

## CHAPTER 3

# A Parasite among the Cannibals in *Typee*

After the historical overview in Chapter 2, it is now time to turn to the first part of Herman Melville's career, consisting of the six books he published in the period 1846–1851: *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick*. These have in common that they all, at least partly, take place at sea, and that they are narrated in the first person by rootless sailors of modest means: respectively, Tommo, Typee, Taji, Wellingborough Redburn, White-Jacket, and Ishmael. Crucially, these six narrators also all have at least a little bit of the classical figure of the parasite in them, even though none of these books are comedies, as such. While some of them express this objective with greater frequency and conviction than the others, they all take an active interest in good dining and leisure. As difficult as these aims can be to achieve for poor landmen, combining the two may initially appear as a near impossibility for Melville's sailor-narrators: Not only is their access to fresh and tasty forms of nourishment severely limited by their infrequent contact with land, but they often serve under tyrannical officers and captains ready to punish them for even the smallest infraction of the strict rules regulating life at sea. These obstacles aside, to some degree all of Melville's early narrators dream of what in *Typee* is described as "plenty and repose" (*T* 52), and some of them are even willing to go to great risks to pursue this dream. By now, one answer to the question of how this might be achieved should be obvious: to play the parasite.

In the end, none of Melville's six sailor-narrators acquires more free dinners than does the narrator of *Mardi*, who, in passing himself off as the demi-god Taji, discovers an excellent way of getting easy access to the hospitality of the many kings and lords throughout the vast kingdom of Mardi. Still, after a certain point he shows surprisingly little interest in the abundance of food resulting from his new-found semi-divinity, often

simply mentioning that yet another meal has been served. As noted in Chapter 1, Typee in *Omoo* also discovered ways of feeding on his surroundings, but the one narrator in the first part of Melville's career whose interest in matters of the belly is so obvious that it can hardly be denied, and whose hunger also becomes the catalyzing element that sets his narrative in motion, is Tommo in *Typee*.

Hence, the most important dilemma faced by parasites throughout history—how to get access to food—was undeniably on Melville's mind from the start of his career, and, accordingly, an analytical focus on “parasitical relationships” is essential to understand his first work. Even though previous scholars have, to the best of my knowledge, never approached Tommo in this manner, in the first part of this chapter my analysis shows that he is someone who, initially at least, clearly and unambiguously longs for a parasitic lifestyle.<sup>97</sup> In order to make this point, I start by discussing how the narrative expresses his hunger and his desire to avoid toil. In the second part, I move on to address his relationship to those that feed him: the Typees. As I will argue, without Tommo fully realizing this himself, his story shows readers two different sets of expectations coming into conflict with each other: Whereas the Typee chief Mehevi likely considers their relation as one of *patronage*, where the patron and his client have mutual obligations toward one another, Tommo's expectations of a parasitic lifestyle lead him to fail to understand that the food and companionship he receives are *not* gifts freely given. I first suggest that when Tommo tries to repay some of the people who have cared for him near the end of the story, this might be read as his somewhat problematical attempt to redefine his own position, in order not to appear as an ungrateful parasite. I then propose that the very narrative of *Typee* might be understood as a problematical, belated gift to his former hosts. Finally, Michel Serres' work is deployed in order to analyze how Tommo's presence comes to affect the Typees. Here I argue that reading *Typee* in light of Ilya Prigogine's work on non-equilibrium thermodynamics helps explain the seeming lack of correspondence between Tommo, as

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97 The only work I have come across where both parasites and *Typee* are mentioned, if only in passing, is A. M. Adamson's *Review of the Fauna of the Marquesas Islands and Discussion of Its Origin* (1939).

a relatively insignificant “foreign body,” and the potentially dramatic effects of his escape on his hosts’ society and their ways of life.

## Tommo in the Paradise of the Parasite

*Typee* is the narrative of Tommo’s adventures on Nukuheva, the largest of the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia. When his ship, the *Dolly*, makes landfall there, he runs away together with his shipmate, Toby, with the aim of hiding out in the interior of the island until it has left. Their journey turns out to be much more difficult than expected and Tommo also gets sick, but after five days, the two deserters finally reach an inhabited valley. From what they know about the island, it could belong to either of two tribes that are at war with each other: the Happars or the Typees, the former rumored to be friendly, the latter to be ferocious cannibals. As it turns out, the valley does belong to the latter, but they show few signs of living up to their dreadful reputation, instead feeding and pampering their guests. Tommo, whose foot is swollen, is also carried around by his own personal valet, Kory-Kory. Hoping to find medical aid for his companion, Toby tries to leave. His first attempt must be aborted when he is attacked by the Happars, but the second one seems to succeed. However, when he does not return as promised, Tommo is thrown into a deep depression, where fears that his friend has simply deserted him alternate with fears that he has been eaten by their hosts.

It is only as his leg starts to get better that his depression lifts. In the company of Kory-Kory and the beautiful and scantily clad Typee girls, of whom “the beauteous nymph” Fayaway is his favorite (*T* 85), Tommo sets out to explore what the valley has to offer. In doing so he reflects on a variety of aspects of Typee life and culture, which he generally compares favorably to the ills of Western civilization. He also spends a lot of time in the Ti, where Mehevi holds court. Taboo for women, it is a place for dining, repose, and general hilarity in the company of the male warriors.

This happy life of leisure starts coming to an end when Tommo realizes that the natives want to tattoo his face. Around the same time his fears of cannibalism return, as does the ailment in his leg. Realizing that the Typees, all their kindness notwithstanding, are in effect holding him

prisoner, he decides to run away. The opportunity finally arises after four months when, taking advantage of a dispute amongst the natives, he manages to reach a boat that has appeared in the bay. He is forced to throw the boat hook at the one-eyed chief Mow-Mow to avoid recapture, thereby safely reaching the ship *Julia*, which he signs on to and whose further adventures will form the first part of Melville's next book, *Omoo*. *Typee* thus ends with Tommo leaving his kind cannibal captors/hosts and their comfortable life of leisure and abundance behind for good.

This narrative is presented as a true account of Melville's own experiences as a sailor. Its preface states that the author trusts "that his anxious desire to speak the unvarnished truth will gain for him the confidence of his readers" (*T* xiv), but even from the start, this desire was not always met, and the question of how true to Melville's own experiences *Typee* really is has been a recurring one ever since.<sup>98</sup> What is known is that he boarded the *Acushnet* as a common seaman on January 3, 1841. While on shore leave on the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva (in *Typee* referred to as Nukuheva) in French Polynesia, he and his shipmate Richard Tobias Greene deserted on July 9, 1842. On August 9, he then boarded the *Lucy Ann*, having in the meantime most likely spent one month with the local Taipi tribe, which in the book became the "Typees."<sup>99</sup>

Under the title *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, a Peep at Polynesian Life*, the story of this experience was originally published in England by John Murray in February 1846, when Melville was twenty-six years old. In March and

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98 Early scholars often treated *Typee* as autobiography, but this became less common after Charles Roberts Anderson proved that Melville had incorporated materials from different contemporary sources. The standard view today—resonating well with Tommo's claim about cannibalism, that "[t]ruth, who loves to be centrally located, is again found between the two extremes" (*T* 205)—is that *Typee* is neither entirely true nor entirely made up. Recent contributions to this discussion can be found in Suggs, Bryant ("Taipi"), Otter ("*Typee*"). Edwards goes as far as to suggest that Melville may not have stayed with the Typees at all during his month on the island, but that instead, "he may have lived, as many deserters did, with the tribes along the beach" (41). Since the question of how true *Typee* is to Melville's own experiences is not central to my argument, I will simply label the work a travel narrative.

99 In this chapter, I follow Melville's spelling of all local words (i.e. Typee instead of Taipi; Nukuheva instead of Nuku Hiva), as well as of the names of historical persons, even where these differ from common usage: In the narrative, the French admiral Abel Dupetit-Thouars is referred to as Du Petit Thouars, and the Hawaiian king Kamehameha III as Kammehammaha III).

August of the same year, Wiley & Putnam brought out two editions for the American market. The version most American readers of the time were familiar with, was the latter of these, which had been heavily bowdlerized to tone down the critical view of missionaries and some of the veiled, but still obvious eroticism of the English edition. Even though not a best-seller, the book sold quite well for a first work, and was for the most part favorably reviewed.<sup>100</sup> It also created somewhat of a personal reputation for Melville, who would later come to grow weary of the epithet “the man who lived among cannibals.” Even so, to the degree that he was remembered at all, near the end of his life it was first and foremost because of this book; as Hershel Parker puts it: *Typee* was “a great cultural icon ... far more important to the [nineteenth] century than *Moby-Dick*” (*Herman Melville* 2: 882).

Hence, readers of *Typee* encounter a text that tries to pass itself off as an autobiographical travel narrative of Melville’s own experiences when he was a runaway sailor in French Polynesia, but one that has long been recognized as at least a partly fictitious adventure story, and partly ethnological study. In the following I will argue that *Typee* is also part *sitological* treatise, in the sense of it being an extended reflection on eating, food, and nourishment. At first glance this claim may seem neither groundbreaking nor controversial. After all, even though the Typees receive Tommo with an almost excessive kindness, due to their reputation as cannibals, he can never entirely rid himself of the fear that he might end up on their menu. Throughout the story, this causes him to repeatedly return to the issue, which is even indicated in the title: as Tommo explains, the name Typee “in the Marquesan dialect signifies a lover of human flesh” (*T* 24).<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, cannibalism is far from my primary reason for labeling the narrative a sitological treatise. First, Melville’s first work is full

100 On the differences between the various versions of *Typee*, the different editorial policies of John Murray and Wiley & Putnam, as well as the reactions of reviewers and the book-buying audience, see Leon Howard’s “Historical Note” (*T* 277–302), and Bryant (*Melville Unfolding*).

101 As noted in Chapter 1, when scholars have shown an interest in food in *Typee*, for the most part it has only been in relation to anthropophagy. While Hughes avoids this, he ends up treating the references to food almost solely as symbols of forbidden sexual acts, as already indicated in Chapter 1. Hershel Parker briefly addresses the question of access to food at sea and Melville’s own hunger in *Herman Melville: A Biography* (1: 208–9).

of references to meals, foodstuffs, and to native food culture. Herein might be found one potential explanation of why the topic of (non-human) food has generated so little critical interest: as is well documented, John Murray had an aversion to fiction, and only included books in his series of travel narratives, *Colonial and Home Library*, if they were completely true. After Murray expressed doubt about the verity of *Typee*, Melville made several changes to reassure him, for example writing three new chapters (number 20, 21, and 27), as well as adding material to others—ironically, much of it appropriated from other written sources. In the words of John Evelev: “This material, much of it touching upon the meaning of the system of ‘taboo,’ but also adding a variety of different details about Marquesan islander life, was designed to bolster the factuality of the narrative and thus augment its market ‘value’” (29).

That is, Melville aimed to make his first book seem as true to life as possible, and a lot of the references to food and to eating in *Typee* can be seen as a means of strengthening the narrative’s factuality. Accordingly, it could be argued that food and eating are important to the story, insofar as they say something about the genre of travel narratives and Melville’s willingness to adapt to the wishes of his editor.<sup>102</sup> In other words, it is possible to view the references to food as a version of what Roland Barthes termed “the reality effect” of realistic literature (148). The concept refers to the effect of little details in works of fiction that do not contribute to narrative progression, but whose function, as Barthes saw it, was to draw attention to their own purported reality. This might help explain why the seemingly mundane topic of food has seldom been considered worthy of extended analytical reflection from Melville scholars.

While many of the references to food in the narrative may also function in this manner, this does not mean Tommo should be understood

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102 Evelev comes close to such a view when he states that “*Typee* is full of long descriptions of Marquesan landscapes, the types of clothing worn (and not worn) and how they are produced, as well as of diet and eating habits. Functioning as authentic experience, but also, ironically, derived almost entirely from other books, these details and information establish Melville’s authority to speak on such matters” (32).

as an impartial, proto-anthropological observer of exotic foodways. As shown by the passage quoted in Chapter 1 about pork—“a morsel of which placed on the tongue melts like a soft smile from the lips of Beauty”—he is also a hungry guest who seems to be enjoying his meals in an almost sensual manner.<sup>103</sup> This gives a strong indication that the importance of food to the narrative far exceeds the pragmatic uses Melville made of the topic to persuade John Murray and potential readers to accept the story as true.

At times, Tommo comes across not just as hungry but as outright obsessed with eating, at one point even gladly digging into what Toby claims is most likely human flesh, rather than go hungry:

“But I say, Tommo, you are not going to eat any of that mess there, in the dark, are you? Why, how can you tell what it is?”

“By tasting it, to be sure,” said I, masticating a morsel that Kory-Kory had just put in my mouth; “and excellent good it is too, very much like veal.” (*T* 95)

This excessive hunger is something he has in common with the classical parasite.<sup>104</sup> That *Typee* is to a large degree a narrative about the quest for what the parasites of comedy were always looking for, already becomes clear on the first page of Chapter 1. The first sentences come across almost as an elegy, where Tommo is lamenting not the loss of a lover, relative, or friend, but tasty meals and fresh fruit:

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103 In a reading of Chapter 4 of *Moby-Dick*, Christopher Looby argues that Melville’s characters should not be understood in terms of sexuality as conceptualized today, but rather from a standpoint of *sensual tendency*, “a relatively persistent taste for certain pleasures” (67). For him, the concept functions as an intermediate stage between the early modern regime of *sexual acts* and the modern understanding of sexuality as *identity*, as described in Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. As Looby claims, “well into the nineteenth century in the United States, people did not habitually think in terms of sexual identity, but in terms of sensual tendency or sensual practices, a category of experience that included genital practices and other behaviors we might retrospectively regard as sexual, but that also would have included *eating, drinking, smoking, gazing at landscapes, reading stimulating novels, going to the theater, and a host of other pursuits*” (69–70; emphasis added). Tommo’s hunger might therefore be understood as just such a sensual tendency, not just for food, but also for leisure, companionship and erotic experiences.

104 To quote Cynthia Damon: “To reveal the first of the parasite’s features, his dependency on his patron for food, the comic poets made him hungry, indeed insatiable” (25).

Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm-whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line, and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific—the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else! Weeks and weeks ago our fresh provisions were all exhausted. There is not a sweet potatoe left; not a single yam. Those glorious bunches of bananas which once decorated our stern and quarter-deck have, alas, disappeared! and the delicious oranges which hung suspended from our tops and stays—they, too, are gone! Yes, they are all departed, and there is nothing left us but salt-horse and sea-biscuit. (T 3)

The four exclamation marks make it obvious that the passage is uttered with great conviction and urgency.<sup>105</sup> Invoking the sweet memories of sweet potatoes, yams, bananas, and oranges, Tommo immediately makes it clear that life at sea has implanted in him a strong desire for food. This becomes even more obvious when, in a somewhat envious tone, he subsequently makes fun of first-class passengers complaining about the “hardships” of their voyages:

Oh! ye state-room sailors, who make so much ado about a fourteen-days’ passage across the Atlantic; who so pathetically relate the privations and hardships of sea, where, after a day of breakfasting, lunching, dining off five courses, chatting, playing whist, and drinking champagne-punch, it was your hard lot to be shut up in little cabinets of mahogany and maple, and sleep for ten hours, with nothing to disturb you but “those good-for-nothing tars, shouting and tramping over head,”—what would you say to our six months out of sight of land? (T 3)

While the quote indicates that Tommo is also yearning for sleep and idleness, since the question of food and eating is brought up time and again throughout the narrative, it seems especially important. For instance, it is there in one of the most frequently quoted passages of the book, where Tommo describes his expectations when he learns that the *Dolly* is heading for the Marquesas Islands to stock up on provisions:

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105 On Melville’s exclamatory style, see Sanborn (“Melville” 13–4).



The Marquesas! What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up! Naked houris—cannibal banquets—groves of cocoa-nut—coral reefs—tattooed chiefs—and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with bread-fruit trees—carved canoes dancing on the flashing blue waters—savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols—*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*. (T 5; emphasis in the original)

To a Western observer, some of these things are obviously more “outlandish” than others. As a corollary, native eroticism (“naked houris”), the Polynesian practice of facial- and full-body tattooing (“tattooed chiefs”), paganism (“bamboo temples,” “horrible idols,” and “heathenish rites”), and the aforementioned taste for human flesh (“cannibal banquets” and “human sacrifices”) have all received considerable attention from Melville scholars.<sup>106</sup> While it is understandable that the not quite as exotic coconuts and bread-fruit trees have been less commented upon, they are still there in the list of “the strangely jumbled anticipations that haunted me during our passage from the cruising ground” (T 5), indicating that they, too, are important to Tommo and to his story.

This focus continues in Chapter 2, where it also becomes clear that Tommo is highly predisposed toward *leisure*.<sup>107</sup> Here is his description of the wonderful days when the *Dolly* is approaching the Marquesas Islands, the winds doing almost all the work, allowing the crew to do as little as possible:

I can never forget the eighteen or twenty days during which the light trade-winds were silently sweeping us towards the island. ... What a delightful, lazy, languid time we had whilst we were thus gliding along! There was nothing to be done; a circumstance that happily suited our disinclination to do anything. We abandoned the fore-peak altogether, and spreading an awning over the fore-castle, slept, ate, and lounged under it the live-long day. Every one seemed to be under the influence of some narcotic. (T 9)

106 For contributions on eroticism, see Martin (17–39), Heath, Crain, and Hughes; on Tommo’s fear of being forcibly tattooed, see Renker (17–23), Cassuto, and Otter (*Melville’s Anatomies* 9–49); on taboo and religion among the Typees, see Calder.

107 This is something Tommo had in common with the young Herman Melville himself, at least if we are to believe his brother Gansevoort. Mentioning Herman in a letter to their brother Allan in 1840, he states that “I know no other reason for his remissness but laziness—not general laziness by any means—but that laziness which consists in an unwillingness to exert oneself in doing at a particular time, that which ought then to be done” (*Corr* 565).

Obviously, these days are unforgettable because they represent something altogether different from Captain Vangs' usual strict regime aboard the *Dolly*. As Tommo makes clear, this regime is why he decides to run away on Nukuheva, stressing that he should not be expected to uphold his end of the contract when his captain has not upheld his: "The usage on board of her was tyrannical; the sick had been inhumanly neglected; *the provisions had been doled out in scanty allowance*; and her cruizes were unreasonably protracted" (*T* 20–21; emphasis added). While the provisions "doled out in scanty allowance" is not the only reason he decides to jump ship, the reference to food is important, especially since Tommo soon thereafter returns to the topic at length, describing the sorry state of the ship's larder in an ironic tone:

The very preparations made for one of these expeditions are enough to frighten one. As the vessel carries no cargo, her hold is filled with provisions for her own consumption. The owners, who officiate as caterers for the voyage, supply the larder with an abundance of dainties. Delicate morsels of beef and pork, cut on scientific principles from every part of the animal, and of all conceivable shapes and sizes, are carefully packed in salt, and stored away in barrels; affording a never-ending variety in their different degrees of toughness, and in the peculiarities of their saline properties. Choice old water too, decanted into stout six-barrel-casks, and two pints of which are allowed every day to each soul on board; together with ample storage of sea-bread, previously reduced to a state of petrification, with a view to preserve it either from decay or consumption in the ordinary mode, are likewise provided for the nourishment and gastronomic enjoyment of the crew. But not to speak of the quality of these articles of sailor's fare, the abundance in which they are put on board a whaling vessel is almost incredible. Oftentimes, when we had occasion to break out in the hold, and I beheld the successive tiers of casks and barrels, whose contents were all destined to be consumed in due course by the ship's company, my heart has sunk within me. (*T* 21–22)

That is, what is lacking in variety is made up for by the sheer quantity of tough and tasteless salty meat, hard bread, and stale and brackish water. The dark humor of the passage results from the discrepancy between the contents of the *Dolly's* larder and the terms Tommo uses in describing

them, his vocabulary making him come across more like a professional food critic than a common sailor. In other words, the reader gets the impression that he is no stranger to “gastronomic enjoyment,” even though the present situation offers extremely little of it.

This discrepancy between an interest in good food and access to it is something Damon claims was often the case for the classical parasites. By making them “connoisseur[s] of good eating,” the writers of comedies could make the plight when dinner invitations were not forthcoming all the bigger, crueller and funnier: “Equally pitiable is the parasite-connoisseur who had to be content with leftovers, for ancient leftovers seem to have been a mince of what diners left on their plates or threw back into the pot, together with food that was old and tired before it ever left the kitchen” (Damon 27). So too with Tommo: Not having been to sea for that long yet, he could be looking at several more years of the same fare. No wonder, then, that one of the most important reasons the Marquesas Islands beckon, is the promise of food.

The references to eating and to different sorts of food also continue after the *Dolly* arrives at her destination, both prior to and after Tommo and Toby make their escape. For example, when planning to run away, the former explains that as the natives of the island inhabited its different valleys, his intention was to seek its heights to avoid detection: “if I could effect unperceived a passage to the mountains, I might easily remain among them, supporting myself by such fruits as came in my way until the sailing of the ship” (*T* 31). Immediately, he comments that this plan pleased him so much that “straightway [I] fell to picturing myself seated beneath a cocoa-nut tree on the brow of the mountain, with a cluster of plantains within easy reach” (*T* 31). Later, Tommo mentions that “I fully relied upon the fruits of the island to sustain us wherever we might wander,” but that, after having run away, this hope for a time is not met: “we perceived none of those trees upon whose fruit we had relied with such certainty” (*T* 36, 41).

Finally gaining a view of a valley down below, it becomes evident that Toby fully shares his companion’s interest in nourishment. He is not only described as eager to “partake of the hospitality of its inmates,” as well

as “incapable of resisting the tempting prospect which the place held out of an abundant supply of food and other means of enjoyment,” but also offers the following description in order to persuade his more reluctant fellow fugitive to join him: “So glorious a valley—such forests of bread-fruit trees—such groves of cocoa-nut—such wilderness of guava-bushes! Ah, shipmate! Don’t linger behind: in the name of all the delightful fruits, I am dying to be at them” (*T* 50, 51, 57). This leads to another passage often quoted by Melville scholars, taken from the beginning of Chapter 10, where the two deserters finally enter the valley. Tommo needs convincing by Toby because the two deserters know that the valley must belong to one of the two tribes inhabiting the area, tribes whose reputations differ. The dilemma facing the two is the following: “Typee or Happar? A frightful death at the hands of the fiercest of cannibals, or a kindly reception from a gentler race of savages?” (*T* 66). However, what is much more seldom quoted is the sentence immediately preceding these two: “How to obtain the fruit which we felt convinced must grow near at hand was our first thought.” As much as the two runaways would, for obvious reasons, prefer not to be eaten, at that moment, it is the desire to *eat* that is foremost in their minds, even though this entails the risk of encountering cannibals. As Henry Hughes has put it, it is thus their “hunger that drives them toward their first contact with the natives” (4). If the question of eating is really this important to Tommo, then his hunger is surely also important for understanding his narrative. Clearly, the lure of easy access to food is perhaps the most important factor motivating his actions.

Another important trait that Tommo has in common with the classical parasites is that he is not only hungry, but also unable to fill his stomach on his own. There can be no doubt that among the Typees, and especially before his foot gets better, he is in a position of extreme vulnerability. Not only is he a poor sailor without any means to support himself—poverty being a common trope in comedy to “reveal [the parasite’s] dependency” (Damon 28)—but when he finally reaches the valley, he is also starving and suffering from the ailment in his leg. Given the difficulties of the journey, it is doubtful if he could have made it back to Nukuheva bay, had he tried, and his knife would hardly have helped him against the spears

of the Typees. Consequently, he is entirely at the mercy of his hosts; had they decided to eat him on the spot, to enslave him or to drive him away, there is not much he could have done about it.

Luckily for Tommo, he does have one thing he also shares with many parasites of comedy: his quick wits and his capability for adapting to circumstances, tailoring his behavior and opinions to what he deems the most gainful. This knack for saying the right thing at the right time—even though he does not necessarily mean what he says—is perhaps most clearly seen when, after finally encountering the natives that live in the valley, he and Toby are led to a large bamboo hut where they are scrutinized by everyone. At this moment the two are not yet aware which tribe they have encountered, and are therefore understandably nervous when the seeming leader of the tribe, speaking in his own tongue, asks them what appears to be the following question: Typee or Happar? Following an impulse, Tommo lets it be known that he considers the Typees “mortar-kee” (good), which is said to help “conciliate the good will of the natives, with whom our congeniality of sentiment on this point did more towards inspiring a friendly feeling than anything else that could have happened” (*T* 71–72). It is this that leads to a ceremony where the deserters and the natives exchange names, and then to exactly what Tommo and Toby had been hoping for: first food and later rest.

Tommo then offers a detailed account of the meal they are served, which consists of cocoanut milk, the bread-fruit dish known as “poeepoe,” and “several other dishes . . . , some of which were positively delicious” (*T* 73). Due to the effect the visitors’ clumsy attempts to eat it has on their hosts, the poee-poe is treated to the largest part of this description:

This staple article of food among the Marquese islanders is manufactured from the produce of the bread-fruit tree. It somewhat resembles in its plastic nature our bookbinder’s paste, is of a yellow color, and somewhat tart to the taste.

Such was the dish, the merits of which I was now eager to discuss. I eyed it wistfully for a moment, and then unable any longer to stand on ceremony, plunged my hand into the yielding mass, and to the boisterous mirth of the natives drew it forth laden with the poee-poe, which adhered in lengthening strings to every finger. So stubborn was its consistency, that in conveying my

heavily-freighted hand to my mouth, the connecting links almost raised the calabash from the mats on which it had been placed. This display of awkwardness—in which, by-the-bye, Toby kept me company—convulsed the bystanders with uncontrollable laughter. (*T* 72–73)

This passage is worth quoting in full because it clearly exemplifies the narrative's two main modes of referring to food, as well as Tommo's tendency of shifting back and forth between the two, often in the same paragraph: The quote starts out as an anthropological observation about a noteworthy fact about native food culture, presented in a fairly detached and academic tone ("Such was the dish, the merits of which I was now eager to discuss"), only to turn into the viewpoint of a famished guest gorging himself on the dinner he has long been dreaming of ("I eyed it wistfully for a moment, and then unable any longer to stand on ceremony, plunged my hand into the yielding mass"). The narrative then shifts back again to the descriptive mode, addressing the reactions of the natives to the clumsiness of their guests, as well as the instructions on how to properly eat poee-poee subsequently given by the chief, whose name they will later learn is Mehevi. This split in Tommo as narrator—he is part detached outsider describing the islanders in a seemingly objective manner, and part hungry guest with a strong personal interest in filling his stomach—will be seen repeatedly in the narrative.

Even though Tommo and Toby have not managed to rid themselves of the fear that the Typees may eat them, after their initial acceptance by the tribe, they are offered an abundance of food, kindness, and leisure. When Mehevi learns of the former's ailment, he orders a young Typee, Kory-Kory, to look after him. Tommo highly appreciates the services offered by this "tried servitor and faithful valet" (*T* 82–83), including spoon-feeding, making sure the guests get enough sleep, carrying Tommo on his back, bathing him, various forms of entertainment, and, as several critics have noted, possibly also sexual favors.<sup>108</sup> No matter if the latter is a correct

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108 In particular, the description of the task claimed to be "the most laborious species of work performed in Typee," namely Kory-Kory lighting Tommo's pipe by rubbing two sticks against each other, has strong homoerotic undertones (*T* 111). For critics who have written about possible hidden references to homosexuality in *Typee*, see Martin (17–39), Crain, Hughes, and Bryant (*Melville Unfolding*).

assessment, there seems to be little doubt that Tommo, his coy veiling of his own sexual experiences notwithstanding, has every opportunity to have his bodily needs met by Fayaway and the other fair maidens of the valley.<sup>109</sup>

Hence, in the valley of the Typees—described by Kory-Kory as almost as pleasant as the Polynesian “heaven of bread-fruit, cocoa-nuts, and young ladies” (*T* 173)—Tommo finds exactly what he has all the while told the readers that he is looking for: food, leisure, and most likely also other sensual pleasures. In fact, for the most part there is so much of the former that nobody ever needs to go hungry.<sup>110</sup> And, just like himself, the natives, whom he describes as of an “indolent disposition,” are highly predisposed toward the latter (*T* 90). Throughout the narrative Tommo constantly returns to their aversion to hard labor and their fondness for leisure. This becomes particularly clear in his description of a typical day in the valley in Chapter 20, which ends with the statement that “[t]o many of [the Typees], indeed, life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap” (*T* 152).<sup>111</sup> At first glance, then, what Tommo has found is nothing less than the paradise of parasites, the one place on earth where his dream of “plenty and repose” can come true.

Before addressing Tommo’s relationship to the Typees, some additional comments about his potential indebtedness to the classical figure of the comedic parasite are in order. Whereas there are many similarities, there are also differences. For example, once he has been accepted by the natives, Tommo must no longer worry about a fearsome possibility that had always kept the parasites of comedy on their toes: due to the abundance of food in the valley, he is spared the parasite’s “painful eagerness

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109 In a thorough analysis of importance placed upon sex in the native culture, as well as its connections to religion, William Heath claims that “[n]othing was more honorific in Marquesan society than sexual skill” (48).

110 However, Tommo mentions that sometimes the harvest could be poor (*T* 117).

111 The sole exception mentioned by Tommo is Kory-Kory’s mother, Tinor, “the only industrious person in all the valley of Typee; and she could not have employed herself more actively had she been left an exceedingly muscular and destitute widow, with an inordinate supply of young children, in the bleakest part of the civilized world” (*T* 85). However, Marsoin has convincingly argued that Tommo’s claim that the Typees do not work, says more about his own Western expectations that “‘labor’ should be painful,” than it does about the natives’ way of life (“No Land” 224).

for the arrival of the dinner hour,” as well as the usual “struggle to gain his place at the table” (Damon 26, 28). He also has a lot of time on his hands, as opposed to the always busy parasites of comedy, who generally “had little time for accessory pleasures, such as sex” (Damon 57). On the other hand, and this too is a direct consequence of ending up with the Typees, Tommo does have at least two things to worry about that the classical parasites did not have to deal with: the possibility of becoming dinner or being forcibly tattooed.

The former possibility raises a few philosophical questions. In *Typee* it is Toby who comes closest to formulating these. Refusing to believe that their hosts are feeding them out of the goodness of their savage hearts, he at one point tells Tommo:

Why, for what do you suppose the devils have been feeding us up in this kind of style during the last three days, unless it were for something that you are too much frightened to talk about? Look at that Kory-Kory there!—has he not been stuffing you with this confounded mushes, just in the way they treat swine before they kill them? Depend upon it, we will be eaten this blessed night, and there is the fire we shall be roasted by. (*T* 94)

Toby’s fears raise the apt question of whether people who fully qualify as parasites in all other regards, can be described as such if they are literally being fed and fattened to be eaten. This is an additional difficulty facing all attempts to arrive at clear and unambiguous rules for separating parasites from non-parasites; to quote Serres: “The feast changes hosts, and the guest changes roles; from the subject of the banquet, the [guest] becomes the object: once a parasite, now the main course” (*Parasite* 62).<sup>112</sup>

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112 Similar borderline cases can also be found in other works by Melville. In *Mardi*, Taji at one point visits the two lords Piko and Hello, whose mutual love of bloodshed leads them to arrange tournaments where their subjects are encouraged to kill each other for their sovereigns’ viewing pleasure: “the unbounded hospitality of the kings’ household was freely offered to all heroes whatsoever, who for the love of arms, and the honor of broken heads, desired to cross battle-clubs, hurl spears, or die game in the royal valley of Deddo” (*M* 444). In *Moby-Dick*, Queequeg teaches Ishmael that humans might be fattened up for more reasons than to be eaten or killed in battle: “in his broken fashion Queequeg gave me to understand that, in his land, owing to the absence of settees and sofas of all sorts, the kings, chiefs, and great people generally, were in the custom of fattening some of the lower orders for ottomans; and to furnish a house comfortably in that respect, you had only to buy up eight or ten lazy fellows, and lay them round in the piers and alcoves” (*MD* 100).



One trait of the parasites of classical comedy that at first glance would seem *not* to be applicable to Tommo, is the fact that they were seldom properly individualized: even though exceptions exist, due to their function as comic relief, they were usually presented as little more than embodiments of typical parasitic character traits, in particular their hunger. Obviously, this does not hold for Tommo, who is a far more complex character than any literary parasite prior to Shakespeare and Jonson, but even so, there are still some similarities. First, there is the question of background and ties to the world, something the parasites of comedy almost never had. While this is not entirely the case for Tommo, he has very little to say about his family or about his previous life, only making a few sporadic references to missing his friends, family, and country throughout the narrative.<sup>113</sup> It would therefore be possible to say of him something similar to what Damon says of Saturio from Plautus' *The Persian*, who "alone of [Roman] literary parasites is endowed with the rudiments of a family" (51).

Finally, the question of names should be addressed. As noted in Chapter 2, the parasites of comedy were most often known by their comic nicknames having to do with their appetites. As Elizabeth Ivory Tylawsky argues, to the classical parasites the very act of being given an epithet functioned as a means of inclusion within a group: "Being named brought the hungry outsider into the group, giving him recognition together with his invitation. Being nicknamed granted inclusion within a closed group, a nickname conferred belonging and belonging meant access to the table" (4). Now, after the Typees want to learn his and Toby's names, Tommo expresses a similar insight: "An exchange of names is equivalent to a ratification of good will and amity among these simple people; and as we were aware of this fact, we were delighted that it had taken place on the present occasion" (*T* 72). In addition, when he is going to introduce himself to Mehevi, it is revealed that Tommo is not the narrator's real name at all:

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113 See (*T* 108, 239, 243). There is also the reference to the two English words Tommo has taught Kory-Kory's father, old Marheyo: "Home" and "Mother" (*T* 248).

I hesitated for an instant, thinking that it might be difficult for him to pronounce my real name, and then with the most praiseworthy intentions intimated that I was known as “Tom.” But I could not have made a worse selection; the chief could not master it: “Tommo,” “Tomma,” “Tommee,” every thing but plain “Tom.” As he persisted in garnishing the word with an additional syllable, I compromised the matter with him at the word “Tommo;” and by that name I went during the entire period of my stay in the valley. (*T*72)

Thus, just as is the case in *Omoa*, *Mardi*, *White-Jacket*, and probably also *Moby-Dick*—“Call me Ishmael” (*MD* 3)—*Typee*’s narrator goes under a sobriquet. No matter if this is a coincidence, given Tommo’s hunger and the Polynesian tradition of bestowing nicknames “in accordance with some humorous or ignoble trait” (*O* 260), it is fitting that one of the suggestions made by Mehevi is a homophone for the word “tummy.” There is also a second potential meaning of his chosen moniker: As John Samson points out, “the name that the narratives propose, ‘Tommo,’ has a meaning: it is a Marquesan verb signifying ‘to enter into, to adapt well to’” (30). Contrary to Samson, who notes that “ironically Tommo not only fails to understand his newly given name, he never adapts” (31), I would rather claim that while Tommo obviously never adapts to Typeean society, as such, like the comedic parasites, he is a master of adaptation, in the tactical sense of securely lodging himself in a position where he may freely feed. Accordingly, both these potential meanings of the name “Tommo” are telling.

## The Parasite and His Host

So far, the analysis has focused on Tommo’s parasitical traits, but this is only a small part of what I have in mind when I claim that its “parasitical relationships” are essential to *Typee*. To move beyond this first step, in the following I will scrutinize the narrator’s association with his hosts to address a question that has been repeated by readers, from Sophia Hawthorne—who in a letter commented upon “the unfathomable mystery” of the Typees’ treatment of Tommo (qtd. in Metcalf 91)—and up to the present: What exactly do the natives want from him? Or as

Tommo himself remarks, after he and Toby have stayed with the Typees for a week:

The natives, actuated by some mysterious impulse, day after day redoubled their attentions to us. Their manner towards us was unaccountable. Surely, thought I, they would not act thus if they meant us any harm. But why this excess of deferential kindness, or what equivalent can they imagine us capable of rendering them for it? (*T* 97)

To better understand this “excess of deferential kindness,” it is necessary to turn to a concept already briefly addressed in Chapter 2 due to its many points of intersection with the figure of the parasite: *patronage*. While Tommo never explicitly uses the term, there are a number of reasons for understanding his relationship to Mehevi as one between patron and client.<sup>114</sup> One, to be addressed in more detail later, is that social anthropologists have argued that historically, a local version of this type of social relationship functioned as one of the basic organizing principles of Polynesian society. Another is that Tommo’s association with the chief almost fully satisfies Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s four criteria: to reiterate, he suggests that to qualify as patronage a social relationship must be (i) reciprocal, (ii) personal, (iii) asymmetrical, and (iv) not legally enforceable. In *Typee*, the last three criteria are undoubtedly met: Mehevi personally interacts with Tommo (ii), the chief is clearly of much higher rank than his guest (iii), and, due to the lack of institutionalized courts and written laws among the natives, if one of them had failed to live up to their bargain, it would obviously not be possible to drag the guilty party in front of a judge (iv). The only potentially ambiguous point is the question of reciprocity (i). A pertinent question must therefore be addressed: is there a sort of unwritten contract between the two, and, if so, what are its terms and stipulations?

Since Tommo never mentions such a contract and since the lack of a shared language prevents him from understanding what the natives

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<sup>114</sup> There is also another possible candidate for the role of Tommo’s patron. Following Wai-chee Dimock’s argument, it would be possible to argue that the entire tribe, which she considers “the collective presence behind Mehevi,” comes to function as his patron, the chief just being the tribe’s most visible representative (“*Typee*” 33).

want from him, from his perspective the most likely answer is no. Interrogating the details of his relationship to Mehevi as it plays out in the narrative offers several central clues that indicate that to the chief, the answer is clearly yes. To explain why this is so, it is necessary to approach their association from the only perspective the narrative offers: that of the guest. First, consider what Tommo says about the Typees. On the one hand he constantly praises them in what seems a very earnest and sincere manner, stating that, even though they are cannibals, “a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific” (*T* 97). He also declares that, “after passing a few weeks in this valley of the Marquesas, I formed a higher estimate of human nature than I had ever before entertained. But alas! since then I have been one of the crew of a man-of-war, and the pent-up wickedness of five hundred men has nearly overturned my previous theories” (*T* 203).

Nothing in the narrative indicates that this is not his honest opinion of the matter. Still, there is no doubt that he deliberately hides his true feelings from the natives on several occasions. This becomes especially evident when, after his initial encounter with the only native who speaks English, the wanderer Marnoo, Tommo realizes that he is, in effect, a prisoner in the valley. When he asks this “Polynesian Apollo” (*T* 135)—himself a parasite figure of sorts whose tabooed status allows him to come and go between the different tribes on the island, being well fed everywhere in return for the news he brings—to convey to the Typees that he wishes to leave, Marnoo is reluctant, but finally gives in: “yielding at last to my importunities, he addressed several of the chiefs ... His petition, however, was at once met with the most violent disapprobation, manifesting itself in angry glances and gestures, and a perfect torrent of passionate words, directed to both him and myself” (*T* 141).

In other words, Tommo quickly learns that some things are better kept to himself if he wants to avoid angering his host:

the scene which had just occurred admonished me of the danger of trifling with the wayward and passionate spirits against whom it was vain to struggle, and might even be fatal to do so. My only hope was to induce the natives to believe

that I was reconciled to my detention in the valley, and by assuming a tranquil and cheerful demeanor, to allay the suspicions which I had so unfortunately aroused. Their confidence revived, they might in a short time remit in some degree their watchfulness over my movements, and I should then be the better enabled to avail myself of any opportunity which presented itself for escape. (T 144)

As the preceding quoted passages clearly indicate, Tommo's relationship to the tribe is thoroughly ambiguous. He simultaneously praises the natives and hides his true feelings to be able to escape. Accordingly, it is difficult to answer whether he is their friend or is merely pretending to be. One might also ask, if he is truly a friend, is he a good one?

A similar ambiguity also defines his personal relationship to the commanding and "superb-looking warrior" Mehevi (T 71), who immediately takes an active interest in the well-being of his two visitors: "nothing could surpass the friendliness he manifested towards both my companion and myself" (T 79). As much as he initially impresses Tommo, it is only later that the full extent of the chief's power and importance begins to dawn on him. This becomes especially evident after the grand party described in Chapter 23: "What lavish plenty reigned around!— Warwick feasting his retainers with beef and ale was a niggard to the noble Mehevi!" (T 163).<sup>115</sup> Returning to this magnificent repast two chapters later, Tommo admits that "[p]revious to the Feast of the Calabashes I had been puzzled what particular station to assign Mehevi. But the important part he took upon the occasion convinced me that he had no superior among the inhabitants of the valley" (T 186). For the first time, Tommo sees all the chiefs of the valley gathered, and it is this that makes him realize that Mehevi is second to none, and that the Ti, the "Bachelor's Hall" where the chief holds court (T 157), is the local equivalent of a castle:

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<sup>115</sup> The feast offers an opportunity both for anthropological observations concerning native food culture, and for the hungry visitor to gorge himself (T 165). In the quote, Tommo is probably referring to Richard Neville, 16th Earl of Warwick (1428–1471), better known as "Warwick the Kingmaker," accused in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI, Part 3* (c. 1590) of being a "[p]roud setter up and puller down of kings" (3.3.167). In order to explain the extent of Mehevi's hospitality, Tommo thus ends up explicitly invoking older European relationships of aristocratic patronage.

Among [the chiefs] Mehevi moved with an easy air of superiority which was not to be mistaken; and he whom I had only looked at as the hospitable host of the Ti, and one of the military leaders of the tribe, now assumed in my eyes the dignity of royal station. His striking costume, no less than his naturally commanding figure, seemed indeed to give him pre-eminence over the rest. The towering helmet of feathers that he wore raised him in height above all who surrounded him; and though some others were similarly adorned, the length and luxuriance of their plumes were far inferior to his. Mehevi was in fact the greatest of the chiefs—the head of his clan—the sovereign of the valley. ... The Ti was the place—and Mehevi the king. (*T* 186–87)

This leads Tommo to the following realization, clearly showing that there is an unmistakable degree of calculation behind the friendship he professes for the chief:

After having made this discovery I could not avoid congratulating myself that Mehevi had from the first taken me as it were under his royal protection, and that he still continued to entertain for me the warmest regard, as far at least as I was enabled to judge from appearances. For the future I determined to pay most assiduous court to him, hoping that eventually through his kindness I might obtain my liberty. (*T* 187)

Just as Tommo is eager to gain Mehevi's protection and friendship—not with the aim of keeping it, but of being allowed to leave the valley—the chief also seems eager to offer it. I will return to the question of what Mehevi might be said to gain from this, but it is first necessary to describe the concrete advantages he bestows upon his guest. As mentioned, Mehevi orders Kory-Kory to serve as his valet. Tommo also ends up living in the household of his faithful servant's parents, Marheyo and Tinor, together with the beautiful Fayaway and several other lovely maidens, as well as three merry young idlers, all of whom have the best interests of his stomach in mind: "All the inhabitants of the valley treated me with great kindness; but as to the household of Marheyo, with whom I was now permanently domiciled, nothing could surpass their efforts to minister to my comfort. To the gratification of my palate they paid the most unwearied attention" (*T* 113).

Even in such a paradise of plenty as the valley of Typee, regaling a hungry guest with a hearty appetite for four months is bound to be costly. Still, the cost does not fall on Marheyo, or at least not alone, since it turns out that Mehevi plays an important part in keeping his new retainer properly fed. For example, when Tommo and Toby are returning from their first visit to the Ti, the chief sends an abundance of food with them, including poee-poe, bread-fruit, bananas, cocoa-nuts, and pork. This causes Tommo to conclude that “Mehevi, it seemed, was bent on replenishing old Marheyo’s larder, fearful perhaps that without this precaution his guests might not fare as well as they could desire” (*T* 96).

The arrangement with his patron also gains Tommo regular access to Mehevi’s inner circle at the Ti. As befitting a good host, here the chief offers not only companionship and leisure, but also what the etymology of the former word suggests: food.<sup>116</sup> In fact, Tommo at one point admits that this is the main reason he comes: “To tell the truth, Mehevi was indebted to the excellence of his viands for the honor of my repeated visits,—a matter which cannot appear singular, when it is borne in mind that bachelors, all the world over, are famous for serving up unexceptionable repasts” (*T* 158). Mehevi thus seems to take his role as patron seriously. As social anthropologist Marshall D. Sahlins has pointed out, such generosity was customary among Polynesian chiefs. As he sees it, their power was intimately connected to the generation of “a politically utilizable agricultural surplus,” which could then be used for a variety of means, leading him to the conclusion that “[r]edistribution of the fund of power was the supreme art of Polynesian politics” (Sahlins 296).<sup>117</sup> One of the most important of these means was the allocation of the goods contributed by the people to the members of the chief’s closest circle, to ensure their continuing loyalty. As Sahlins argues—and, since “hanger-on” and “retainer” often

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116 The origin of companion is the Latin “companionem,” combining “com” (together) and “panis” (bread), that is, someone to share bread with. In other words, companionship and parasitism both derive from the sharing of food.

117 That Mehevi has access to such an agriculturally based “fund of power” is evident from Tommo’s description of the conservation of the fruit from the bread-fruit tree in Chapter 15 (*T* 116).

serve as synonyms for “parasite,” in so doing indirectly evoking the latter concept—these goods were

appropriated for the livelihood of circles of retainers, many of them close kinsmen of the chief, who clustered about the powerful paramounts. These were not all useless hangers-on. They were political cadres: supervisors of the stores [of food], talking chiefs, ceremonial attendants, high priests who were intimately involved in political rule, envoys to transmit directives through the chiefdom. (297)<sup>118</sup>

What Sahlins’ analysis indicates is that, instead of viewing the abundance of food and other favors bestowed upon Tommo as a sign of hospitality given without expectation of anything in return, to Mehevi, it likely is meant as part of a mutually binding agreement where both parts have a part to play. This possibility is further strengthened if *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950) is taken into consideration. Here, Marcel Mauss maintains that there exists an unwritten obligation to return even what is seemingly freely given, and that this obligation functions as the glue holding pre-capitalist societies together. This argument helps explain the excessive kindness of Mehevi: From Mauss’ perspective, it becomes part of a “*system of total services*” where “total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare” (5–6; emphasis in the original). Also note that to Mauss, food holds a special role in this reciprocal system: “The gift is therefore at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond, above all when it consists of food” (59).

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<sup>118</sup> Sahlins’ primary focus is the most advanced Polynesian islands, such as Hawaii and Tahiti, where chiefs would rule over much larger populations than Mehevi does. On a more moderate scale, his statements would still seem to hold true for the Typees: “A lesser chiefdom, confined say as in the Marquesas Islands to a narrow valley, could be almost personally ruled by a headman in frequent contact with the relatively small population. Melville’s partly romanticized—also for its ethnographic details, partly cribbed—account in *Typee* makes this clear” (299).



To combine the arguments of Mauss and Sahlins, while Tommo's acceptance of Mehevi's friendship is also important, it is particularly through repeatedly consuming the chief's edible "fund of power" that he manages to entangle himself in a "bilateral, irrevocable bond" of expectations he barely seems to grasp. No matter if he himself is aware of this or not (and his narrative seems to indicate that the latter is the case), by accepting Mehevi's food Tommo has very likely entered a form of pre-capitalist, gift-based relation of exchange where something is expected of him in return.

If the possibility I am suggesting by way of Sahlins and Mauss is correct, the question logically follows: What exactly is it Mehevi wants from his guest? Since Tommo—all his enthusiasm for the Typees and criticisms of the West aside—shows a very limited understanding of native culture, one cannot give any final answers to this question. Even so, Cynthia Damon's analysis of the relationship between patron and client/parasite offers a possible answer. Describing the different ways a classical parasite might go about acquiring his dinner invitations, she states that "it is useful to recognize that there are two basic techniques that a dependent might use to attract benefits from a patron, namely, flattery and services" (13).

Starting with flattery, it has already been pointed out how Tommo constantly praises Mehevi in a tone of gradually increasing admiration, going from calling him a "superb-looking warrior" to a "king." This might of course simply be seen as objective descriptions of a remarkable individual, but two things should be borne in mind. First, the classical parasite would frequently do anything to stroke the ego of his host, lavishing him with praise. Second, as noted in Chapter 2, if one wanted to indirectly label others as parasites, one common way of going about it was to apply the term "rex" to their patrons: "One could also characterize someone as a parasite by labeling his patron *rex*, 'king,' the flattering term used by comic parasites of their patrons" (Damon 16–17).

While it is often difficult to gauge whether Tommo's comments about Mehevi are objective descriptions or outright flattery, at one point he goes so far in his praise that it becomes obvious that he is feeding the reader little more than fawning propaganda. This happens in Chapter 26, which starts out as a reflection on whether or not it is appropriate to label

Mehevi king: “King Mehevi!—A goodly sounding title!—and why should I not bestow it upon the foremost man in the valley of Typee?” (*T* 188) To answer this question, Tommo lampoons “his gracious majesty” King Kammehammaha III of Hawaii as, among other choice epithets, a “fat, lazy, negro-looking blockhead, with as little character as power” (*T* 189). This leads to the following conclusion:

if the farcical puppet of a chief magistrate in the Sandwich Islands be allowed the title of King, why should it be withheld from the noble savage Mehevi, who is a thousand times more worthy of the appellation? All hail, therefore, Mehevi, King of the Cannibal Valley, and long life and prosperity to his Typeean majesty! May Heaven for many a year preserve him, the uncompromising foe of Nukuheva and the French, if a hostile attitude will secure his lovely domain from the remorseless inflictions of South Sea civilization. (*T* 189)

Clearly, no matter how great a chief Mehevi is, this is the sort of blatant flattery classical parasites excelled at offering, right down to the use of the epithet “king.” However, since Mehevi himself has no way of understanding his guest’s praise, it cannot be meant for the ears of the chief himself, but for the readers of *Typee*, a point I will return to.

The second of the two techniques mentioned by Damon is services. One of the reasons Tommo is unable to understand why the Typees are so intent on keeping him in the valley, is because he feels that he has little of value to offer. As he puts it in regard to their kindness and attention to all of his needs:

Had I been in a situation to instruct them in any of the rudiments of the mechanic arts, or had I manifested a disposition to render myself in any way useful among them, their conduct might have been attributed to some adequate motive, but as it was the matter seemed to me inexplicable.

During my whole stay on the island there occurred but two or three instances where the natives applied to me with the view of availing themselves of my superior information. And these now appear so ludicrous that I cannot forbear relating them. (*T* 120)

The incidents in question are all related to the few things Tommo brought with him when he ran off from the *Dolly*, including “a razor with its case,

a supply of needles and thread, a pound or two of tobacco, and a few yards of a bright-colored calico" (*T* 121). To the Typees, these items are regarded as treasures: "they gazed upon the miscellaneous contents as though I had just revealed to them a casket of diamonds" (*T* 121). The needle and thread come in handy when Tommo repairs a strip of old cloth for Marheyo, and the razor for shaving the warrior Narmonee. Later, it is also mentioned that the former finds a novel use for the old shoes that his guest has discarded, proudly wearing them as pendants around his neck.<sup>119</sup>

Apart from the uses these basic items are put to, even though Tommo is unable to instruct the Typees "in any of the rudiments of the mechanic arts" and has no great talent for rendering himself useful, this does not mean that he has nothing else to offer. In fact, in addition to the aforementioned "two or three instances," several times in the text he relates things he has done that, while he himself accords them little value, are evidently a source of real joy to the Typees. What these services have in common is, to quote Damon, "their cheapness: they cost the parasite nothing" (4). First, even though the Typees are never mean-spirited, unless Tommo misreads the situations, there are occasions where they gently ridicule him. This for example happens during the previously mentioned ceremony where he and Toby exchange names with the natives:

During this ceremony the greatest merriment prevailed, nearly every announcement on the part of the islanders being followed by a fresh sally of gaiety, which induced me to believe that some of them at least were innocently diverting the company at our expense, by bestowing upon themselves a string of absurd titles, of the humor of which we were of course entirely ignorant. (*T* 72)

This does not seem to bother Tommo, and neither does the "uncontrollable laughter" of the natives when he and Toby make their first, rather inelegant attempts at eating *poee-poee*. Now, compared to the abuse that the classical parasites of comedy had to be ready to suffer in return for their free meals—according to Damon, they were usually "shamelessly tolerant

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<sup>119</sup> An early indication of the problems involved in deciding whether Tommo is truly generous or not can be found in the following quote: When Marheyo signals an interest in the shoes, he states that "I immediately comprehended his desires, and very generously gave him the shoes, which had become quite mouldy" (*T* 146).

of insult and injury” (29)—this is nothing. Even so, it does show that up to a certain point, at least, Tommo, just like his comedic forefathers, is willing to lose face to fill his stomach.

From the Typees’ perspective, the undoubtedly comic situations that arise from Tommo’s lack of knowledge of their culture and traditions can be sources of amusement, but still, the most important contributions of their guest seem to be connected to the new inventions and ideas he brings into the valley. While these might appear insignificant to him, they are clearly not so to them. One such instance is the pop-gun he decides to make for a small boy, which leads to a veritable rush of similar requests from Typees young and old. As he puts it: “Had I possessed the remotest idea of the sensation this piece of ordnance was destined to produce, I should certainly have taken out a patent for the invention” (*T* 145). Even more important is what happens when Mehevi discovers that his new retainer has two talents nobody else in the valley seems to possess. Tommo mentions the first after having described the Typees’ love of chanting. This fondness notwithstanding, what they do not seem to be familiar with is singing, “at least,” as he puts it, “as that art is practiced among other nations” (*T* 227). When Tommo once chances to sing, the effect it has on them amazes him:

I shall never forget the first time I happened to roar out a stave in the presence of the noble Mehevi. It was a stanza from the “Bavarian broom-seller.” His Typean majesty, with all his court, gazed upon me in amazement, as if I had displayed some preternatural faculty which Heaven had denied to them. The king was delighted with the verse; but the chorus fairly transported him. At his solicitation I sang it again and again . . . Previous to Mehevi’s making the discovery, I had never been aware that there was anything of the nightingale about me; but I was now promoted to the place of court-minstrel, in which capacity I was afterwards perpetually called upon to officiate. (*T* 227–28)<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> In *Melville’s Folk Roots* (1999), Kevin J. Hayes analyzes the correspondence between Tommo’s experiences and those related in the “Bavarian Broom-seller,” which chronicles a homesick foreigner selling brooms on the streets of London. Given the evolution of the parasite from an unwanted dinner-guest to an insect or an animal feeding on its host, it is not without significance that the broom-seller tries to convince people to buy his wares by stating that his brooms can “brush away insects that sometime annoy you,” as well as “sweep all vexatious intruders away” (qtd. in Hayes 14).

Strange as it may sound that the Typees are not familiar with singing, Tommo had previously mentioned that while the valley was home to an abundance of colorful and beautiful birds, these all had one thing in common: “they go sailing through the air in starry throngs; but alas! The spell of dumbness is upon them all—there is not a single warbler in the valley!” (T 215). This perhaps helps explain why the Typees have never been exposed to the phenomenon before, and why nothing resembling (Western) traditions of singing had evolved. No matter if this explanation is correct, Tommo is in effect the sole songbird of the valley. Given the pleasure the Typees gain from his efforts as “nightingale,” this gives one indication why it would reflect well upon Mehevi to keep such a *rara avis* in his entourage.

While the first new *techné* Tommo offers the Typees involves the voice, the second involves a form of acting:

Singing was not the only means I possessed of diverting the royal Mehevi and his easy-going subjects. Nothing afforded them more pleasure than to see me go through the attitudes of pugilistic encounter. As not one of the natives had soul enough in him to stand up like a man, and allow me to hammer away at him, for my own personal gratification and that of the king, I was necessitated to fight against an imaginary enemy, whom I invariably made to knock under my superior prowess. Sometimes when this sorely battered shadow retreated precipitately towards a group of savages, and, following him, I rushed among them, dealing my blows right and left, they would disperse in all directions, much to the enjoyment of Mehevi, the chiefs, and themselves. (T 228)

That Tommo’s shadowboxing and singing hardly qualify as great art is of little importance, given that the Typees obviously find pleasure in them.<sup>121</sup> Thus, in addition to whatever other reasons Mehevi might have for wanting to retain the guest, it becomes clear that just as the classic parasite, Tommo is a master of providing entertainment—no matter if he is aware of it or not. In the context of what he offers the Typees and what

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<sup>121</sup> That the Typees themselves enjoy play-acting is evident from the detailed description of how one of the younger chiefs, Narnée, goes about fetching fruit from the top of the tall cocoanut trees for Tommo (T 214).

he receives in return, he can therefore be viewed not only as a parasite, but more specifically as an artist-parasite: someone who pays for the food he receives through words (in the form of song) and acting (in the form of pugilistic encounters).

To sum up at this point, it seems likely that having Tommo in his entourage not only reflects positively on Mehevi as chief, but also ensures him steady access to entertainment and to various types of technological innovation, which are no less important for being comparatively modest from a Western perspective. Allowing him to leave, on the other hand, would not only deprive Mehevi of his guest's various talents, but could also potentially be held against him as a sign of weakness or as an indication that he has not been a good enough host. Also, no matter if this was the explicit intention which led the natives to feed and pamper Tommo, he is clearly in their debt—in Alex Calder's words:

Tommo "belongs" to Mehevi, who has extended to him the protective and proprietary mantle of his personal taboo. The more important point is that everyone else in the valley is entirely aware this is so, and Tommo will find doors opening and closing in relation to a sign he cannot read but that has always determined how he stands in relation to his surroundings. (33)

To Mehevi, letting Tommo go before this debt has been properly repaid would thus be the equivalent of being conned in a business venture. This is a prospect few self-respecting leaders anywhere would take lightly, but it might be seen as especially important in Polynesia, where honor, according to Mauss, "expresses itself violently" (37). When Tommo makes it known that he wants to leave the valley, the anger expressed by Mehevi, who "took care by the whole of his behavior towards me to show the displeasure and resentment which he felt" (*T* 142), therefore makes perfect sense.<sup>122</sup>

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122 While Calder's explanation of what the Typees want from Tommo doesn't cover all relevant aspects, it is still useful: "The people of Typee require a Pakeha Maori of their own—if I may use the New Zealand term for a European who settled with Polynesians on Polynesian terms, who mediated transactions between ship and shore and so augmented a tribe's position relative to the other tribes of the island" (33).

What finally puts an end to the contentment Tommo has found as a well-fed client of Mehevi's, is the tattoo artist Karky, who lets it be known that he wants to practice his art on him, and, more specifically, on his face. This would serve a double function, at the same time permanently initiating him into Typeean society and excluding him from Western civilization.<sup>123</sup> Clearly in favor of this plan, Mehevi does not only desire his continual presence, with all the advantages this brings, he wants him to once and for all become part of the tribe. *This* is the contract Tommo has unknowingly signed by accepting the chief's patronage; in the words of Hildegard Hoeller, who has explored somewhat similar questions in relation to gift-fiving in *Typee*:

What escapes Tommo is that, in response to the gifts bestowed upon him, he is expected to become a Typee since gift economies function by drawing clear distinctions between brother and other—the former bound within the community through gift exchange, the other treated as enemy with different, far less “generous” rules. (150)<sup>124</sup>

Faced with this expectation it becomes evident what Tommo is willing to accept in order to gain free meals and what he is not. As long as all he has to suffer is laughter, he does not mind metaphorically losing face, but losing face in a *literal* sense through tattooing is another matter altogether; as Hoeller puts it: “The phenomenal, unfathomable generosity of the Typees becomes impossible for Tommo precisely because it demands a counter-gift of nothing less than himself” (155). Around the same time the ailment in his foot returns, as does his fear of being eaten, and he finally decides to “escape from a captivity, which, however endurable, nay, delightful it might be in some respects,

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123 For the argument that the Typees' desire to tattoo Tommo should be read as an attempt to integrate him more fully into their culture, see Otter (*Melville's Anatomies* 10). The Typees also attempt to do so through teaching Tommo different skills useful for life in the valley: stating that whenever he took part in their activities, “the delight of the islanders was boundless; and there was always a throng of competitors for the honor of instructing me in any particular craft” (*T* 151).

124 On gift-giving in Melville, see also Doan.

involved in its issues a fate marked by the most frightful contingencies” (*T* 140–41).<sup>125</sup>

To summarize the argument so far, the narrative of *Typee* illuminates the tension resulting from two different sets of contrasting expectations. On the one hand, Mehevi seems to consider their relationship as one between patron and client, and having lived up to his end of the bargain, he expects his guest to do the same; on the other hand, Tommo is primarily looking for someone to feed him, but whose meals come with no expectations attached. When he finally decides to run away, it might thus be seen as the result of his realization that what originally looked like a host, in fact was a patron.

The ending of the narrative, where Tommo finally manages to escape after having spent four months in the valley, must now be addressed. When the excited natives one day announce to him that Toby has returned by boat, he conveys that he wants to go to the beach to meet his friend, but it is only after having several times repeated the request that he is allowed to do so by his patron: “Again and again I renewed my petition to Mehevi. He regarded me with a fixed and serious eye, but at length yielding to my importunity, reluctantly granted my request” (*T* 246). Upon learning that Toby has not come, after all, Tommo insists on continuing in the hope that the strangers who have arrived might help him run away. With the help of Kory-Kory, he at last manages to reach the beach, where he sees an English whale-boat, as well as a tabooed native from Nukuheva, Karakoe, bartering with the Typees for his freedom:

Karakoe stood near the edge of the water with a large roll of cotton-cloth thrown over one arm, and holding two or three canvass bags of powder; while with the other hand he grasped a musket, which he appeared to be proffering to several of the chiefs around him. But they turned with disgust from his offers, and seemed to be impatient at his presence, with vehement gestures waving him off to his boat, and commanding him to depart. . . . When I remembered the extravagant

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<sup>125</sup> In an ironic twist, the decision to run away can be said to point back to the very first page of *Typee*, where Tommo had complained about the spoilt and ungrateful behavior of “state-room sailors” and their incapacity of appreciating their privileges. In the end, he, too, turns out to be unable to enjoy the Typeean equivalent of “breakfasting, lunching, dining off five courses, chatting, playing whist, and drinking champagne-punch,” as well as “sleep[ing] for ten hours” a day.



value placed by these people upon the articles which were offered to them in exchange for me, and which were so indignantly rejected, I saw new proof of the same fixed determination of purpose they had all along manifested with regard to me, and in despair, and shaking myself free from the grasp of those who held me, I sprung upon my feet and rushed towards Karakoee. (*T* 249)

From the perspective of my analysis, the most important part of the ending is Tommo's attempt, as he finally reaches Karakoee and the boat, to repay the kindness of those who have cared for him during his stay in the valley, as expressed in the following passage:

Marheyo and Kory-Kory, and a great many of the women, followed me into the water, and I was determined, as the only mark of gratitude I could show, to give them the articles which had been brought as my ransom. I handed the musket to Kory-Kory, with a rapid gesture which was equivalent to a "Deed of Gift;" threw the roll of cotton to old Marheyo, pointing as I did so to poor Fayaway, who had retired from the edge of the water and was sitting down disconsolate on the shingles; and tumbled the powder-bags out to the nearest young ladies, all of whom were vastly willing to take them. The distribution did not occupy ten seconds, and before it was over the boat was under full way; [Karakoee] all the while exclaiming loudly against what he considered a useless throwing away of valuable property. (*T* 250–51)

With some commendable exceptions, few Melville scholars have taken an interest in this passage, which to my mind is central for understanding the relationship between the guest and his hosts in *Typee*. Two of those who have analyzed the passage, Milton R. Stern and Hildegard Hoeller, have come to similar, somewhat Emersonian conclusions about Tommo's gifts: The former holds that he "cannot buy his own deliverance with the fortuitous gun and calico, which are a bogus reprieve because they are external to his own commitments" ("*Typee*" 133); the latter that "he knows his gifts are poignant, ironic travesties of the gifts he has received. They are given fast, as a way of ridding himself of his bond" (156).<sup>126</sup> As

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126 More precisely, Stern and Hoeller's views of what constitutes a "real" gift might perhaps be said to resemble Ralph Waldo Emerson's maxim from his essay "Gifts": "The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. ... But it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's" (26).

opposed to Stern and Hoeller, I am not convinced that this is necessarily the best way to understand these gifts.

Looking in more detail at the passage, the “young ladies” all seem very happy to receive their presents, but when it comes to those that have been closest to Tommo, it is much harder to gauge their reactions. Since the heartbroken Fayaway is described not just as sobbing, but as “sobbing indignantly” (*T* 250), this might indicate that she is not simply sad at his leaving, but perhaps also feels betrayed by him.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, since she has withdrawn from Tommo’s side it is hard to know whether the roll of cotton has an effect on her, and, if so, whether it makes her more or less sad and indignant. Nor is it possible to unambiguously assess Kory-Kory’s reaction to the gift of the musket—at least not in the original edition of *Typee*. In the revised American edition, though, Melville changed the second sentence quoted above to “I handed the musket to Kory-Kory, in doing which he would fain have taken hold of me.” His reasons for making this change are not known, but it seems likely that his aim must have been to say something about Kory-Kory’s reaction to Tommo’s gift, perhaps as the result of a realization that his narrator’s actions might seem ungrateful to some readers; as it is put in the editorial appendix to the Northwestern-Newberry edition: “the revision does remove the possible implication of callousness on Tommo’s part, and may thus be thought to soften the original forthright tone of the book” (*T* 333).

At first glance, the new sentence can be read as expressing gratitude. As the musket is a valuable and rare item, Kory-Kory is so happy that he would have embraced his friend, were it not for the hurry Tommo is in to make his escape. Even so, in contrast to this way of understanding “taken hold of me,” the phrase can just as well express that Kory-Kory would like to hold him back to stop him from leaving. After all, a few sentences previously it had been stated that as Tommo takes the last few steps toward his saviors in the boat, neither Marheyo “nor Kory-Kory attempted to

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127 In the revised American edition, “sobbing indignantly” was changed to “sobbing convulsively.” The editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition remark that “[a]n effect of Fayaway’s sobbing being reported as convulsive rather than indignant is to remove any implication that she was indignant because Tommo was leaving her rather than because he was being prevented from leaving the island” (*T* 333).

hold me” (*T* 250), holding here meaning to hold him back. In such a reading, the musket could potentially be perceived as an insult to Kory-Kory’s honor. Realizing that the man whom he considered a friend is trying to buy him off with something that is not even properly his to give might have caused him to change his mind about letting Tommo go. Yet another possibility is suggested by the ending of *Omoo*, where the narrator tries to give half of his wages to the hospitable Ereemear Po-Po “as some small return for his kindness; but, although he well knew the value of the coin, not a dollar would he accept” (*O* 315). If comparable notions of hospitality exist on the different Polynesian islands, Kory-Kory could have similar reasons not to accept the gift Tommo thrusts into his hands.

In the end, it is probably not possible to decide whether any of these interpretations are correct. Since Tommo stresses that the whole scene took less than ten seconds, it could very well be that he himself is not sure how to understand what he has experienced. It is therefore truly fitting that this specific change made by Melville, likely intended to allay doubts about the sincerity of Tommo’s feelings, ends up so clearly embodying the fundamental ambiguity of *Typee* toward those who are simultaneously the narrator’s friends and captors. Similarly, it could also be asked whether Stern and Hoeller are right to define Tommo’s gifts simply as a “bogus reprieve” and as “ironic travesties.” After all, the context clearly shows that even though it only takes him a few seconds to offer these gifts, they nonetheless increase the chances of his recapture. Nor is it fair to claim that he should necessarily be understood as callous because he gives away something that does not belong to him, since there was simply nothing else he could have given the Typees at the time. Perhaps it would be better to understand Tommo’s presents as his attempt, to borrow a phrase from Arndt Niebisch, “to renegotiate the parasite-host relationship” (15). In other words, through his actions at the beach Tommo tries in the best way he can to balance out his accounts, so as *not* to be seen as an ungrateful parasite. Whereas Stern and Holler are correct that, in the end, he probably does not entirely succeed in the effort to cancel his debts, the significance of his attempt should not be overlooked.

Conspicuously absent from Tommo’s escape is the man he owes the most to, Mehevi. In fact, the passage where he states that “at length

yielding to my importunity, [he] reluctantly granted my request” is the last time the noble chief is mentioned in the narrative. Hence, even though Tommo should have succeeded in repaying Kory-Kory and Fayaway what he owes them with those gifts that were not really his to give, he is still in debt to his protector, without any final gift to offer him in return for the patronage he has received. Consequently, the decision to let the chief silently disappear from the story prior to the escape can be seen as Tommo’s understandable, if somewhat unsatisfactory way of avoiding the embarrassment of still being in debt.

There is perhaps one final thing that Tommo has to offer Mehevi: the narrative of *Typee* itself. For, as earlier noted, trying to understand the massive amount of flattery heaped upon the chief throughout the story leads to the paradoxical situation where Tommo’s admiration can only be expressed to the readers of the narrative, and not directly to the one he professes to admire. When approached from this perspective, *Typee* can be understood as a belated work of praise for someone whom Tommo had no way of thanking at the time, immortalizing him as a noble king in a work of literature read and discussed over one hundred and seventy years later. If not for the parasite-poet, there is no doubt that Mehevi—if he ever really existed—would have been long forgotten.

## Tommo the Troublemaker

We have already seen that in their final moment together, Mehevi grants what turns out to be his guest’s last wish only because of the “importunity” of Tommo’s repeated requests. According to *OED*, this word refers to the “quality or fact of being persistent or pressing in making requests, demands, or offers, esp. so as to cause irritation or distress,” in other words, “something which is troublesome or difficult” (“importunity”). A fitting word: Melville’s narrator is a *troublesome* guest, indeed.<sup>128</sup> This brings to mind the following claim from Michel Serres:

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128 As Michael C. Berthold notes, David Porter’s travel narratives—which Melville drew heavily upon in *Typee*—contain reflections on the Typeean word “kie-kie”: “*Kie-kie* signifies to eat, it also signifies a *troublesome fellow*; may it not also have many other significations, with which we are unacquainted? It may signify to *cut up*, to *divide*, to *sacrifice*, to *keep as trophies*”

“The parasite is an inclination toward trouble, to the change of phase of a system. It is a little troublemaker” (Parasite 196).

Even though Tommo is no revolutionary or reformer himself, as well as explicitly opposed to those who try to impose Western ways of life on the Polynesians, the narrative clearly demonstrates that, no matter if he is aware of this or not, he is still the bringer of something akin to what Serres terms “a little difference, a minimal action” that disturbs traditional customs (*Parasite* 193). To understand the chain of events he sets in motion, in this last part of the chapter I first offer a closer look at what the narrative says about Typeean society as a “system.” Then, I trace some of the changes that occur as this system is affected by the presence and subsequent escape of the “foreign body” it—unwisely?—ends up hosting.

The first time Tommo glimpses the beautiful valley of the Typees, with its “hushed repose,” he likens it both to “the gardens of Paradise” and “the enchanted gardens in the fairy tale” (*T* 49). If this Edenic, seemingly ageless world were to be understood as a system, how should it be described? First, as it exchanges matter, energy, and information with its surroundings, it is an open and self-organizing living system, rather than closed and isolated one, like the kind that can be created in a laboratory, where there is a causal connection between input and output. While closed systems tend toward a state of equilibrium and a maximum amount of entropy—that is, energy not capable of doing work—this is not the case for open ones receiving a continual influx of outside energy, where, to quote Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, “equilibrium is a rare and precarious state” (128).

Contrary to what classical, Newtonian science held to be the case, to Prigogine and Stengers—as well as to Michel Serres, who is clearly indebted to their work—it is therefore not open systems and their randomness that should be counted as the exceptions to the general rule, but closed ones and their determinism.<sup>129</sup> At first glance, Tommo’s description

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(Porter 46; qtd. in Berthold 556; emphasis in the original). This polysemous word is therefore highly relevant to Tommo: he is a troublesome guest out to eat at the tables of others, kept by Mehevi as a sort of trophy, who fears he might end up being eaten, and who causes a division among his hosts.

129 On the importance of Prigogine and Stengers’ work for Serres, see Johnsen.

of the social order of the natives appears as somewhat of an anomaly from such a Prigoginian perspective. For, while undoubtedly a complex open system, this Edenic world seems to be if not in, at least very close to a state of equilibrium. As Tommo puts it: “Nothing can be more uniform and undiversified than the life of the Typees; one tranquil day of ease and happiness follows another in quiet succession; and with these unsophisticated savages the history of a day is the history of a life” (*T* 149). In thermodynamic terms, the Typeean social order could thus perhaps be said to resemble what is known as a *steady state system*, meaning one that is open, but where most properties do not change over time.

In addition to being stable, the system would also seem to be in something close to an optimum state. Given the Typees’ lack of “legal provisions . . . for the well-being and conservation of society,” this puzzles Tommo:

everything went on in the valley with a harmony and smoothness unparalleled, I will venture to assert, in the most select, refined, and pious associations of mortals in Christendom. How are we to explain this enigma? These islanders were heathens! savages! ay, cannibals! and how came they, without the aid of established law, to exhibit, in so eminent a degree, that social order which is the greatest blessing and highest pride of the social state? (*T* 200)

Several factors mentioned in the narrative help explain this seeming combination of stability and optimization. As they are all related by Tommo, it is of course not unlikely that as a Western outsider he has misunderstood some of them, that he is consciously or unconsciously exaggerating, romanticizing, or that he has been tricked into drawing the wrong conclusions by the Typees. However, as later scholars have argued, even though some details may be inaccurate, the larger picture he presents corresponds well with what is known about life on the island in the period.<sup>130</sup> Tommo’s descriptions may therefore still give a good indication of why life in the valley has managed to remain so stable for long periods of time.

First, in terms of the size of the population, Tommo estimates there to be “about two thousand inhabitants in Typee; and no number could

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<sup>130</sup> To quote Charles Roberts Anderson: “As romantic as these accounts seem to be in their picture of an almost ideal government reduced to a minimum and economic justice extended to all—they seem to be surprisingly near the truth, at least in their statement of fundamental facts” (132).

have been better adapted to the extent of the valley” (*T* 194). Neither too many, nor too few, the Typees can continue to reap the benefits of Mother Nature without having to fight among themselves for scarce resources. As Kory-Kory at one point remarks, “liberally” translated by Tommo: “Ah, Typee ! isn’t it a fine place though !—no danger of starving here, I tell you !—plenty of bread-fruit—plenty of water—plenty of pudding—ah ! plenty of everything !—ah ! heaps, heaps, heaps !” (*T* 103). In addition, since “the births would appear but very little to outnumber the deaths” (*T* 192), the size of the population seems to have remained remarkably stable over time. In other words, the population is well within its carrying capacity, or maximum number of individuals that can be sustained indefinitely, given the resources available. This Tommo considers of the utmost importance to the continuing happiness of the Typees:

The ratio of increase among all the Polynesian nations is very small ... This would seem expressly ordained by Providence to prevent the overstocking of the islands with a race too indolent to cultivate the ground, and who, for that reason alone, would, by any considerable increase in their numbers, be exposed to the most deplorable misery. (*T* 192)

This combination of natural abundance and a balanced and stable population helps explain the approximate steady state of life: the valley has enough for everybody and there is little to be gained by striving for more. Tommo points out the lack of money in the valley, and this, too, undoubtedly helps explain the situation. As Manuel De Landa has argued, the presence of money in a society will tend to function as “a catalyst or stimulant of trade,” which in turn causes an increasing systemic self-acceleration, whereas its absence functions as “an inhibitor” (35), meaning such auto-catalytic processes are less likely to occur, and change on the whole to be much slower.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> While there is no official money in the valley, the Typees have a version of what social anthropologists often refer to as “primitive money,” i.e. valuable items that function as a means of payment (see Graeber 60). In *Typee*, it is salt that plays this role: “From the extravagant value placed upon the article, I verily believe, that with a bushel of common Liverpool salt all the real estate in Typee might have been purchased” (*T* 114). As Marsoin has argued, Typeean society is thus no “pre-economy,” but should rather be understood as a “proto-economy” which has pleasure and enjoyment as its fundamental values, and where the defining trait of pleasure is that it is allowed to circulate freely, rather than being hoarded and thus delayed (“No Land” 223–31).

Another relevant aspect is the regulative function of taboo in Typee. Taboo not only helps ensure that people act as expected of them, but, due to what Tommo considers a widespread, rather pragmatic attitude to religion, the potential for religious officials taking advantage of taboo for their own ends is also limited. Finally, one could also mention the Typee's lack of jealousy in romantic affairs, their lack of crime, their lack of property rights (at least in the Western sense), as well as their comparative egalitarianism.<sup>132</sup>

Finally, the unchanging aspects of Typeean life might in part also be explained by one additional trait, which greatly impresses Tommo:

There was one admirable trait in the general character of the Typees which, more than any thing else, secured my admiration: it was the unanimity of feeling they displayed on every occasion. With them there hardly appeared to be any difference of opinion upon any subject whatever. . . . During my whole stay on the island I never witnessed a single quarrel, nor any thing that in the slightest degree approached even to a dispute. (*T* 203–4)

In other words, the Typees appear as almost entirely free from internal dissent. Along with the strong social bonds uniting even those who are not relatives, this must greatly contribute to the stability of their society. Most important, though, is probably the very limited interaction with strangers, in large part resulting from the rest of the world considering them ferocious cannibals. Due to the reputation that Melville's narrative exposed as a sham, it seems the Typees have only to a limited degree been exposed to new technologies and new and unexpected challenges capable of transforming their society and their traditional ways of life.

This rough outline of the traits of Typeean society likely contributing to its seeming stability and resistance to change—hence its status as “near equilibrium,” in thermodynamic terms—allows for a better understanding of the changes caused by Tommo, in his role as parasitic “thermal exciter.” For, as the following words from Serres indicate, the presence of such a foreign body may inadvertently have played a part in bringing

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<sup>132</sup> On the pragmatic attitude to religion, see (*T* 178); on the lack of jealousy, see (*T* 191); on the lack of crime, see (*T* 200); on comparative egalitarianism, see (*T* 185).



this stable situation to an end: “If some equilibrium exists or ever existed somewhere, somehow, the introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium. Immediately, the system changes; time has begun” (*Parasite* 182).

Some of these changes have already been mentioned—the items he brings with him; the new “arts” he introduces—but two additional ones must be stressed. First, Alex Calder argues that the influence of outsiders would have been bound to affect the workings of taboo:

Had Melville “gone native,” he would have joined the many beachcombers who accelerated change far beyond local expectations. With regard to taboo, for example, their making allowances for his ignorance of its provisions would eventually weaken those provisions, not only so far as he was concerned, but also so far as everyone was concerned. (33)

Calder notes that such a weakening of the taboo is evident in the chapter where Tommo convinces Kory-Kory to bring a canoe to the lake where he often enjoys the company of Fayaway and the young ladies of the valley. As it turns out that not only the canoe, but also the water it touches, is taboo to women, to his chagrin he suddenly finds himself without female companions. After he tries to persuade Mehevi to lift the ban, the chief finally agrees to discuss the matter with the priests of the valley. This leads to unexpected results: “How it was that the priesthood of Typee satisfied the affair with their conscience, I know not; but so it was, and Fayaway’s dispensation from this portion of the taboo was at length procured” (*T* 133). No matter if this solution to his problem is realistic or not, from an ethnographic perspective, it shows how Tommo’s presence clearly disturbs established cultural patterns.<sup>133</sup>

The second, and perhaps most important change caused by Tommo becomes visible in the description of the events leading up to his escape in Chapter 34. The first indication of what he has set in motion occurs when he is brought to Mehevi due to news claiming that Toby has returned to the beach: “I found myself within the Ti, surrounded by a noisy group

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<sup>133</sup> Calder takes issue with those commentators who have remarked upon the unlikelihood of such a dispensation being granted, claiming that “[t]o suppose that a taboo against women entering canoes was immutable ignores the local dynamics of change in this period” (42).

engaged in discussing the recent intelligence” (*T* 246). That the Typees turn out to be capable of disagreement, after all, becomes even more evident after Tommo and “some fifty of the natives” set out for the beach after receiving Mehevi’s reluctant permission: “In this manner we had proceeded about four or five miles, when we were met by a party of some twenty islanders, between whom and those who accompanied me ensued an animated conference” (*T* 246). None of the Typees is willing to carry him any further, but he carries on alone after finding a spear he can use as a crutch:

To my surprise I was suffered to proceed alone, all the natives remaining in front of the house, and engaging in earnest conversation, which every moment became more loud and vehement; and to my unspeakable delight I perceived that some difference of opinion had arisen between them; that two parties, in short, were formed, and consequently that in their divided counsels there was some chance of my deliverance. (*T* 248)

Gone is not only the “hushed repose” of the landscape, which initially had so impressed Tommo, but also the “unanimity of feeling” that the Typees “displayed on every occasion.” The difference of opinions—obviously over what to do with him—is so severe that, in the end, the different factions start fighting each other, thus allowing him to escape: “blows were struck, wounds were given, and blood flowed” (*T* 250).

This ending exemplifies Serres’ notion of the parasite as a thermal exciter nudging the system away from its steady state, irritating it into evolving in unforeseen new directions. Nevertheless, Tommo’s effects—particularly him causing a severe split among natives who hitherto had “appeared to form one household, whose members were bound together by the ties of strong affection” (*T* 204)—seem disproportionate when compared to the fact that he is a stranger whom the Typees have only known for four months. Prigogine and Stengers argue, for instance, that in a stable system in or near equilibrium, fluctuations will have few lasting effects—as they see it, such systems are “‘immune’ with result to fluctuations” (14). After suffering a “microscopic event”, “macroscopic structures” will therefore soon return to their stable states, much the same way a swinging pendulum soon returns to rest (Prigogine and Stengers 191).

The relatively modest input of Tommo should therefore only result in small and short-lived effects. Does this mean that after his departure, life in the valley ought to quickly have gone back to business as usual, marked by the return of “hushed repose” and “unanimity of feeling”?

*Typee* does not answer this question. As the boat pulls away from its pursuers and strength finally deserts Tommo, the Typeean system fades from view and with it, its potential future states, whatever they might be. Nonetheless, the narrative does offer several important indications that *Typee* may not be a steady state system after all. The reason for this is that when Tommo ends up in the valley, it is at a very specific historical moment where the system is under a lot of pressure from its surroundings. To quote T. Walter Herbert: “The Marquesas were well known in Melville’s time because they provided a stage on which the drama of empire was played out” (72). More precisely, Tommo arrives on Nukuheva not long after the French have taken possession of most of the island. Entering the bay of Nukuheva for the first time, he makes the following observation:

No description can do justice to its beauty; but that beauty was lost to me then, and I saw nothing but the tri-colored flag of France trailing over the stern of six vessels, whose black hulls and bristling broadsides proclaimed their warlike character. . . . The whole group of islands had just been taken possession of by Rear Admiral Du Petit Thouars, in the name of the invincible French nation.  
(*T* 12)

The presence of the French is most important in the first chapters of *Typee*, where Tommo for example states that “[t]he islanders looked upon the people who made this cavalier appropriation of their shores with mingled feelings of fear and detestation. They cordially hated them; but the impulses of their resentment were neutralized by their dread of the floating batteries” (*T* 16). Later the French colonial enterprise somewhat recedes from view. Once Tommo comes to stay with the Typees, his descriptions tend to focus on the stable and unchanging aspects of life in the valley, rather than on the ongoing political situation of the island. Even so, this external pressure is clearly visible in the text. After he and Toby have been accepted by the tribe, the Typees exhibit a strong

awareness of the presence of the French colonizers and a wish to learn as much as possible about their plans:

They then plied us with a thousand questions, of which we could understand nothing more than that they had reference to the recent movements of the French, against whom they seemed to cherish the most fierce hatred. So eager were they to obtain information on this point, that they still continued to propound their queries long after we had shown that we were utterly unable to answer them. ... in the end they looked at us despairingly, as if we were the receptacles of invaluable information; but how to come at it they knew not. (*T* 75, see also 79)

Whereas Tommo and Toby are of little help in this regard, during one of his visits to the valley, Marnoo gives the Typees all the information he can about the French invaders:

he related circumstantially the aggressions of the French—their hostile visits to the surrounding bays, enumerating each in succession—Happar, Puerka, Nukuheva, Tior,—and then starting to his feet and precipitating himself forward with clenched hands and a countenance distorted with passion, he poured out a tide of invectives. Falling back into an attitude of lofty command, he exhorted the Typees to resist these encroachments; reminding them, with a fierce glance of exultation, that as yet the terror of their name had preserved them from attack, and with a scornful sneer he sketched in ironical terms the wondrous intrepidity of the French, who, with five war-canoes and hundreds of men, had not dared to assail the naked warriors of their valley. (*T* 137–38)

In other words, the Typees are perfectly aware that they are under threat from outside forces. This is significant because it indicates that even though the system Tommo enters and for a limited time becomes a part of may seem stable and unchanging to him, it should probably be understood as being in a state far from equilibrium. Crucial for Prigogine and Stengers' argument and for Serres' concept of the parasite, is the fact that in such a state even very small fluctuations may have enormous consequences. In other words, when put under a lot of pressure, systems have a point of no return from whence they can no longer revert to their initial states: "At some point we reach the threshold of stability of the

‘thermodynamic branch.’ Then we reach what is generally called a ‘bifurcation point’” (Prigogine and Stengers 160). Beyond this point the behavior of the system becomes random and impossible to predict in advance, and changes may lead to yet further changes, and temporary stable states will be followed by new bifurcations, and so on. While the Typeean system seems calm on the surface, due to the threat of invasion it might have reached exactly such a bifurcation point. At this critical point even the minor fluctuations caused by a hungry parasite looking for “plenty and repose,” yet unwilling to be incorporated into the social body, might lead to changes that could far outlive his presence, irreversibly and profoundly changing the state of the system.

This way of conceptualizing the situation on the island is useful because it helps address the changes Tommo sets in motion, all the while avoiding the moralism of some scholars. This tendency is clearly exemplified in Rita Gollin’s “The Forbidden Fruit of *Typee*” (1975). After touching upon many of same changes caused by Tommo as I have mentioned, she comes to the following conclusion:

Tommo did taste the fruit of the valley and found it sweet despite its decay; he had longed for the world of “cannibal banquets” and he entered it for a time. Implicitly conflating the image of the forbidden tree with the apples of Sodom, Melville suggests that appetites and expectations are never wholly gratified in this fallen world. And as the double image also suggests, Tommo is from the first a snake in the grass, a Satanic tempter in the garden; he is a polluter of the flawed paradise of *Typee*—the only kind of paradise to survive the fall. (Gollin 34)

The problem with this interpretation is that the narrative gives no indication that Tommo is evil or that he is interested in harming the Typees; quite the contrary, his love and respect for the natives seems sincere. Serres’ work in the wake of Prigogine and Stengers, on the other hand, illuminates how the small bifurcations inadvertently brought about by an insignificant parasite, guilty of nothing more than his desire for free meals, may lead to dramatic consequences.

However, here a difference between Serres, and Prigogine and Stengers becomes evident: When describing the randomness associated

with systems far from equilibrium, the latter two tend to present such instances in a positive light. This is because the new structures that result from this unexpected behavior form the basis of their argument that in conditions far from equilibrium, order is sometimes spontaneously born out of chaotic fluctuations—as they see it, nature can therefore be said to be “self-organizing” (176). Hence, Prigogine and Stengers end up stressing those cases where fluctuations cause systems to *successfully* reorganize at a higher level of complexity. This unfortunately coincides with a downplaying of the importance of those cases where systems far from equilibrium are set in motion, but prove *unable* to adapt, leading to their eventual dissolution. As most of Prigogine and Stengers’ concrete examples are either taken from heat conduction or from chemical reactions, such a failure might not seem particularly important. When they do address more complex organic systems, they do not seem to take this possibility and all its implications very seriously, for example stating that “*the same nonlinearities may produce an order out of the chaos of elementary processes and still, under different circumstances, be responsible for the destruction of this same order, eventually producing a new coherence beyond another bifurcation*” (Prigogine and Stengers 206; emphasis in the original), as if the destruction of a system was nothing but a step on the way toward the production of “new coherence.”

What is lost from view here is that whether or not a system manages to adapt, can be a matter of life and death. As opposed to this somewhat one-sided optimism, Serres is much clearer regarding the destructive potential of the parasite. Sometimes its actions may result in the death of a given host, or, in rare cases, even of an entire host species, but it might just as well irritate the system it enters into adapting, either by incorporating or by expelling the foreign body, in the process making it healthier, stronger and more complex. The latter is what happens with vaccinations, where an individual’s immune system is strengthened through a moderate infection of parasitic microorganisms:

In vaccination, poison can be a cure, and this logic with two entry points becomes a strategy, a care, a cure. The parasite gives the host the means to be safe from the parasite. ... The generous hosts are therefore stronger than the bodies without visits; generation increases resistance right in the middle of endemic

diseases. Thus parasitism contributes to the formation of adapted species from the point of view of evolution. At the same time it causes the disappearance, by terrifying epidemics, of unadapted species. (*Parasite* 193)<sup>134</sup>

From the narrative of *Typee*, alone, it is impossible to decide the ultimate consequences of hosting the hungry Tommo: a strengthening of the tribe's immune system, its destruction, or something in between.<sup>135</sup> In the end, what remains is only a combination of the parasitic guest's good intentions and troublesome nature.

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134 J. Hillis Miller makes a similar point: "Health for the parasite, food and the right environment, may be illness, even mortal illness, for the host. On the other hand, there are innumerable cases, in the proliferation of life forms, where the presence of a parasite is absolutely necessary to the health of its host" ("The Critic" 186).

135 Unfortunately, the fate of the real Typees was quite bleak, at least if Jack London can be trusted. In *The Cruize of the "Snark"* (1911), he describes his pilgrimage to the valley of his boyhood dreams, only to learn that exposure to Western civilization and its microparasitic foot-soldiers had taken a great toll on the local population: "the valley of Typee is the abode of some dozen wretched creatures, afflicted by leprosy, elephantiasis, and tuberculosis. ... Life has rotted away in this wonderful garden spot, where the climate is as delightful and healthy as any to be found in the world. Not alone were the Typeans physically magnificent; they were pure. Their air did not contain the bacilli and germs and microbes of disease that fill our air. And when the white men imported in their ships these various microorganisms of disease, the Typeans crumpled up and went down before them" (169). On the importance of parasitic microbes for the success of the Western colonial enterprise, see McNeill (*Plagues; The Human*), and De Landa.