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Surrealist Elements in Herman Melvilie's *Typee* and *Omoo*

Raihana Akter
Assistant Professor
Department of English Language and Literature
Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University
Trishal, Mymensingh, Bangladesh
E-mail: raihanaakter508@gmail.com

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Abstract

Certain passages in Herman Melville's Typee and Omoo are striking because they appear to be vigorously irrational in communication. Early critics have struggled to decipher these passages along with Lawrence (1923) for labeling them as unconscious communication of cultural neurosis. Later critics such as Witherington (1970) have challenged this interpretation by explaining scenes such as the author's "entry into the dread cannibals of Nukuheval" as an example of symbolism and allegory. Somewhere between these two interpretations is the position that at several points in his writings of Typee and Omoo, Melville tended deliberately towards a conscious deployment of surrealism. In fact, specific techniques and themes of these two early works yield to the considerable evidence that Melville was a forerunner of that literary movement that first coalesced in France in the 1920s.

Keywords: *Surrealism, allegory, symbolism, rationalism, black humor, rebirth-myth, psychic automatism, myth-maker.*

Herman Melville's first two novels have always startled the readers with the powerful absurdity of their communication. Siren-like, they have lured more than one literary critic upon the shoals of speculative improbability. Lawrence (1923) noted these striking passages in his Studies in Classic American Literature and styled them an unconscious communication of cultural neurosis:

> So in *Typee* when [Melville] tells of his entry into the valley of the dread cannibals of Nukuheval. Down this narrow, steep, horrible dark gorge he slides and struggles as we struggle in a dream … This is a bit of birth-myth, rebirth myth … unconscious, no doubt, because his running under consciousness was always mystical and symbolic. (198-199)

Witherington (1970) challenged this sort of reading by explaining the same scene from *Typee* as an instance of conscious symbolism and allegory. Somewhere between these two critical positions may lie another which maintains that Melville tended toward deliberate surrealism at several points in the writing of *Typee* and *Omoo*.

Melville shares certain thematic biases with later surrealists who emphasize the subversion of rationalism and conventional interpretations of the world. First there is the

theme of the governance of the world by chance. André Breton, the foremost spokesman of the French surrealist movement, postulated that reality conformed to a pattern brought about by chance which humans would never be able to discern. In the novel *Nadja*, Breton (1928) illustrated how a receptive sensitivity to chance would introduce one into the real world—"a world almost forbidden, which is that of things suddenly brought together, of petrifying coincidences, of each individual's own reflexes, harmonies pounded out as if on a piano, flashes that would make us see, really see..." (22). A striking incident is recounted at the beginning of *Omoo* which illustrates the irrational workings of the world and hints at the existence of just such an obscure pattern manipulated by chance. Having been rescued from the Typee valley, the narrator climbs abroad the "Julia" amidst the inquiring gazes of her crew:

> As an instance of the curious coincidences which befall the sailor, I must here mention, that two countenances before me were familiar. One was that of an old man of war's –man, whose acquaintance I had made in Rio de Janeiro… The other was a young man, I had frequently met in a sailor boarding-house in Liver-pool. . . And here we were again: -- years had rolled by … and we were thrown together under circumstances which almost made me doubt my own existence. (Melville, *Omoo,* 6)

A second notable treatment of chance in *Omoo* is manifested in the microcosmic symbolism of the Julia's voyage. The ship's erratic progress across the Pacific, conforming to the obscure design of the unpredictable chief mate, evokes a vivid image of man's chance-ridden course through time and the universe:

> Where we were, exactly, no one but the mate seemed to know…The captain—a mere cipher—was an invalid in his cabin, to say nothing more of so many of his men languishing in the forecastle.
>
> Our keeping the sea under these circumstances … now seemed wholly unwarranted, and added to all, was the thought that our fate was absolutely in the hand of the reckless Jermin. Were anything to happen to him, we would be left without a navigator, for, according to Jermin himself, he had, from the commencement of the voyage, always kept the ship's reckoning, the captain's nautical knowledge being insufficient. (47)

A second proto-surrealist theme developed by Melville in *Typee* and *Omoo* is the dissociation of intelligent activity from rationality. Breton found such a postulation absolutely essential in order to justify, theoretically the surrealist image and surreal 'black' humor. Concerning the creation of images Breton concluded in the first Manifesto of Surrealism (1924):

> We are. . . obliged to admit that the two terms of the image are not deduced one from the other by the mind for the specific purpose of producing the spark of irrational meaning, that they are the simultaneous products of the activity I call Surrealist, reason's role being limited to taking note of, and appreciating, the luminous phenomenon. (37)

J.H. Matthews' study confirms the importance of this dissociation for surrealist poetics:

> Breton starts out from this assumption: in the world that black humor makes its target, we should be wrong to suppose the existence of fundamental and natural agreement between intelligence and reason. Accordingly, intelligence takes on value when and where it ceases to operate in confirmation of reason's teachings. (Towards 91)

Among the many distinctions noted by Melville between civilized life and Typeean life, one of the most important is the foundation of the former upon rational intelligence and of the latter upon an irrational intelligence; herein lies the postulation of a dissociation between rationality and intelligent activity. The narrator of *Typee* is astonished to discover that native society is ordered as effectively as civilized Western societies, though lacking the particular repertory of conventional responses or anything like the body of laws which are so essential for staving off chaos in the latter societies. For example, respect for private property needn't be legislated in the Typee valley Melville portrays; that principle seems to have been intuited naturally and embraced wholeheartedly. One remarkable feature of this 'natural' intelligence is the dissociation of content and conventional form, as exampled by Marheyo's transformation of the narrator's old shoes into necklace ornaments:

> [My pumps] were so dilapidated as to be altogether unfit for use…But things unserviceable in one way, may with advantage be applied in another, that is, if one have genius enough for the purpose. This genius Marheyo possessed in a superlative degree. . . . (Melville, *Typee* 146)

A second remarkable feature of the Typee's intellectual life is the dominant influence of play as opposed to that of utility in the rational West:

> The minds of these simple savages … were capable of deriving the utmost delight from circumstances which would have passed unnoticed in more intelligent communities. All their enjoyment, indeed, seemed to be made up of the little trifling incidents of the passing hour; but these diminutive items swelled together to an amount of happiness seldom experienced by more enlightened individuals, whose pleasures are drawn from more elevated but rarer sources. (Melville, *Typee*, 144)

Dream, we may remember, was thought by Freud to be a purposeful, irrational mode of human intelligence reflective of infantile play instincts and characterized by the dissociation of conventional form and content. Inspired by Freud's findings, the French surrealists idealized the state of "psychic automatism" which is prefigured in so many aspects by the natural intelligence of Melville's *Typee*.

A third characteristically surrealist theme employed by Melville in his first two books is the close relationship between imaginative freedom and the 'latent content' of images and objects.

> In surrealist parlance, the distinction between latent and manifest content is all-important. The former is associated with imaginative freedom. On the other hand, the latter betokens the depressing consequences of a utilitarian principle diametrically opposed to the pleasure principle governing imaginative activity. (Matthews 1)

Expressed in somewhat different terms, manifest content is pinned down content, packaged for use in a rational scheme. Thus, the primary objection voiced by the French surrealists against their symbolist predecessors and peers was the fact that the symbolists' mind-boggling desire to activate all the symbolic meanings of an image or object constituted, nevertheless, a delimitation of that image's or object's expressive possibilities (Matthews 165). The Melvillean narrator's praise of latent content and its liberating effect upon his imagination can be found throughout *Typee* and *Omoo*. Typically, that effect is compared to dreaming, and its power is perceived to derive from both a lack of rational order or utilitarian value, and the felt presence of an irrational pattern. One of Typee's reflections upon approaching a nameless island of the Pomotu Group illustrates all four of these points:

> On we glided, within less than a cable's length of the shore, which was margined with foam that sparkled all round. Within, nestled the still, blue lagoon. No living thing was seen, and, for aught we knew, we might have been the first mortals who had ever beheld the spot. The thought was quickening to the fancy, nor could I help dreaming of the endless grottoes and galleries, far below the reach of the mariner's lead. (Melville, *Omoo* 64)

Two of the most significant repositories of latent content for Tommo/Typee are the sea and the Polynesian landscape; and both sources of reverie are praised particularly for their dream-like qualities: inexhaustible variety, resistance to rational order, serenity, and playful fluxion. Tommo's reaction to his first glimpse of the Typee valley is a striking example:

> But the crowning beauty of the prospect was its universal verdure…the peculiar charm of every Polynesian landscape. Everywhere below me. . . the surface o the vale presented a mass of foliage, spread with such rich profusion that it was impossible to determine of what description of trees it consisted.
> But perhaps there was nothing about the scenery I beheld more impressive than those silent cascades …, after leaping down the steep cliffs, were lost amidst the rich herbage of the valley. Over all the landscape there reigned the most hushed repose, which I almost feared to break lest like the enchanted gardens in the fairy tale, a single syllable might dissolve the spell. (Melville, *Typee 49*)

A fourth thematic similarity between surrealist art and Melville's first two novels is the exaltation of the pleasure principle and its enthronement in the play instincts of childhood. Breton explained that the primary aim of surrealism is to recapture the "actual functioning of thought" (Manifestoes, 26) – psychic automatism which takes the form of disinterested play, unbounded imagination. That authentic mode of thought plays a part in the grand pattern of chance, and may be characterized further by its polymorphous perversity, sensuousness, wholesomeness, intensity, and diversity of interest. In its pure form psychic automatism may be found only in the minds of children and soon becomes constricted by the culturally imposed "Laws of an arbitrary utility" (Breton, Manifestoes, 4). Likewise, Tommo observes:

> One peculiarity of Typee life that fixed my admiration was the perpetual hilarity reigning through the whole extent of the vale. There seemed to be no cares, griefs, troubles, or vexations, in all Typee. The hours tripped along as gaily as the laughing couples down a country dance. (Melville, *Typee* 126)

This playfulness together with the absence of sickness and "the luxurious provisions of nature" characterize a type of life which Tommo judges "infinitely happier" than that of Europeans (Melville, *Typee* 124). Tommo's description of the Typee's daily schedule in chapter 20 indicates the dominance of the pleasure principle as manifested in play and the gratification of bodily functions. In contradistinction, the sailors aboard the Julia often indulge in a parodic form of the pleasure principle. Although the "dreamy reverie" (Menville, *Omoo* 42) induced by pipe-smoking is a pleasure embraced by the Typees, most of the amusements and physical gratifications that characterize the lives of the sailors are destructive or anesthetic: their brutal practical jokes, for example, or their alcoholic excesses.

Typee and Omoo also contain several surrealist techniques, particularly the use of black humor, which continue to be thoroughly characteristic of Melville in his later works. Adverse to the pattern established by Rosenberry (1955), the humor found in Melville's first two works is not overwhelmingly "jocular-hedonic" in quality, but oftentimes 'black' in the sense discussed by Breton in his Anthologie de l'humour noir. Rosenberry (1955) confuses

his examination of *Typee* and *Omoo* by presenting what would seem to be contradictory assessments of the distinctive humor they contain:

> Melville's adventures before the mast in the 1840's were so fraught with crudity, privation, and danger that one's hair rises at the thought of the reality behind many of his casual and ludicrous descriptions ... … There is no dread, only a wry exhilaration, in his description of the nauseous Julia ... … Like the fantasy-makers of the West of whom Constance Rourke tells us, Melville had swung 'from an impinging terror to a gross and often brutal comedy.' (12)

The comic tone of the two Polynesian tales is, as Constance Rourke has described it, 'temperate and sweet,' giving them an idyllic temper [sic] found nowhere else in Melville, Typee is firmly famous for its tonic humor ... *Omoo* alone among his books floats raft-like above the undercurrent of outer problem and inner drama that tugs even at parts of *Typee*. It is his first and last unreflecting horselaugh at the sober world of respectability, responsibility, and authority. (46)

In addition, Rosenberry (1955) ignores the fact that most of the passages in *Typee* and *Omoo* which do display a "brutal comedy" also conspicuously imply the "impinging terror" that has evoked that comedy. A failure to note this special sort of humorous effect is a failure to recognize the diverse qualities and functions of narrative tone in Melville's work.

In the Anthologie de le'humour noir, Breton (1939) declared "black humor" to be the distinctive comic tool of surrealist artists. He reflected Freudian theories in his estimation of humor as a "process permitting us to brush aside reality in what is most painful about it," (20) and implied that the revolutionary humor of the surrealists was the only sort that recognized the essential nature of humor by exposing equally in the conscious mind the painful reality alongside the process of brushing aside that painful reality. Breton styled black humor "a higher revolt of the mind" (16) because it might be used as an instrument by surrealists for evoking a higher intelligence in their audience by "breaking down the barriers erected by rationality, convention, and educated response" (Matthews 91).

In black humor, intelligence conducts us through two stages of experience, first by casting doubt upon the stability of the real, then by affirming, or at least testifying to, the existence of something beyond the control of contingent reality (Matthews 96-97). Oftentimes black humor may recognize "the appropriateness of some juxtaposition effected by chance, or in acknowledging the validity of the rationally inappropriate nature of this same juxtaposition" (Matthews 94). Several examples of black humor in *Typee* may be cited: the callousness of Karky, the old Hawaiian chief who claimed to be "the living tomb of Captain Cook's big toe," the *Typee* doctor's assault upon Tommo's leg; and in Omoo: an old sailor's warning that the steward is sharpening his handsaw for the purpose of carving on Typee's "spar," the cockroach jubilee, the dead rat in the molasses tin, and the imminent shipwreck in the bay of Hannamanoo. In *Omoo,* the sense of the last example is striking:

> All at once we got into a strong current, which swept us rapidly toward a rocky promontory forming one side of the harbor…… The eddies were whirling upon all sides, and the rock so near, that it seemed as if one might leap upon it from the mast-head. Notwithstanding the speechless fright of the captain, and the hoarse shouts of the unappalled Jermin, the men handled the ropes as deliberately as possible, some of them chuckling at the prospect of going ashore and others so eager for the vessel to strike, that a countercurrent befriended us, and assisted by the boats we were soon out of danger. (27)

Rationality and educated response lead us to expect that the sailors aboard the Julia would be frightened at the prospect of shipwreck with the attendant risk of drowning. But that expectation is subverted by the hilarity of the men and their half- hearted attempts to save the vessel. Though some of them overlook the immediate danger and hope for a spree on the island of La Dominica, others are governed by the irrational desire merely to see the ship destroyed. In addition, the entire incident is initiated and concluded by chance, and the sailor's joyous insubordination is partly a celebration of that chance. In *Omoo*, the narrator himself comments upon the 'blackly' humorous quality of life on the Julia (and of life in general to the extent that the Julia represents a microcosm):

> The mirthfulness, which, at times, reigned among us, was in strange and shocking contrast with the situation of some of the invalids. Thus, at least, did it seem to me, thought not to others. (44)

Most of the sailors may indulge in humor in order to ignore the brutality and privation of their lives, but more sensitive men such as Typee perceive both the painful reality and incongruous mirth. The appropriateness of black humor as a response to the illusory rationality of life is developed further in the figure of Ropey. Ropey's miserable life abroad the Julia is governed by chance, absurd conventions, and the irrational whims of his tormentors:

> Like as not, if the mate sends him after his quadrant, on the way he is met by the captain, who orders him to pick some oakum; and while he is hunting up a bit of rope, a sailor comes along and wants to know what the deuse he's after, and bids him be off to the forecastle.
> "Obey the last order," is a precept inviolable at sea. So the land-lubber, afraid to refuse to do anything, rushes about distracted, and does nothing: in the end receiving a shower of kicks and cuffs from all quarters. (Melville, Omoo 53)
> Forbidden to speak his mind or to joke at his tormentors' expense, Ropey nevertheless must receive the witticisms directed toward his person and his plight "in the greatest good –humor" (Melville, *Omoo* 53); in other words, he must celebrate, at least superficially, the irrationality and chance that rule his life.

Another subversive technique used by Melville is the use of images for their own intrinsic appeal, not for their contribution to any rational scheme, even a symbolic one. This technique is central to the art of most surrealist poets, novelists, and film makers:

> ... Bunuel has shown time and again that the presence of [distributing visual] effects [in his films] owes much more to the intrinsic appeal of the image itself than to its interpretable nature. . . . For just like Artaud, he recognizes that the value of the image exceeds its possible symbolic signification. Speaking on the subject of "Sorcery and Cinema," Artaud once wrote," The smallest detail and the most insignificant object take on a meaning and a life that belong to them alone. And this is so, outside the significative value of the images themselves, outside the thought they translate, the symbol they constitute." (Matthews 165-66)

In surrealist art, an image is allowed to signal its meaning, not forced to symbolize a single meaning or a limited set of meanings. One of the most famous sections of *Typee*—namely, Tommo's and Toby's perilous journey through the jungle into the Typee valley—contains descriptions of actions and objects which signal to us with an irrationality – understood meaning and validity. Witherington (1970) is a worthy representative of those critics who choose to recognize only the symbolic aspects of Melville's proto-surrealist signs as he upholds that *Typee* often seems to be "a portrait of the artist and of his dilemma, an

objectification of artistic theory," approximating an allegory of the search for artistic form (Witherington 139). Concerning Tommo's descent through the jungle, Witherington (1970) remarks:

> dark, wet, jagged passage through the ravine early in Chapter IX, for example, has a strong flavour of myth. In the same Spirit, he speaks of the "venomous reptile" which is the "congenial inhabitant of the chasm" (48). His later statement that "there are no venomous reptiles and no snakes of any description to be found in any of the valleys" (212) is not a contradiction of the earlier statement but a signal that the mythic mode is being freely used and dropped. (142)

In the passages cited by Witherington (1970), Melville is embroidering his narrative with dream-like imagery certainly, but it would be extravagant to posit the significant manifestation of a mythic mode. Chapters 7-9 of *Typee* are abound with dream imagery, unexplained occurrences, and landscapes of "strange picturesqeness" (Melville, *Typee* 64). For example, consider the scene of Tommo's first night on *Typee*:

> The sight that now greeted us was one that will ever be vividly impressed upon my mind. Five foaming streams, rushing through as many gorges, and swelled and turbid by the recent rains, united together in one mad plunge of nearly eighty feet, and fell with wild uproar into a deep black pool scooped out of the gloomy-looking rocks that lay piled around, and thence in one collected body dashed down a narrow sloping channel which seemed to penetrate into the very bowels of the earth. Overhead, vast roots of trees hung down from the sides of the ravine dripping with moisture, and trembling with the concussions produced by the fall. It was now sunset and the feeble uncertain light that found its way into these caverns and woody depths heightened their strange appearance, and reminded us that in a short time we should find ourselves in utter darkness. (Melville, *Typee* 45)

Confronted with images and actions which signal powerfully and irrationally yet do not seem to fit a particular symbolic scheme, critics like Witherington tend to question Melville's artistic control:

> Phase 2's [Chapters 7-9] major flaw is the separation of thought from action, idea from form. Consider the narrator's strange leg ailment which is introduced here. We find later that the "wounded" leg relates to mental distress, for its condition is aggravated in times of stress. But in the mountains the symbolism does not work for Melville, for the leg pains most naturally are worst when the man is in motion, that is, when he thinks least. . . .Also, the imagery of a quest and descent into Hell which occasionally spices this section is somewhat at odds with the actual learning experience of the narrator who is still operating on a physical plane of awareness... (142-143)

Thus, Melville the symbolist and Melville the myth-maker are straw men to be pulled down by the very critics who father them.

A more consistent explanation for the dream –like images and actions found in *Typee* and *Omoo* is to consider them proto- surrealist signs which communicate their own intrinsic meaning. If the dream-world they plumb is the repository of archetypes or culture- specific symbols, then part of their irrational appeal may be due to archetypal or symbolic overtones. But tailoring these signs to fit a symbolic or mythic pattern leads to an allegory of Melville's work which is either bewilderingly esoteric or blandly simplistic; it appears likely that the dream-like images and incidents in *Typee* and *Omoo* are all based on Melville's actual experiences in the South Seas; that the author allowed his mind to play freely upon these

remembered experiences in a manner approximating psychic automatism; and that he recorded these fantastic embellishments because of their irrational power, without the least notion of stringing them together into a consistent , rational scheme. We may assume that Melville worked in this way when he later transformed a scene from Nathaniel Ames' A Mariner's Sketches into that of white-jacket's fall from the yard-arm of the Neversink.

The recognition of a surrealist element in *Typee* and *Omoo* aids an appreciation of Melville's artistry in several ways. We may note without surprise that the characteristically surrealist themes and techniques found in early novels are all interdependent within the mode they generate. Thus, the role of chance has to do with the ontological bias of that mode, the dissociation of rationality from intelligent activity with the epistemological bias, "Latent content" with the aesthetic bias, and the pleasure principle with the ethical bias. Signaling images are a valid aesthetic creation within this mode, while black humor points up ontological of irrational play. In addition, Melville's intellectual and stylistics development may be traced with greater assurance when the significance of surrealist elements are taken into account; for example, the concept of fate in Moby Dick becomes a bit clearer if it is related to Melville's early concern with chance. Finally, the competitive strength of the surrealist mode may discourage the temptation to pigeonhole Melville as a symbolist, an allegorist, or a myth-maker, thus forcing us to appreciate the fact that the multiple modality is a central feature of Melville's literary art.

> [F] or the sum o my inconsistencies make up my consistency. And to be consistent to one's self is often to be inconsistent to Mardi. (Melville, *Madri* 459)

The surrealist elements in *Typee* and *Omoo* are proof that Melville had too much respect for the authentic functioning of his own mind to pretend a merely decorous consistency.

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