

FEATURES OF THE QUEST IN OMOO

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"*Omo* is a fascinating book: picaresque, rascally, roving. Melville as a bit of a beachcomber (. . .) Perhaps Melville is at his best, his happiest, in *Omo*¹. This is D. H. Lawrence's opinion about *Omo*, and practically all major critics agree with it. The present paper intends to explore the undercurrent of disappointment and melancholy that permeates the whole book.

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If there was anything Melville and Thoreau had in common, that was a desire for isolation. Living in a higher or lower degree of seclusion, usually in places of great natural beauty, unspoilt by modern civilization, the two hoped to lead not only a more comfortable life - without the stress and compromises required by life in a modern society - but also a fuller, a more meaningful one, in agreement with the higher laws of Nature and God. There is, however, a significant difference: Thoreau preferred to live in the nearby woods (Walden Pond was within walking distance from his mother's place), so that he could drop by, now and then, meet people, listen to the gossip and small talk and then return to his secluded cabin where he also received visitors; Melville, on the other hand, chose for himself a more radical solution: going out to sea and "jumping ship" on exotic, uncivilized islands, thus breaking most of the bridges between himself and the Western civilization held responsible for the lack of accomplishment in his life. Contemplating both ways of escaping the evils of a world gone chaotic, Melville is fully conscious of the implications of the latter; nowhere does he express this awareness in a more vivid way than in the following excerpt from *Israel Potter*:

A hermitage in the forest is the refuge of the narrow-minded misanthrope; a hammock on the ocean is the asylum for the generous

distressed. The ocean brims with natural griefs and tragedies; and into that watery immensity of terror, man's private grief is lost like a drop.²

Melville's first three novels, *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Alardi* begin with the hero already 'at sea' *Redburn* is the first to present the reasons for departure:

Sad disappointments in several plans which I had sketched for my future life; the necessity of doing something for myself, united to a natural roving disposition, had now conspired within me to send me to sea as a sailor.³

The "sad disappointments in several plans" actually refer to all levels of integration into anything larger than the individual being: family, local community, American society at large, religious community or dogma. To put it differently, the Melvillean hero is, in most cases, utterly unable to attach his individual existence to any higher project. The initial search for perfect integration gradually becomes a quest that Melville develops in every one of his novels.. The Melvillean hero is frank enough to admit that the causes of his failure are not external; if there is any "conspiracy" set against him then it is an internal one. However, he cannot help indulging the fancy that a change in the external environment may bring about the long expected accomplishment finally coming his way. And, feeling the "necessity of doing something" for himself he embarks upon a long voyage.

Once at sea, the Melvillean hero discovers that a ship is a microcosm reproducing, more or less faithfully, the one at home. The crippling authority of the State and Dogma has only been replaced by the more or less arbitrary authority of the captain. Tommo's "jumping ship" in *Typee* could be taken for an accident if it were not reiterated in *Omoo* and *Mardi*. This succession of desertions suggests a pattern of refusal of an order that the hero cannot understand and which, therefore, does not appeal to him.

The third stage of the quest engendered by this refusal (after leaving home and the ship) is life in an entirely different environment: in *Typee* it is the valley of the Polynesian tribe of the Typees, in *Omoo* - Tahiti, and in *Mardi* an imaginary archipelago. The outcome, in all cases, is not surprising: after a

short period of admiring observation of native customs - with consistent portions of the Noble Savage eulogy - Tommo feels the entire terror of the wildest of nightmares: the danger of the loss of identity and arrested development. Although the Typees live in perfect harmony with Nature, theirs is a biological existence; cultural being, Tommo is accustomed to the vivid dialogue specific to living cultures (i.e. the Western culture); there is nothing of the kind in the Typee world. There are certain rituals, but they represent mere mechanical reiterations of inherited practices (no one ever doubts their usefulness and propriety) and the natives themselves do not bother to take them very seriously. There is no faith (idols are reprimanded and their statues knocked down in certain circumstances) and chiefs have little authority in times of peace. Without any interference of a superior authority, the individual seems to have all the conditions necessary to flourish and prosper. But this is hardly the case, At least as far as Tommo and his friend Toby are concerned. In order to get out of his newly found haven, Tommo is ready to kill. This is what actually happens when Mow-Mow, an athletic native, tries to prevent Tommo's flight.

Omoo begins with Tommo reaching the *Julia* and signing in. It takes him nearly three months to recover from his miserable psychic condition (symbolized in the narrative by a mysterious physical lameness). One might therefore expect him to scrupulously avoid any encounter with a similar situation. One might even expect him to reconsider such attitudes towards ship captains and their authority as the one displayed in *Typee's* Chapter 4:

Our ship had not been many days in the harbor of Nukuheva before I came to the determination of leaving her. That my reasons for resolving to take this step were numerous and weighty, may be inferred from the fact that I chose rather to risk my fortunes among the savages of the island than to endure another voyage on board the *Dolly*. To use the concise, point-blank phrase of the sailors, I had made up my mind to "run away."⁴

What actually happens in *Omoo* is the opposite. For much the same "numerous and weighty" reasons as above, Tommo-*Omoo* decides to stand against the will of Captain Guy and his trusted first mate, Jermin:

Still, so much did I sympathize with the men, so far, at least, as their real grievances were concerned; and so convinced was I of the cruelty and injustice of what Captain Guy' seemed bent upon, that if need were, I stood ready to raise a hand.⁵

And need there was. Omoo raised a hind although he knew he was heading towards a situation similar to the one encountered in the Typee valley. There is, however, a difference between Tommo's situation in *Typee* and the one in *Omoo*: if in both cases he deals with natives, those of *Typee* are virtually unaffected by Western civilization whereas the *Omoo* ones have been under a long and all-encompassing European influence (some of them, like hospitable Ereemear of Partoowye, are Christianized, all natives being under the censorship of European institutions). This difference can be seen in Omoo's attitude: although he is disappointed with the natives in both cases, in the Typee valley he is horrified, desperately trying to leave the area, whereas in Tahiti he never shows more than a mild disappointment

Omoo begins in a bright, optimistic tone: Tommo joins the *Julia* "in the middle of a bright tropical afternoon", and soon after feels as if in a dream, the circumstances almost making him doubt his own existence. But he has not learned his lesson: paradoxically, Tommo-Omoo, forgetting the danger of losing his life, and the greater one of losing his identity, longs for his lost cannibal friends:

But how far short of our expectations is oftentimes the fulfillment of the most ardent hopes. Safe aboard of a ship - so long my earnest prayer - with home and friends once more in prospect, I nevertheless felt weighed down by a melancholy that could not be shaken off. It was the thought of never more seeing those, who, notwithstanding their desire to hold me a captive, had, upon the whole, treated me so kindly. I was leaving them forever⁶

But they cannot be lost forever as long as the magic of desire brings them back to mind; soon enough, Tommo will once more seek the company of South Seas natives.

The atmosphere remains serene even when the mutineers of the *Julia* are put in jail. The "Calabooza Beretanee" is built in "a beautifully spot", the local constabulary is a sympathetic, easy-going fellow and the sailors seem to enjoy all the benefits of parole. Moreover, they know that immediately after the departure of the *Juha*, all charges against them will be dropped and they will enjoy the limitless freedom they have always longed for.

Everything comes out as expected and the sailors fully enjoy the benefits of life on the South Seas islands: perpetual summer, abundance of fruits, friendship and hospitality of the natives, the lack of any stress, of~ obligation except for the natural, for the instinctual; it is a feast of the senses where the sailors, having nothing to do, regale their "senses most delightfully"⁷

Nicholas Canaday Jr. points out one more feature of Polynesian life, even more compelling than the above: the "attractiveness of Polynesia was based in large part upon the superfluous nature of the authority exercised there by church and state."⁸ Indeed, without a real authority of the chiefs (at least in times of peace), with a superficial and formal - although obstinate - censorship of the Christian churches, the islanders (and other residents) seem to enjoy all the opportunities of a limitless development of their individual natures.

Very soon, however, Omoo comes to realize the price the natives must pay for the privilege of living under such generous circumstances: forgetfulness. Quite naturally, there is no place for Time in any Paradise. Starting from an anachronism - the pretence of the natives to have met Captain Cook - Omoo realizes that the islanders care little about either the past or the future. They live in an eternal present: "days and years are all the same to them".⁹ Without History, they literally envisage no future. All they can hope for is the preservation of a mode of life which is centered on the body and the senses, with little - if any - inner life. "The Tahitians can hardly ever be said to reflect: they are all impulse", Melville's narrator assures the reader

Telling is also the fate of those Europeans who made Tahiti their home. As Steven Kemper shows, "the Europeans who have settled on the islands and "gone native," like Lem Hardy or the man on Roorootoo or Old Mother Tot, have become defamed in some way - by tattoos, elephantiasis, alcoholism."¹⁰ Their cases, especially the one of the man at Roorootoo remind the mysterious pain in the leg Tommo had while in the Typee valley, pain that could only be alleviated once he had left the Marquesas.

Bearing in mind all of the above, Omoo feels an ever-stronger desire to leave the island.

It is important to note that not only Tommo-Omoo is unhappy with his newly found Eden; all the other sailors of the *Julia* intend to leave Tahiti as soon as possible. Caucasians, in general, assume the same position. There are few exceptions to the rule, among which Lem Hardy, the renegade whom the sailors never envy in spite of Lem's colossal local power.

The reason that prompts Tommo-Omoo - and his fellow-sailors - to sign in as quickly as possible is their frustrated expectations: instead of an easy, natural integration into a world that should offer, at the same time, more freedom and more sense, the sailors feel trapped into a series of events whose absurdity makes obvious their total lack of perspectives. Little by little, Melville uncovers the geography of an unsuspected feeling: disappointment, and of its painful architecture.

Let us examine these events in the order of their occurrence in the novel.

Soon after the departure of the *Julia* all the sailors take unto themselves "tayos", that is close, one might say intimate friends, from among the natives. Koobo, Omoo's "tayo", proves to be - in spite of his physical beauty and of his professed love - "one of those who make no music unless the clapper be silver"¹¹; in other words, he behaves like a friend only as long as Omoo has some assets to share with him (shirts, trousers, knives, etc). Once those assets given away, the feelings subside and, shortly after the ungrateful Kooloo serenely confesses that he has fallen in love with someone else (who happens to be the owner of a number of exciting European articles). It seems that Kooloo's ingratitude has reached its peak but no, he manages to outdo

himself he refuses even to greet his former friend when they meet on the Broom Road.

The narrator remembers Vancouver reporting that

there "(.) is a quality inherent in Polynesians; and more akin to hypocrisy than anything else. It leads them to assume the most passionate interest, in matters for which they feel little or none whatever"¹².

As time goes by, the character of the natives reveals itself more and more plainly to the sailors. Another revelation is that of the all-encompassing laziness of the islanders. In spite of excellent soil and weather conditions, both the large-scale cultivation of cotton and that of sugar-cane have failed due to the natives' unwillingness to do anything that resembles work for a longer period of time. Businesses there are in Tahiti but they are all owned, operated and used by whites, no native being employed there. The following fragment faithfully renders Omoo's feelings about the islanders:

Secluded, in a great measure, from the ministrations of the missionaries, they gave themselves up to all manner of lazy wickedness. Strolling among the trees of a morning, came upon them napping on the shady side of a canoe hauled up among the bushes; lying under a tree smoking; or, more frequently still, gambling with pebbles; (...) Upon the whole, they were a merry, indigent, godless race¹³.

Soon the sailors learn that another vice is spread all over the island: the natives gladly steal sweet potatoes and yams from the few whites there. One day, Long Ghost's boots are lost in something that very much resembles them. To their surprise, Omoo and the doctor learn that there are no thieves in Martair. The paradox has a simple explanation: the natives are bribed to be honest! In exchange for a certain quantity of potatoes they agree to cancel their predatory expeditions.

To make things worse, the islanders begin to tire of *Julia's* sailors; the former no longer bring food on a regular basis. Just like the natives, all the white

sailors steal foodstuff, in a quite jovial and natural way, both from the ships in the harbor and from the islanders ("kidnapping pigs"). Then they organize picnics in the moonlight where they tell one another their "adventures".

The general sense of waste and misuse is emphasized by events such as the Arheetoo episode. The latter, learning that Tommo was a "mickonaree," here meaning "someone able to read and cunning in the use of pen," asked the white sailor to forge a set of papers, false evidence of previous employment with western ships. Thus, Arheetoo could more easily find a job on the crowded market of those "who board the shipping for their washing."

Scenes of decay complete the picture. The huge Royal Mission Chapel, a sort of South Sea cathedral, is now a ruin, as if to prove that in Polynesia tings spiritual can only survive under moderate dimensions. The colossal and impressive can only belong to the biological, to the physical realm, to the all-conquering power of the tropical jungle.

A block of European houses, built by an enterprising Yankee for the natives, is also a ruin' suggesting the failure of Western civilization in the area.

All the attempts of Europeans to build durable objectives fail; the Omoo world is one of extreme perisability and uselessness of any human effort.

The motif that best characterizes the state of things on the island is the one we find in a song belonging to the heathen priest Teearmoar and often sung by aged Tahitians:

The palm-tree will grow
The coral will spread
But man shall cease.¹⁴

Another source of vexation comes from several instances of rejection, especially the impossibility of talking to Queen Pomaree; once a right of any newcomer, the royal interviews are twice refused to Omoo and his long friend The second time, strict orders are issued forbidding the access of strangers on the royal premises. Thus, the fancy of finding a position with the royal court is finally abandoned and Omoo joins the crew of the *Leviathan*.

He could not have stayed in Tahiti for good. As Newton Arvin shows, he had

...to resume the burden he had temporarily laid down - the burden of consciousness, of the full and anguished consciousness of modern man. He had taken a long plunge into the realm of the preconscious and the instinctual, the realm of heedless impulse and irreflective drift; he had been refreshed, indeed remade, by it; but he had found there no ultimate resolution of his difficulties. Not in avoiding the clash between consciousness and the unconscious, between mind and emotion, between anxious doubt and confident belief, but in confronting these antinomies head-on and, hopefully; transcending them - in that direction, as Melville intuitively saw, lay his right future as an adult person¹⁵

In *Typee*, Melville explored life in an isolated South Pacific community and found it unbearable. In *Omoo*, he tried to reach a compromise, to place himself at the border; in the "no man's land" at the contact point between two civilizations. Little by little, in spite of the merry and hospitable character of the natives, life on the islands appears to contradict most of the things Melville considers as supreme values: ideal love, ideal friendship, real communication conscious becoming. Perhaps nothing expresses better the relationship between the two worlds, the Western one and that of Polynesian islands than one of Queen Pomaree Vahinee's occupations: a symbol of her nation, "she went into the laundry business, publicly soliciting, by her agents, the washing of the linen belonging to the officers of the ships touching in her harbors".¹⁶

Realizing his total lack of perspectives, Melville abandons the South Seas for good; they will never again be the setting of his novels - with the exception of *Mardi* where events unfold in an imaginary archipelago whose islands stand for as many European and American countries.

Abandoning Polynesia, Melville also abandons the picaresque narrative. His will be, from now on, the great themes of *Moby Dick*, *Pierre* or *Billy Budd*: the relationship between two human beings, the relationship between man and God, the nature of Good and Evil. As Melville puts it at the very end of *Omoo*, "all before us was the wide Pacific"¹⁷: indeed, the voyage

at sea - which in the history of religions stands for the spiritual quest - is all before him. This time, however, it will deal with the uncharted territories and profound depths of the human mind, much more difficult to explore than any Pacific region.

Notes:

¹ Lawrence, D. H. "Herman Melville's *Typee and Omoo*"; in W. Claise (eds.), *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962, p. 18.

² Melville, Herman *Israel Potter*. New York: Vilang Press, 1982, p.437.

³ Melville, Herman, *Redburn*. New York: Vilang Press, 1982, p.1.

⁴ Idem, *Typee*. New York: Vilang Press, 1982, p. 30.

⁵ Idem, *Omoo*. New York: Vilang Press, 1982, p.401.

⁶ id., p. 331.

⁷ Ibid., p. 448.

⁸ Canaday, N. *Melville and Anihority*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988, p.4.

⁹ Melville, Herman *Omoo* New York Vilang Press, 1982, p. 44⁷.

¹⁰ Kemper, H., "Omoo: Genuine Melville" *Studies in the Novel* vol.10, Winter 1978, 110.4, p.425.

¹¹ Melville, Herman *Omoo* New York Vilang Press, 1982, p.483.

¹² Ibid., p.500.

¹³ Ibid., p. 530.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 519.

¹⁵ Arvin, N. *Herman Melville. A Critical Biography*, New York Vilang Press, 1964, p.530.

¹⁶ Melville, H. *Omoo*. New York Vilang Press, 1982, p.636~ mid., p.646.
