism, and at the same time the shrinking forms of its unhappy worshippers.

Among the islands of Polynesia, no sooner are the images overturned, the temples demolished, and the idolators converted into *nominal* Christians, than disease, vice, and premature death make their appearance. 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 the Truth ... The spontaneous fruits of the earth, which God in his wisdom had ordained for the support of the indolent natives, remorselessly seized upon and appropriated by the stranger, are devoured before the eyes of the starving inhabitants, or sent on board the numerous vessels which now touch at their shores.²⁷

In its mingling of the Polynesian situation with the situation of native North America (the "rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals" settling within the borders of the former native territory instantly recall the rapacious Georgia settlers settling on former Cherokee land), the passage offers an instructive comment on the Indian Removal policy. Coupled with the extirpation of the Polynesians, that of the Native Americans may now also primarily be seen as the result of the clash of two incompatible cultures (one sedentary, one dependant on the earth's "spontaneous fruits"), as well as of the ensuing "tragedies" of "disease, vice, and premature death".

25. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 181 f.

26. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. "Introduction", p. 19.

27. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 266; see Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy. The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, Knopf, New York, 1983, p. 45.

Problematic as the account already is with respect to Polynesia (it leaves no doubt about the general agreement with the *project* of "civilization", despite its criticism of the present *practice*), the analogy with the situation in the United States defines away the *political* responsibility of Jacksonian America for the death and removal of thousands of Indians. Far from being a "gradually sweeping" natural force, the march of Progress, whose executive failings the text criticizes while endorsing them in principle, was of course very much a man-made affair.²⁸ The fact that Melville is a much better writer than Jackson cannot ultimately conceal the similarity of their arguments.

To be sure, the descriptions of Polynesian lifestyle in *Typee* are at times hilarious, an amusing read. The burlesque and mocking tone in which Tommo renders the strange customs of the natives only seldom has a condescending touch. But it is precisely the comedy of such passages which reveals really much more about the society of the narrator than it does of Typee culture. At one point, Tommo frankly admits that he has not understood the deeper meaning of the natives' rituals and customs at all (295 f.). What he gives us may be called, following Clifford Geertz, a series of "thick descriptions": exhaustive accounts of cultural practice (rather than assumptions about their hidden meaning), during which he makes frequent use of the strategy of analogy.

A good instance of this is the view of Marquesan history which is implied in Tommo's contemplation of a number of huge stone monuments on the island. He compares them with the ceremonial center of the Druids at Stonehenge and with the Egyptian pyramids, expressing his conviction that they must be "the work of an extinct and forgotten race". As there are no inscriptions or other clues to establish the precise age of the monuments, Tommo finds no reason to believe that they could have been constructed by the forefathers of his simple hosts (216 f.). Scholarship has shown that Melville here, as in the case of the islanders' alleged lack of cultivation, departs from the ethnographic information contained in his sources. The megaliths were indeed the work of the direct ancestors of the Typees.²⁹ In both instances, Melville's manipulation of the sources serves the overall rhetorical pattern of his text, which is above all concerned with translating the difference between the cultures into a dualist structure with the historically evolved Western civilization on one end and its ahistorical savage counterpart on the other. The islanders, Tommo informs us, have "not advanced one step in the career of improvement".³⁰ Native history, the text implies, is at best catastrophic (consisting of inexplicable ups and downs), while the "civilized" world owes its superiority to a continuous historical development (at least since the unification of the Roman Empire with Christianity).

But the purpose of the rhetorical manipulation of life in *Typee* is not only to make it fit the straight-jacket of European utopian and colonialist expectations. The idealistic descriptions gain new meaning from their direct interaction with the

28. There is another oblique reference to Jacksonian Indian policy when Tommo writes about the Typees' sense of property which, he says, they hold "in fee simple from Nature herself; to have and to hold, *so long as grass grows and water runs*; or until their French visitors ... shall appropriate [their valleys] to their own benefit and behoof" (273, my italics). While Tommo speaks about colonialism in Polynesia, with a third party conveniently at hand to blame for the atrocities of dispossession, his metaphor, borrowed from the language of Indian treaty-making, betrays his concern with a rather less digestible case closer to home.

29. Cfr. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 157 ff.

30. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

savagery which saturates Tommo's narrative. *Typee* is dominated, and in fact organized, by the topic of native cannibalism.

It is by the evocation of "cannibal banquets", "savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols -- *heathenish rites and human sacrifices*" and other such "jumbled anticipations that haunted me" that the reader is introduced to the world of the Marquesas (37). And the text is indeed haunted by Tommo's and Toby's constant expectation that they will be the main course of a cannibal feast, no matter in how friendly a manner the natives behave toward their unexpected guests. Tommo in fact deploys a large repertoire of colonial tales of cannibalistic islanders, all of dubious reliability and based on hearsay, a typical feature of this specific item of colonial discourse.³¹ His stories reverberate with the discourse on the Caribbean, from Columbus to Montaigne. Captain Cook, too, makes his frequent appearance: we are entertained with the story of the native who claims to have nibbled Cook's big toe, all the while watching his companions devour the rest of him (311), and when Tommo and Toby are presented with a bowl of pork during their initiation rite in the Toboo Groves (or "Ti"), Toby, apparently not too frightened for subtle punning, exclaims, "'A baked baby, by the soul of Captain Cook!' (145). In short, the whole text oozes the odor of "horrid rites" and unspeakable sacrifices (140). Toby's mysterious disappearance provides the cannibal plot with additional flavour (160 f.; 172; 200; 333). The occasional mention of disbelief in the face of contradictory evidence (184), or Montaignesque considerations of the "cannibalistic" nature of European society (180 f.), ultimately help to keep the topic over a low flame (so to speak), and are usually coupled with the promise of some real stuff to follow (184). After numerous announcements of a *Typee* cannibal feast (e.g. 277), which work wonderfully in building up the suspense, we finally get what we have been waiting for throughout the tedious ethnographic accounts of the innocence of *Typee* culture: Tommo accidentally perceives three shrunken heads, claims that one of them was that of a white man, and is from now on convinced that not only will he be devoured but afterwards exposed to the same abominable practice (309 f.). Though Tommo is excluded from the ritual which follows the capture of two or three enemies, he knows by now what the warriors were occupied with in their meeting place. The sound of the drum is sufficient to excite in him "a sensation of horror which I am unable to describe". When the feast is over, Tommo visits the "Ti", looking "fearfully round in quest of some memorial of the scene which had so lately been acted here" (315). Lifting the lid off a suspicious-looking vessel, he finally finds what he has been searching for, "the disordered members of a human skeleton, the bones still fresh with moisture, and with particles of flesh clinging to them here and there!" (316). Kory-Kory's exclamation that this was the skeleton of a pig does not reach him anymore. Tommo's fear of being the next victim of the treacherous natives builds up to his escape and initial act of violence against one of the warriors who tries to prevent him from leaving (332). By the time of Tommo's racy flight from *Typee*, the islanders have lost all their previous innocence and now betray their real nature: they are persistently referred to as "savages" and "wretches" (332).

The suspense of the text (which works!) obviously depends on its ambivalent depiction of the *Typees* as both innocent lambs and potential ravenous wolves. But

31. See note on p. 60; on cannibalism see Hulme, *op. cit.*, chapter 2.

as both innocence and savagery are traits of one and the same native character, that character becomes a paragon of the Calvinist concept of the innate depravity of mankind. As in Tommo's interpretation of the chief's effigy which I referred to at the beginning, the allegedly unspoilt appearance of Typee society is here again presented as mere *appearance*, a mask of innocence that conceals the utter savagery of the natural state of mankind, of which cannibalism is of course the most horrible expression. What Melville has written in his famous comment on Hawthorne's short stories applies to *Typee* as well:

this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals 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. ... You may be witched by his sunlight — transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you; but there is the blackness of darkness beyond. (quoted in "Introduction", p. 26)

The text's ambiguous attitude towards Typee culture as both utopian and savage, bright on the outside but rotten within, is the main source of suspense. The most important element of Melville's plot is the deferral of the "revelation" of the cannibalistic act until the very end: it is constantly announced throughout the text, and after this careful preparation Tommo's glimpse of the dissected skeleton has an anticlimactic touch. Whether the "disordered members" really derive from a human skeleton is of course an open question. But my point is not to confute Tommo's version of "what really happened" at the Ti: this would mean ignoring the constructed character of the text which, particularly in its cannibalistic passages, is far from representing Polynesian reality. I am, rather, interested in the function which *Typee's* discourse of cannibalism has within the overall ideological structure of the text. How does the discourse work and to what ends is it utilized?

Once the Typees' cannibalism is "proven", the text completely changes its tone with regard to the natives. Even a critical reader is led to accept Tommo's fear, resulting in his desire to escape the heart of darkness. The fierceness of the Typees in trying to prevent him from leaving, too, has a very familiar ring. In our eyes, which are accustomed to such stories, it fully legitimates Tommo's own use of violence, exerted against one of the chiefs who attacks him, interestingly, with a "tomahawk" (332). In short, *Typee's* discourse of savagism "works"; the fascination and suspense it excites in the (Western, and mostly male) reader seems to be timeless.

But of course that fascination is precisely the problem, as it testifies to that specific reader's successful "insertion" into the colonial discourse of savagism. The natives' savagery in the final passages of the text is so "natural" to most of us that it is hard to resist its ideological lure. Once resistance takes hold, however, the text's rhetorical strategy begins to unfold. It is the assumption of native cannibalism which endows the text with closure, and this closure in turn consists of an initial act of colonial violence and a hairbreadth escape from what has by now become a savage hell.

But the hellishness of savage life is not really described at all. Like Daniel Defoe before him and Joseph Conrad after him, Melville operates with an aesthetics of absence. As I said, the reader's expectation of some "real stuff", arising from the constant evocation of cannibalism, is hardly rewarded with hard facts of any kind.

Cannibalism is less an observed native ritual practice than an indicator of the "civilized" man's psychotic fear. Like the single footprint which Crusoe finds on his beach, and whose inexplicability turns him into a nervous wretch, Tommo's evocation of cannibalism has an "uncanny" quality. In both cases, horror is excited *not* by the "thing itself" but by its absence and invisibility. The technique is similar to that in the beginning of Horace Walpole's gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), in which a man is found squashed to death by an oversized helmet of unknown origin. Both gothic and adventure discourses share a similar plot structure, which introduces a terrifying mystery and works toward a final solution.

But the deferred reality of native cannibalism can only create an "uncanny" suspense in both *Crusoe* and *Typee* because it relies on the reader's previous conditioning by the discourse of savagism. The immense popular success of both texts testifies to the fact that readers probably knew well how to fill in the gaps with what they thought they knew about savage life. As Roy Harvey Pearce and others after him have shown, by the nineteenth century the ideology of savagism pervaded Western culture as the major legitimatory myth of Western superiority. So, while we could say that Tommo the fictional character is haunted by the fear created by the discourse of civilization itself, and that his fear is reinforced by its intimate ties with the Calvinist concept of innate depravity, his fear is at the same time a narrative technique which reinforces colonial ideology by making the cultural encounter end "logically", in an act of colonial violence. To lay the blame for initiating this violence at the door of the Typees (Tommo simply defends himself) agrees with the colonialist strategy of displacing responsibility on to the recipients of Western blessings. We have seen this strategy at work in Captain Porter's theory of the islanders' self-inflicted victimization by exaggerated courage and mistaken pride.

The "gothic" plot of *Typee* would be much less effective, and definitely much less "Calvinist", without its interaction with the utopian discourse of the text. Imposed on the actual experience of Melville on Nukahiva in 1842, then, the text develops a Christianized allegory of colonial beginnings. In addition, its explicit references to contemporary United States Indian policy turn it into a mythical solution to the moral dilemma of Indian removal. Colonial violence, the ending of the text implies, originates with the innately depraved savages themselves.

I have so far treated *Typee* largely as a fictional account, a mythical construct. But the real ideological impact of the text can only be grasped by being aware of the fact that for almost a hundred years it was taken at face value. For a whole century, readers trusted Tommo's passionate claim that it was his "anxious desire to speak the unvarnished truth" (34). Since Charles Roberts Anderson's pathbreaking study of 1939, Melville's numerous departures from his actual experience and from his sources are well known. But this does not alter the fact that *Typee's* discourses of utopianism and of savagism have had an immense impact on later texts on the South Seas, fictional as well as ethnological ones.³² Among the heirs of *Typee* are Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir James Frazer, the latter of whom returned elements of Melville's pseudo-ethnography to the scientific community which treated them as hard facts.³³ The texts of Conrad and Frazer have in turn become pillars of the aesthetic and scientific project of modernism, from T.S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud to Claude Levi-Strauss.

32. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

Melville's literal attitude towards the scientific imperative to represent reality "as it really is" may be applauded, from a poststructuralist perspective, as a good lesson about the pitfalls of positivism. From a "postcolonial" point of view, however, the text's pseudo-realistic deployment of time-worn colonialist myths can only be seen to aesthetically underwrite the dualist logic of the modern project of imperialism. The adventure plot, whose success the text's ambiguity guarantees is at the same time a miniature version of "God's Plot" which has always sanctified colonial exploitation as a special manifestation of divine providence.

Both the reversal of initial aggression and the providentialist affirmation of Western colonialism, which *Typee* accomplishes in a quite subtle way, are much more overtly displayed in Cooper's romance *The Crater* (1847),³⁴ which appeared one year after *Typee*. In a different way than *Typee*, *The Crater*, too, negotiates discourses of utopianism and savagism. But while Tommo's violent return is also an affirmation of the cultural values of the capitalist world, Cooper's utopian romance, in which he articulates his disenchantment with what he regards as the Jacksonian perversions of the ideas of the Founding Fathers, ends with a deeply negative vision of the future of the United States.

The setting of the romance, an imaginary volcanic archipelago in the Pacific, promises an American *Robinson Crusoe*, while its naming politics gives it the flavour of a displaced Leatherstocking romance (the natives are frequently called "Indians" and a plain is called the "prairie"). There are indeed traces of, as well as intertextual references to, Defoe's text in the *Crater*. Young Mark Woolston and his elder sailor-friend Bob Betts are shipwrecked on a barren reef in the South Seas, which they quickly turn, *Crusoe*-fashion, into a flowering garden. While Betts drifts away in a boat during a storm, an earthquake with volcanic eruption raises the subterranean part of the archipelago, and Mark finds himself the original owner of an extensive and extremely fertile area. Betts returns with some of Woolston's family members, and they found a colony, which soon grows in citizens and wealth. Attacks from the nearby indigenous islanders, who at one time even hire a pirate crew to overthrow the booming colony, are successfully warded off. But as soon as the external enemy is defeated, internal dissensions begin; a popular movement, which conceals its selfish thirst for power by professing democratic ideals, overturns Mark Woolston's benevolent quasi-monarchic government, and Mark and his family leave for the United States. Upon returning once more in order to re-establish trade relations with the Craterians, they find that the archipelago, with men and goods, has sunken to the bottom of the sea after a second volcanic eruption.

The Crater can hardly be counted among Cooper's better works. It is embarrassingly pious, deeply conservative (i.e. undemocratic, antiabolition, anti-suffrage), and contains numerous examples of Cooper's proverbial "literary offences". But as an allegory of American settlement, whose utopian beginning soon merges into dystopian corruption, the text has the quality of a jeremiad whose conjuration of catastrophe is highly relevant to our topic. Lack of space allows only a cursory reading which dispenses with a discussion of Cooper's aristocratic theory of government. What is most important for us is the way in which Mark's governorship is legitimated. Because what we have here is one of those cases which rarely happen

33. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

34. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Crater or Vulcan's Peak* (1847), Harvard, Cambridge, 1962.

in real life: Woolston can indeed claim rightful ownership of the island because not only did he discover it in an uninhabited state (which gives him title according to the right of discovery) but he also earns possession of the ground according to the protestant ideology of labor. The first third of the text is a painstaking enactment of the Lockean theory of property: in tedious repetitiveness, the text describes how Mark and Bob, by mixing their labor with the barren land, turn the desert into a paradise. Their success is as miraculous as Locke's theory: no matter what debris crosses their path (whether loam, guano, dead fish, or pig carcasses), everything is turned into manure, and the growth of foodplants; fruit trees and verdure surpasses all expectation. The climate is just perfect, and neither storm nor volcanic eruption can interrupt the growth of Mark's agricultural paradise. To make sure that his message gets across, Cooper actually *calls* the place "earthly paradise" and "garden of Eden" (206; 235; 323; 384). Such bounty invites punning: Wayne Franklin comments, "on the crater the Creator seems to have repossessed the power of Genesis – so much so that it spills over onto Mark and Bob".³⁵ Not surprisingly, in such a favorable climate the fertility of the "females" matches that of the beasts and the ground itself, and the population, which consists almost exclusively of young married couples, doubles every other year. Since all this abundance is owing to Woolston's initial digging and delving, the question of governorship likewise cannot be debated: "It was scarcely possible for man to possess any portion of this earth by a title better than that with which Mark Woolston was invested with his domains" (296). Not only did he discover and cultivate the land, he was also put in its possession by a special gift of Providence ... and his property, which amounted to more than that of all the rest of the colony put together, contributed to give him a title and authority to rule (325).

Needless to say, Mark is the most unselfish ruler we can think of, to whose reign everyone consents and who is not in the least interested in accumulating wealth (though that is of course precisely what he is doing) (295; 286). In a quasi-monarchy like this, whose governor is endowed, through the intervention of Providence, with an equivalent of the divine right of kings, the members of the lower orders know their inferior station. Bob Betts, Mark's co-discoverer, makes no claim to equal treatment. After all, Providence had sent him shipping before putting Mark into possession of the newly-surfaced island. Thus Betts gets 100 acres of land and Woolston 1,000 acres. And according to the rules of social hierarchy, the governor's lately-arrived brother-in-law gets 400 acres of personal property (330). The more intelligent ruling elite has soon swapped its less valuable parcels for the best of the common kind, and everybody is content with it. An extreme case of Cooperian "wish-fulfillment" (Lawrence)!

Obviously, the crater is less an Utopian settlement than a microcosm of the kind of society which the American and the French revolutions had been active to overcome. Cooper's sympathies are clearly with a governmental form similar to that of Tudor England. But when Tudor England is evoked in two of the text's mottos, this not only refers to the ideal state in Cooper's mind but also to the novel's preoccupation with the issue of indigenous habitation. Two consecutive chapters dealing with an extended "Indian" attack are introduced by mottos from Macaulay's *The Spanish Armada* (233; 248). The analogy reinforces the text's translation of the

34. Wayne Franklin, *The New World of James Fenimore Cooper*, Chicago, 1982, p. 197.

"Indians" into external aggressors and of the colonizers into innocent defendants; that is, the text performs a reversal of the real relationship between American Indians and European colonizers. Like "native" settlements in the United States, Mark's colony is under constant siege by the "foreign" islanders. These Indians and their Magua-like leader Waally are as duplicitous as the Indians of colonial documents and frontier fiction. Within just a few pages, they undergo a transformation from people filled with reverential awe who try to help the newcomers whenever possible (190 f.; 196) to people not to be trusted (200) who are aggressive by nature (204) and who cause excessive fear among the colonizers (207). Their first invasion takes place a little later, as expected (217). Just like the simple Craterians later in the romance, the simple "Indians" seem to follow their evil leader less out of a conquering mentality than out of an ungrounded love of change (282; cf. 324; 437).

But the native aggressors are not just compared with the Spanish Armada attacking England but also with the Spaniards conquering *America*. Their fleet, we are told, approached the island

with a steady but regulated movement, that looked as if a secret awe pervaded the savages as they drew nearer and nearer to that unknown and mysterious world. To them the approaching revelations were doubtless of vast import; and the stoutest heart among them must have entertained some such sensations as were impressed on the spirits of Columbus and his companions, when they drew near to the shores of Guanahani. (246)

With the equation of the American settlers with the peaceful Tainos, the text signals its concern with America's Indian policy. In turning the recent newcomers into indigenous islanders comparable to the Arawaks of the Caribbean Cooper even goes one step beyond Jefferson's Anglo-Saxon analogy, which amounts to a denial of any native presence in America, or the various attempts in the Jacksonian era to rationalize, aestheticize, and sentimentalize removal policy. The wish-fulfillment strategies of *The Crater* are startlingly straightforward.

To be sure, Mark's own act of taking possession is likewise rendered in Columbian terms: "Like Columbus, he knelt on the sands, and returned his thanks to God" (180). This contradictory inscription of the romance with the Columbian myth of discovery is symptomatic of its strained effort to suppress any reference to contemporary Indian policy. By contrast, the imperialist practice of France in Tahiti and of England in China are subjected to a harsh critique. This critique directly follows, and is apparently triggered by, the assertion of Mark's unequivocal territorial rights (296 f.). Thus the romance, in all its compositional awkwardness, bypasses the topic of United States expansionism – which is the crucial historical problem around which most of the text's rhetorical displacements revolve.

Due to the increasing attention given to internal dissensions towards the end of the text, the final catastrophe produces an ironical effect, leaving the "Kanakas" and Woolston's royal family as the only survivors. Thus the volatile volcano solves the problems arising from colonial encounter and social dissension by sleight of hand, drowning the evildoers, saving the elect, and preparing the world for another round. But by that time, the nominal identification of the Polynesians with North American Indians is shed.

The cyclical view of history carried by Cooper's romance is essentially alien to the deterministic logic that underwrites *Typee*. Both texts, however, struggle for closure, which in turn distinguishes them from *Arthur Gordon Pym*, the only text discussed here which, in its meandering and burlesque way, resists the conventional demands of plot. This fact is all the more striking in a text of the inventor of the detective story, which is often seen as the classical genre of "plotted" narrative. What makes *Pym* gain some sympathies, at least with this reader, is that it boycotts the quasi-religious ideology of the discovery narrative which guides both *Typee* and *The Crater*. If the strange shrouded figure and the subsequent silence about the two protagonists' survival may be seen to ridicule the kind of metaphysical narrative which underwrites the other two texts, *Arthur Gordon Pym* offers the most positive vision of America's future: no predetermined destruction of the "inferior" culture, no post diluvian survival of chosen members of two distinct races, but the survival of self-sufficient "cross-blood" individuals. Surely this is not what Poe "intended", but this is what he wrote. In spite of Poe's notorious racism, his advocacy of both slavery and imperial expansion, the world of *Arthur Gordon Pym* can do without paradisiacal storm, and its "angel of history" may have been an illusion after all.