

Westerners and the South Pacific dream

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Since the days when, from the Mexican coast, Vasco Núñez de Balboa first discovered, and in the name of the King of Spain took possession of the Pacific Sea (1513), it had remained almost unexplored. Though by the end of the 18th century, Bougainville could name not less than 16 predecessors¹⁾, crossing the Pacific Ocean was still a bold venture. Maps were scanty, fragmentary and inaccurate, methods for measuring longitudes imprecise; scurvy was as great a challenge to captains as storms, but access to islands was difficult and few could provide suitable ports of call, with a deep bay, fresh water and fresh food supplies; not only for these reasons, but also for lack of real political and economical purposes, was the Pacific Ocean to remain largely unknown. Progress in shipbuilding and sailing techniques as well as debates among scientists about the existence of a southern continent and the rising rivalry between France and England for maritime supremacy, caused the situation to change during the 18th century. Expeditions were launched. Thus did the Pacific Ocean gradually become part of the known world²⁾.

More than a historical event, the discovery of Polynesian (though the word only appears in French in 1842) natives can be said to have been a main philosophical issue in the history of the European culture. Occurring at a time when Europeans were questioning their own values, and the very idea of Civilisation, it was to play a decisive part in the debate. This study, which had to be confined both to a specific area (French Polynesia), to a limited span of time (1771 - 1857) and to a few representative writers, only aims at tracing the birth and developments of a myth which has long pervaded French,

English, and American literatures, even throughout the colonial period, and has acted, up to the present, as an antidote to evils brought about by Western Civilisation.

CYTHÈRE

Universally considered the founder of the Polynesian myth, Louis - Antoine de Bougainville only made a nine days stay (4 - 13 april 1768) in Tahiti (spelled by him Taiti), which is very short considering that the voyage from and back to France lasted almost 3 years. Yet, in his *Voyage autour du monde* published in may 1771, not less than 50 pages (in a total amount of 380) are devoted to this short call. Moreover, this account gained such publicity among the public, that later journals (among which Banks and Solander's for instance) were considered to be nothing more than "additions" to Bougainville's logbook³⁾. Scientists may have given more attention to Cook's more informed and detailed account (indeed, Cook's voyage was a scientific expedition in the modern sense of the word), and read Bougainville with feelings of suspicion. But the book fulfilled the public's expectations in many ways and was therefore a success.

As well as a man of experience, Bougainville was a scholar well read in Latin Literature, and an "honnête homme", open-minded, unprejudiced, and abiding by reason. The book, written in concise, clear, elegant style, was easy to read. It was moreover fraught with classical allusions which made things sound more familiar, and contained a few episodes which, though told with both a touch of humour and the utmost discretion, fitted in with his contemporaries' relish for licentious tales. Commerson, the well-known botanist who had taken part in the expedition, had just, on his return to France, published an enthusiastic description of Tahiti, which he called "la nouvelle Cythère"³⁾, from the name

of an island dedicated to Venus in the Aegean sea. Bougainville's account confirmed Commerson's. In the very first lines, he tells how a young woman climbed on board, and having dropped her clothes, appeared before the crew

“telle que Vénus se fit voir au berger phrygien. Elle en avait la forme céleste.”⁵⁾

(as Venus revealed herself to the Phrygian shepherd.
She had the same heavenly appearance)

This alone would have been enough to stir the imagination of readers; but there were other episodes such as the story of the cook, or the story of Baré, a girl who had embarked on the ship in man's disguise, and whose sex had remained undisclosed until the Tahiti natives found her out; there were as well descriptions and comments on “Tahitian hospitality” which induced people to dream of Tahiti as of an island of love and pleasure.

One word, one metaphor, one episode may be enough for a legend to be born. Yet, Bougainville's journal refers to other myths as well: Eden, of course. Tahiti is a place of amazing beauty, plentiful, unspoiled; its climate is healthy; its inhabitants live naked without shame; they do not know the curse of labour. Eden without a snake, and before Sin. To the days of Gauguin, and even after to the days of Somerset Maugham, the myth of Eden will always be associated with Tahiti, particularly in Anglo-Saxon literature. To French people of the Enlightenment, less puritanical, or perhaps less burdened with a biblical background, this image, though powerful enough, is far from being the only mythical reference.

Bougainville's description of the natives' way of life rather suggests some kind of primitive communism, and reminds the reader of Rousseau's

Discourse on the origin of Inequality among men (1775) :

“Qu'ils soient chez eux ou non, jour ou nuit, les maisons sont ouvertes. Chacun cueille les fruits sur le premier arbre qu'il rencontre, en prend dans la maison où il entre. Il paraîtrait que pour les choses absolument nécessaires à la vie, il n'y a point de propriété et que tout est à tous.”⁶⁾

(Whether they are at home or not, houses are open day and night. They all take fruit from the first tree they find, or from any house they go into. It looks as though, as regards the necessities of life, there should be no right of ownership, and that everything should belong to all.)

Bougainville himself was not a follower of Rousseau, which may account for his prudence in trying to interpret things on which he had little information. He was also well aware that, easy as it may be to describe the outward aspects of a different culture, the understanding of its inner aspects (social organization, religious and moral beliefs, etc) requires a good command of its language. When Parisians ironically pitied Aotourou⁷⁾, the native Bougainville had taken to France, for not being able to speak French after two years, Bougainville would reply that learning French may be an easy thing for any European who knows already the notions that form the basis of culture, and consequently just has to translate words, but that it is altogether different with someone who cannot even grasp such basic notions. The same could have been said about Bougainville himself: all he could do was describe and interpret Polynesian life with his own words, which were sometimes far from being adequate (thus the word “polygamy” used to account for sexual relationships). He didn't

even know basic key-words to Polynesian societies such as Taboo⁹. He was therefore bound to misunderstand many aspects of Polynesian life. Thanks to repeated conversations with Aotourou, he gradually began to understand that Tahiti may not have been the idyllic place he had imagined, that it was often at war, that they had a rather rigid cast system, with a privileged aristocracy on one hand and slaves on the other, that there were all sorts of prohibitions, etc. And as he was modest and respectful of the truth, he was not afraid of confessing his errors in his journal.

The public did not have the same scruples. Whatever Bougainville could write, the myth was already on his way. It conveyed longings for the lost paradise of the Bible, hopes for a more equal society, and dreams of sexual liberty. It had been given publicity by Diderot's *Addition to Bougainville's voyage*, which used the journal as a pretext to discuss such topics as freedom and sexual morals, and which, published in series from September 1773 to April 1774 in Grimm's *Correspondence*, had become widely known in all parts of Europe. A few years later, the breaking out of the French Revolution was to add new meanings to the myth.

GOOD SAVAGES OR CANNIBALS ?

In 1857, Eugene Sue's *Relation veritable des voyages de Claude Belissan*, a short humorous philosophical tale in Voltaire's fashion, tells how Claude Belissan, a Paris clerk, having been splashed all over with mud by a lord's carriage, and discovered on the same rainy day that his mistress was betraying him with a servant of the same Lord, embarks on a ship to any place where there should be neither lords, Danish horses, messengers, nor fickle girls. On hearing that the ship

is bound to call at Tahiti, he cries out enthusiastically :

“Vous relâcherez à Otahity, la nouvelle découverte de Bougainville, la Cythère du nouveau monde ! Là, pas de coureurs, de marquis, de chevaux danois ; là une existence douce et pure comme l'eau de ses ruisseaux ; là du soleil, là des fleurs, là des arbres pour tous, là une nature primitive et bonne, là pas de différences sociales ; là des frères, là des soeurs. A Otahity, monsieur le capitaine ! A Otahity ! ...J'abjure mon titre d'Européen : dégénéré, abruti par la civilisation, je reviens à mon état de nature, dont je suis fier. J'étais descendu homme, je remonte sauvage ! ”⁹⁾

(You will call at Otahity, that new discovery of Bougainville, that Cythère of the new world ! There, no messengers, no marquesses, no Danish horses ; there, is life pure and peaceful as the water of rivulets ; there, sunshine, flowers, trees for all ; there, is nature primitive and good ; there, no social differences, there, brothers and sisters. To Otahity, Captain ! To Otahity ! ...I renounce my position as a European : degenerated, turned into a brute by civilization as I was, I will go back to my natural state, and be proud of it.

I had degenerated into a man, I will evolve into a savage !)

1789, the date ascribed to the setting of the story is by no means irrelevant. By the time the French Revolution broke out, the Tahitian myth had changed deeply. In the *Relation véritable des voyages de Claude Belissan*, Tahiti still retains its edenic charm, but all touches of eroticism have been blotted out of the picture. This is no longer the isle of love and pleasure where men and women give way to erotic instinct ; it is a brotherhood ruled by the principle of natural equality. A

disciple of Rousseau (at least as so many people understood, or rather misunderstood his writings), Claude Belissan contemplates the vision of an ideal society, and Tahiti happens to be the only place in the world where the dream of this new society based on natural rights has already become true. At least in Claude Belissan's mind. For the tale is a cynical debunking of this naive political Utopia. As soon as he lands on the shore of Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, Claude Belissan takes off all his polluted clothes in order to become again a son of Nature. Yet who should come along the beach but a savage in an officer's uniform, with the Cross of Saint Louis through his pierced nose, and holding a gun! Needless to say what fate awaited unfortunate Claude Belissan, whose ears, being the most delicious part of the body, were respectfully offered to Chief Toa-Ka-Magarow...

Cannibalism was a fact¹⁰. Cook had once witnessed this practice in Tahiti, unaware that such would be his own fate, years later in Hawaii. However, why the delightful image of Eden had to be destroyed, and replaced at that stage by this barbarous tale is a puzzling question. An hypothesis may be put forward concerning a possible connection between this new stage of the myth and recent developments in the course of History. In the middle of the 19th century, Western Powers definitely lay their hands on, and divide the South Pacific archipelagos between themselves¹¹. The building of Empires is just beginning, and needs some kind of moral justification. Describing natives no longer as "good savages" but as "barbarous cannibals" could just serve the purpose, and help colonial powers bring them the "benefits of civilisation" with a better conscience. In the same way, missionaries needed to blacken the picture, and insist on "heathenish" practices like sexual freedom, cannibalism or infanticide. This aspect of the problem does not appear in the *Relation véritable des voyages de Claude Belissan*, but *Typee*, another story of the same period sheds on it a crude light.

TYPEE AS ETHNOFICTION

First published in London, then in the United States in 1846, *Typee* met with immediate success and was to exert a great influence on later Anglo-Saxon writers (among whom Stevenson and Conrad). It was a new type of book: partly an autobiographical story based on Melville's own adventures in Nuku Hiva, and his 3 weeks stay with the Happers and the Typees; partly a fiction; but for the greater part a reportage¹²⁾, a philosophical essay, a polemical pamphlet, a scholarly investigation enlarged with extensive readings, it can best be summed up by the word Pr Barry Menikoff applied to Stevenson's works: "ethnofiction". Though *Typee* deserves better than a few hasty comments, it must be mentioned, however briefly, at this stage. In 1939, Anderson, a leading Melville scholar, could declare: "The survival value or Melville's reputation lies in the fact that he was the literary discoverer of the South Seas."¹³⁾

Yet *Typee* is not just a work of imaginative literature introducing new themes and a new setting: it is fiction based on what Melville later called "a skeleton of actual reality". Not only does this extraordinary blending of factual and fictitious elements give the book an unprecedented convincing power: the forceful emphasis on reality also gives a new turn to the abstract debate opposing good savages to barbarous cannibals. With *Typee* the discussion shifts from Nature to Culture. As such, the book can be considered a landmark in the history of the Polynesian myth¹⁴⁾.

Typee could have been a book of adventures: it is not. The story of Tom and Toby (how they deserted the whaling ship, how they reached the Typee Valley, etc) is nothing more than a lengthy introduction.

There is a strong element of suspense at the beginning, when our heroes climb down the cliffs to the valley; are they going to find themselves among Happers or Typees, good savages, or ferocious cannibals? The story could unravel in the same way as that of Claude Belissan. Yet, it is very soon obvious that nothing is going to happen. Among the two heroes, Toby escapes from the Typee valley, while Tom is forced to stay: Toby's adventure never developed into a real story: it only provided later editions with an appendix. Tom's undramatic life forms the bulk of the book; far from being a "story", Tom's narration consists in a complete and minute description of the Typee culture. This strange book is indeed closer to an encyclopedia than to a novel, unless we choose to consider it as a novel of a new kind, telling the only adventure really worthwhile, that is the discovery of different cultures.

For Typees have a culture, sometimes a very elaborate one. The book contains pages of precise, matter-of-fact information about cooking recipes, ways of stocking food, ship or house building, weaving and dyeing, music, etc. It is less reliable as regards social organization or aspects of spiritual life. On such matters, the understanding of which requires a good command of language, Melville soon acknowledges his ignorance. Yet the rest is enough to give a blow to the belief in a state of nature. Whether man is naturally good or bad is no longer the question. All men (whether they be "savages" or "civilized") have become estranged from that ideal state of innocence which philosophers of the Enlightenment used to call Nature. Moreover, Typees *are* (occasionally) cannibals, they *do practice* free (so it seems) sexual intercourse, they sometimes send war parties. In this sense, as Woodcock puts it, "the mirror of innocence is cracked; evil is coexistent with innocence even among the Typees."¹⁵ A reader, and to a certain extent, a follower of Rousseau¹⁶, Melville cannot be said to advocate vulgar "back-

to-nature" Rousseauism. Had he chosen to deal with "good Happers", the answer might have been simple. Too simple. By choosing to deal with "evil Typees", he undertakes a more difficult task. The problem is no longer : good or evil, but : to what extent? Some cultures may still be closer to Nature, or less obnoxious than others. Compared to "white civilization", Typee barbarity is a "lesser evil". And "were civilization itself to be estimated by some of its results, it would seem perhaps better for what we call the barbarous part of the world to remain unchanged."¹⁷⁾ Comparing the enjoyment and the degree of happiness of primitive societies and of more advanced communities ; comparing again the degree of wickedness of civilized and of less enlightenend people is one of the main themes in *Typee*. Needless to say that savages get the advantage, and nothing is said in favour of the White Man, the cruellest animal that ever was.

"The term "Savage" is, I conceive, often misapplied, and indeed, when I consider the vices, cruelties, and enormities of every kind that spring up in the tainted atmosphere of a feverish civilization, I am inclined to think that so far as the relative wickedness of the parties is concerned, four or five Marquesan Islanders sent to the United States as Missionaries might be as useful as an equal number of Americans despatched to the Islands in a similar capacity."¹⁸⁾

At this stage, *Typee* ceases to be the factual description of a primitive culture. It turns into a harsh polemic against Western civilization, on one hand ; and into an apology of savagery on the other. This too is a tradition in exotic literature that can be traced back to Bougainville and Diderot. Bougainville had already portrayed a native elder who turned his back on European visitors and prophesied the

coming of all sorts of evils to his people. Yet nowhere had such outburst of passion, such bitter irony, such unrelenting condemnation of civilization been heard. In this too, *Typee* strikes a new note. *Typee* is a kind of literary bastard: something "in between" fiction and a study in ethnology, as well as the narrative of a personal experience with both a claim to the truth and a claim to self-expression. Paradoxically, such heterogenous features give the book unexpected strength. Imaginative literature is impassioned, but it can fail to convince, if not sufficiently grounded on facts. The reverse is true. Science is supposed to be dispassionate, but "objectivity" may fail to stir the reader's imagination and sensitiveness. Accuracy and passion: this blending of opposite qualities gives Melville's praise of savagery and attack on civilization a pungency that neither fiction nor science could have dreamt of, and turn ethnological learning into a vital issue.

MELVILLE AND AFTER.

Typee is a novel; it describes Polynesian life as it is; it deals with the destructive encounter of Western civilization and primitive cultures. These features are going to characterize the greater part of Polynesian fictions in the second half of the 19th Century: no more tales, but novels as a form deemed fitter to reflect a complex reality; a closer observation of facts, together with the growing feeling that the Edenic dream, born from Christian mythology, may have been a misleading clue to the understanding of native cultures; and lastly, the increasing awareness of Western civilization's terrible threat of destruction. Few writers would go so far as to question the benefits of colonization; those who, instead of meeting with the public's demand for exoticism, preferred to shed a crude light on sordid reality, like Stevenson, would be severely censored. But

most novels would tell about the decay and the death of Polynesian culture. A few writers (like Segalen) would also try not to see Polynesians through Western eyes, but, by reversing perspectives, to imagine how they may have watched the arrival of White Men. But this is another story. It does not mean however that former meanings have vanished. Like all myths, this one has a stratified significance. Even decades after *Typee*, paradise-dreamers would try to "go back", and seek, further and further, a vanishing reflection of primitive life. And a happy few would find it.

"Qu'il était bon le matin, d'aller ensemble nous rafraîchir dans le ruisseau voisin, comme au paradis allaient sans doute le premier homme et la première femme. Paradis tahitien, *nave nave fenua...*"

(How good it was in the morning, to go and bathe in the nearby stream, as in paradise undoubtedly would have gone the first man and the first woman. Tahitian paradise, *nave nave fenua...*)¹⁹

NOTES

- 1) Among the most famous : Magellan, Mendana, Janzoon, Tasman, Dampier, Roggeven, Anson, Byron, Wallis. But they must have in fact exceeded this number.
- 2) Cf. Etienne Taillemite : *Sur des mers inconnues, Bougainville, Cook, Lapérouse, Découvertes*, Gallimard, 1987.
- 3) Cf. Jacques Proust's foreword to Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde*, Gallimard. 1982
- 4) In classical French poetry, Cythère is a common figure of speech, meaning "the country of love".

- 5) Bougainville : *Voyage autour du monde*, Gallimard, 1982, p.226.
- 6) Id. p.255.
- 7) Bougainville spent one third of his fortune on buying a ship so that Aotourou should be able to return to his country. Unfortunately Aotourou died on the way back.
- 8) The French "tabou", transposed from the English "taboo" (Cook, 1777), first appeared in the French translation of Cook's voyage, in 1787.
- 9) Eugène Sue : *Relation véritable des voyages de Claude Belissan*, Omnibus, 1996, p.14.
- 10) In some parts of the Marquesas, it remained a practice till 1880.
- 11) As far as France is concerned, 1842 is a turning point in the history of the South Pacific : Admiral Dupetit – Thouars then establishes a Protectorate on what is now French Polynesia. In *Typee*, Melville mentions the French war fleet at anchor in Nuku Hiva Bay, and severely condemns the French policy : "a signal infraction of the rights of humanity" (*Typee*, p.52).
- 12) The title of the original English edition of 1846 was : *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, a Peep at Polymesian Life*. That Melville altered facts, faked chronology, etc, has been established by Anderson.
- 13) Quoted in Woodcock's Introduction to the Penguin Classics Edition, 1986, p.7.
- 14) as is, by a strange coincidence, Radiguet's *Les Derniers Sauvages, Iles Marquises*(1842–1859) in French literature. Even more coincidental : Radiguet was on board *La Reine Blanche*, Admiral Dupetit – Thouars' ship. Melville and he could have met...
- 15) Woodcock, Introduction to *Typee*, p.24.
- 16) Melville's ideas on happiness refer explicitly to Rousseau. See *Typee* p.183.

- 17) *Typee* p.53.
- 18) *Typee* p.181.
- 19) Paul Gauguin : *Noa-Noa - Séjour à Tahiti*-, Editions Complexe, 1989,
p.69.