The Myths of Cannibals:
Cannibalism and Colonialism in Melville’s *Typee*

食人族的“迷思”:
《泰比》中的食人习俗和殖民主义

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Synopsis

This M.A. thesis aims to examine the relation of cannibal myths to Euro-American colonialism in Melville’s first novel, *Typee*. Since the 1920s there have been at least three approaches to this work: the symbolic or romantic approach, the racial ideological approach, and the cultural anthropological approach. This thesis focuses on the racial and ideological aspect of *Typee*, exploring the relation between Melville’s colonial ideology and his literary representation of cannibals and their man-eating practice. Though Melville speaks overtly against Western colonialism in the novel, a careful examination will reveal that even the critic is involved in the ideology that he condemns openly in the text. This involvement is particularly seen in his reception, perpetuation and manipulation of the popular myths of cannibals. The impact of these cultural myths on his literary practice renders *Typee* not only a product of colonial ideology, but also an active affirmation of it. In his work cannibalism is less a tribal reality than a cultural construct or a product of colonial imagination. This thesis argues that Melville’s cultural identity as a Western white determines his participation in perpetuating the colonial myth and in a subtle form of racism, though he does defend openly the natives against Euro-American colonial domination in the book.

The first chapter locates Melville’s representation of cannibals and cannibalism in the fabric of Western colonial history and European literary tradition. It clarifies the relation of *Typee* to those European classical works concerning the trope of cannibal/cannibalism, and identifies Melville’s work with the Western literary history. It also lays bare the way that Western writers or thinkers manipulate the trope to serve their domestic social agendas, and reveals their colonial mentality in such a manipulation. It will be pointed out that the use of cannibal/cannibalism as an ideological weapon is not exclusive to Melville’s works, but rather is his critical practice under the influence of European literary legacy.

The second chapter explores the impact of those preconceived cannibal myths on the psychic state of white people in the nineteenth century. In *Typee* cannibalism is not only
represented as a fearful operator on the mental landscape of Europeans, but it, or rather its location, also serves as the sign of the unexplored world or the frontier. “Fearful” and “unknown” are what cannibalism implies mentally to Tom and his companion Toby. Yet they are not simply the psychic effects produced in white people’ encounter with natives. Rather they impel proactively the transition of the Typees from the reputed man-eaters to the “experientially” confirmed cannibals, and keep the myths of cannibals in motion in the narrative.

The third chapter extends the discussion of the myth of cannibalism to the broad contact zone between Western intruders and Marquesan islanders. The discussion centers on the signifier of body in the text of *Typee*, for in Melville’s representation body is the central locus at which native people and white intruders compete with and negotiate with each other. This chapter approaches “body” from three dimensions: the ethnicity of body, food/cannibalism, and cloth/tattooing. It affirms both Melville’s narrative liberation of native people from the myths of cannibals, and his containment of this textual transgression. His status as a non-interventionist Westerner explains why he liberates the reputed cannibals from their transfixed role of alterity, and imparts partial voice to their culture and subjectivity. But as a person enmeshed in his contemporary colonial ideology, it is inevitable for him to enact implicitly some of its imperatives to contain those narrative digressions against colonialism, and to muffle the generated voice of colonial subjects.

The last part of this thesis sums up the significance of the study of cannibal myths and colonialism. It examines briefly the impact that *Typee* produces on the works of later writers, as well as Melville’s relation to other contemporary American writers in representing the myths of cannibals. Though Melville’s cultural identity underlies the existence of ideological repression and racial discrimination in his text, it does not diminish his greatness and importance as an artist nevertheless.

**Key Words:** *Typee; cannibal myths; colonialism*
中文摘要

本文旨在探讨梅尔维尔的《泰比》中食人族“迷思”与西方殖民主义之间的联系。“迷思”一词译自英文的myth(s)，为无稽的虚构，荒唐的臆造，悖理的谎言之意，多与社会、国家或族群进行意识形态的构建和表述有关。“食人族迷思”指的是西方殖民者在征服与统治美非大陆和太平洋岛屿土著的过程中，所形成的关于土著习俗（如食人习俗）和性行的种种信念或观点。在数百年的西方殖民历史中，这些信念和观点不断地在各类著作中受到表述和确认，逐渐被当成“实情”、“常识”、“不刊之论”，并在文化意识中根深蒂固，影响了包括梅尔维尔在内的一大批西方作家。本文围绕作品中的“食人族迷思”和殖民意识形态之间的关系，指出尽管梅尔维尔在文本中公开谴责西方殖民当局的野蛮行径，为受奴役的马克萨斯土著鸣喊不平，但是他本人在对土著进行描述和评论时，也参与到了意识形态的压迫和微妙的种族歧视之中。这尤其体现在他对“迷思”的接受，表达和操用上，所以在《泰比》中泰比族的食人行为并不是主人公汤姆亲见的现实，而是一种文化建构和殖民想象的产物。可以说，《泰比》既是作家受殖民意识形态的影响而写就的文学作品，也是他对同时代殖民意识形态中某些内容的肯定和再述。

第一章将《泰比》置放于欧洲文学传统和西方殖民历史所构成的背景之中，研究《泰比》与欧洲文学史上关涉食人族或食人行为的作品之间的关系，力图将《泰比》定位于同类主题的西方文学谱系之中。本章将详细分析西方殖民活动者如何以食人习俗或人体献祭为借口，对所谓的“食人族”进行殖民屠杀与征服；有良知的西方作家如何运用“食人”或“野人”主题来达到社会批判的目的，他们的殖民心态如何在此中得以体现；梅尔维尔的立场在何意义上有别于那些殖民活动者，而他在修辞策略上又如何承继那些欧洲文学前人。本章指出，梅尔维尔将“食人”或“野人”主题当作批判意识形态的工具，并非《泰比》中独有或作家本人的独创，而是欧洲文学遗产的影响下作家个人的批判实践。

第二章深入分析“食人族迷思”中的“食人迷思”在十九世纪西方人与土著接触过程中所产生的心理效应。在梅尔维尔同时代西方人的心灵图景中，食人行为代表着“未知”的世界或边疆，代表着“恐惧”的源泉和征兆。“未知”与“恐惧”正是
“食人迷思”对汤姆及其同伴的心理暗示和精神感发。而这暗示与感发，又外化为二人主动和前瞻的行为，将泰比部落从传闻中的食人族转化为经过经验“实证”的食人族。

第三章将论述从前章的“食人迷思”扩展到西方侵入者与马克萨斯岛民接触交往的广大领域。在梅尔维尔的文学表述中，“身体”是两方相互对抗较量，相互协商和的重要“场域”。本章围绕《泰比》文本中“身体”这一符号，从三方面展开论述：身体的种族性，食物/食人，衣物/刺青。本章指出，梅尔维尔的叙事在一定程度上将马克萨斯土著从某些“食人族迷思”中解脱出来，对他们作为“他者性”代表的僵化形象提出质疑，作家以人道主义关怀和非干涉主义的政治立场，为被殖民者呼喊出正义的声音。但是，他的白人作家这一文化身份和同时代殖民意识形态的深广影响，又使得他的文本中不可避免地潜藏着某些殖民“意识”或“本能”，遏制了他文本中对殖民意识形态的颠覆因素，减弱了他替被殖民主体说话的声音力度。

本文的结尾对研究“食人族迷思”和殖民主义的意义进行了总结，提出这一研究与当代社会的相关性。这一部分还简要论及梅尔维尔在表述“食人族迷思”上与同时代作家（如爱伦·坡与梭罗）之间的关系，他的“旅行叙事”对后来英美作家的影响，以及在叙述“太平洋经验”上所起的示范作用。

关键词：泰比；食人族迷思；殖民主义
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Herman Melville is one of the classic American writers who wrote about the Pacific experience. His works, mostly in the form of sea romance, present directly an encyclopedic picture of Euro-American oversea mercantile activities and colonial expansion in the nineteenth century, as well as white civilians’ extraterritorial cultural contact with people of various races or ethnic groups. “Race” is a critical motif in and a stamp of his romance\(^1\). It provides him with not only “a personal, family, and political content”, but also “the forms, scenes, figures, and assumptions of his fiction”, as Samuel Otter contends in his study of the race issue in *Typee* (13). Melville’s oversea traveling experiences and encounter with native people are the biographical reason for such a fascination with “race” or racial figures in his literary practice. In many cases the native figures in his writing, be they Africans, American Indians or the South Pacific islanders, are represented as liable to commit cannibalism. The myths of cannibals are interspersed among his narratives, working often as a footnote to a certain action of the story. Sometimes they figure much more prominently in the text, such as in constructing the plot, serving the critical project of the author, providing an answer to human character, and operating as an index to a person’s subjectivity. In this case consuming human flesh is related to a complicated psychological, cultural or political problem, such as the bind between repulsion and attraction, the integrity of the racial or ethnical identity, the ideological repression, or the colonial manipulation.

Generally speaking, Herman Melville argues against colonialism in his representation of cannibals. At least he speaks overtly against it on the surface of his narratives. But a careful examination will reveal that even the critic is involved in the ideology that he condemns openly in the text. The involvement is seen particularly in his internalization of cannibal myths that have arisen along with the worldwide colonial expansions of Western nations. In Melville’s literary representation cannibalism is less a reality than a cultural

\(^1\) The development of the genre in the United States, as pointed out by Elliott Emory, was indeed linked to the business of race (90).
construct or a product of colonial imagination. The impact of the cultural myth on his literary practice renders his writing not only a product of colonial ideology, but also an affirmation of it. The thesis examines the relation of cannibal myths to colonialism in Melville’s first novel, *Typee*. It argues that Melville’s cultural identity as a Western white determined his participation in perpetuating the colonial myth and in a subtle form of racism, though he does defend openly the natives against Euro-American colonial domination in the book. Before I move to discuss the historical background of the book, it is necessary to clarify some basic concepts or arguments about cannibalism.

1. General Concepts of Cannibalism

The word *cannibal* is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a man (esp. a savage) that eats human flesh; a man-eater, an anthropophagite”. It came from Spanish *Canibal*, which was used first in plural *Canibales*, meaning bloodthirsty and cruel. *Canibal* was derived from *Caniba*, Columbus’s name for the Carib people, who were alleged to practice anthropophagy. It was first introduced to English in Richard Hakluyt’s *Voyages*, and transposed by Shakespeare to name Prospero’s monster servant in *The Tempest*. In place of the awkward neutral “anthropophagi”, it was generally used to refer to the tribe of man-eaters. Its derivative “cannibalism” became a synonym for words like *savagery* and *barbarism*, and carried with it the bloody picture of human bodies being dismembered and burned for ritualistic revelry in remote mysterious jungles. By the 19th century, the archetypal image of cannibalism in the mind of white Europeans was missionaries boiling in a giant stewpot. This scene was very often represented among Euro-Americans in the form of drawing, writing and folk tales. Through repetition and reinforcement it became such a stable system of signifiers that several natives, a pot and a pile of actually unidentifiable bones would be enough to present a scene of cannibalism, or would mean its existence to the Western “witness”.

Though the word “cannibalism” does not appear till after Columbus’s discovery of America, eating human flesh has long been a practice in the European society. As an anthropological term, it is used to refer to more than the ritualistic man-eating practice in
Americas and Africa. Thus it is necessary to look at the different types of cannibalism, and make out which one the thesis is talking about. It will be classified in this thesis according to the function of the cannibalistic practice: for what reason someone is eaten. Three functional types are most recognized by Western anthropologists: survival cannibalism, dietary or gastronomic cannibalism, and ritual or religious cannibalism. The former two are usually grouped into the category of cannibalism by necessity. Dietary cannibalism is a cultural practice originating in conditions of want and scarcity and continued through the force of custom. Though the material base for it is survival or subsistence, it is used in my thesis in a different way from survival cannibalism, which refers to the occasional act of eating human flesh for food in the maritime or terrestrial catastrophes. Ritual cannibalism is concerned with revenge, punishment for crimes, ceremony, rite, or magic. It is the term within the early colonial discourse to denote the alterity of native populations and the devouring threat that they pose to European intruders. This type of cannibalism, as well as dietary cannibalism, is what European colonists have often accused the supposed cannibals of. In my thesis cannibalism, if with no modifier preceding it, refers to the ritual and dietary type. It is what colonial discourse mainly points to, if not to attack it.

Furthermore, cannibalism in question is considered as less a factual widespread practice than a cultural construct held in belief by colonizers. Whether cannibalism exists as a common custom is still one of the most heatedly disputed topics in anthropology. William Arens is one among the growing minority who doubt that cannibalism was widely practiced from the tribal society onwards. His work *The Man-Eating Myth*, published in 1979, is an influential book in favor of the view that there has never been a culture in which the dead were routinely eaten, or enemies killed and devoured. Arens examines perceptively many “classic” cases of cultural cannibalism cited by explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists. One of the documents that he puts into question is Columbus’s journal. He contends that Columbus imputed the man-eating practice into the Carib tribe, not because he witnessed it himself, but because he was informed so by local Arawak Indians, who hated and feared their rival tribe. Many other “unquestionable” cases fell within the scope of his examination, either because they are steeped in racism, or because
they are unsubstantiated, or based on second-hand or hearsay evidence. It is generally held that since the early period of human history, people in one cultural community have been using the concept of man-eating to describe those cultures that were despised, feared or little known by them. They did so quite often because of geographical distance; as Clawde Rawson says in “Unspeakable Rites”, cannibalism is “a geographical and ethnic term” (1). William Arens goes further in arguing that describing another group of people as cannibals is a consistent ideological and rhetorical device for one nation to establish or confirm their own cultural superiority.

However, his skepticism of cannibalism as a fact is criticized by his opponents on many grounds, particularly for his misconstrued conclusion that no such culture has ever existed. His skeptical attitude is even associated with the denial of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the worth of his book is not in this “conclusion”. Rather Arens reveals in what way the works of Western anthropologists have been influenced by their preconceived notions, and how the existence of man-eating peoples as a common ethnographic suggestion exoticizes non-White aborigines and shapes a colonial stereotype about them. His book will be highly appreciated if seen in this view. Thereby this thesis does not intend to explore the factuality of cannibalism, but the belief in and representation of it, as “the significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do” (Arens, Myth 139). It should be noted that Gananath Obeyesekere, another influential contemporary anthropologist, though not explicitly denying the existence of cannibalism, also defines it as the “cultural construction” of “the inordinate capacity of the Other to consume human flesh as an especially delectable food” (63). Since most anthropologists and cultural critics recognize its constructed nature, this thesis does not aim to prove it with Typee as an example, but to bring out how cannibalism operates as a myth in the narrative. It is going to show how Tom, at the work of this perpetuated cultural myth, comes up with his conception of the Typees, and follows the classical way of manipulating it rhetorically for social criticism, and how the South Pacific islanders respond to it in their struggle against colonial force.
2. A Man who Lived Among Cannibals: Herman Melville and the Theme of Cannibalism

Herman Melville, the third of the eight children of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melville, was born in 1819 into a socially connected New York family with comfortable economic circumstances. His father started as a quite successful wholesale merchant and importer, but his import business collapsed in 1830. The financial setback resulted in the poor health of the head of the family and his eventual death in 1832. Because of this mishap in the family, the story of Herman Melville’s years from young adolescence to mature manhood can be described as a young man’s confused and frantic search for a career. As a poverty-stricken youth, he had to quit the school and did various jobs ranging from farming to teaching. In 1839 he got a job as a cabin boy on a New York ship, and made his first voyage to Liverpool with a cargo of cotton. His initiation story *Redburn* was based on this experience. Yet it was his voyage from 1841 to 1844, the second one in his life, that launched him onto the career of authorship, and inspired him to write his first book *Typee*, which was popular with the readers of his time.

In January 1841, twenty-one-year-old Herman Melville embarked upon *Acushnet*, a whaler bound for the Pacific Ocean, as a member of the crew. Having been aboard *Acushnet* for a year and a half, he decided to abandon the vessel on reaching the Marquesas Islands, possibly because of both wretched shipboard conditions and his hankering for adventure. With another fellow-deserter Richard Greene, the “Toby” in *Typee*, he escaped the ship and struck out for a valley occupied by the Happar tribe, known to be friendly to white sailors. Unfortunately they intruded upon the territory of the Typees (now spelled as Taipis), a reputed tribe of fierce cannibals. There the two American sailors lived with them for about four weeks, and though received with hospitality, they were actually held captive by the natives. With the permission of their hosts Greene left the valley to search for a doctor or medicines for Melville’s ailing legs, but never returned. Staying in the valley for another two weeks with the constant fear of being devoured, Melville eventually escaped from the territory of the supposed cannibals, and embarked
upon a series of short voyages in the South Seas. In 1844 he returned to his family at the age of 25, aimless and confused, with “no development at all”, as he said to Hawthorne in one of his letters (Melville, *Moby* 602). Encouraged by his family members, as well as Elizabeth Shaw, his would-be wife, he decided to commit his oversea adventures to paper, especially the part of his sojourn among the Typee valley.

Though he had been deeply interested in literature since boyhood and had begun writing by the mid-1930s, Melville became an author almost by accident. To seek authorship as a career was never in the first place a practical choice with the son of a merchant and the nephew of bankers. Besides, the later dramatic change in the financial situation of the family almost robbed him of an opportunity to get educated. He was prevented from focusing on writing, especially after his brother also declared bankruptcy. But it was after and due to the voyage from 1841 to 1844 that he found his literary talent, and decided to start writing seriously and with more enthusiasm than ever, despite all those difficulties he was confronted with. Two years later a book titled *Typee* was published, first in Britain and then in America, and achieved immediate and startling success in both countries. The publication of *Typee* is of vital importance to Melville, because it is his virgin exhibition of and the testament to his literary genius, or his ability to tell a spellbinding story. As Clifton Fadiman said in the introduction of the book, “*Typee* discovered Melville to himself”: “He found out that he was a mind”, not merely “a man”, and the success of the book “determined him to become a writer,” who proceeded to write such masterpieces as *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd* (xvi).

*Typee* is an account of two lower-class Americans’ encounter with colonial cannibals in the nineteenth century. Seen from the perspective of cultural contact, the significance of cannibalism as a motif is in its status as a locus of power struggle. At the locus one party forms the perception of the other and plays its expedient role of power that is subject to change when circumstances are altered. For Tom and Toby, the threat of cannibalism breeds fear in their psyche, which in turn determines their vision of the Typees. The possibility of being eaten is what they try to avoid, first by not falling into the hands of cannibals and then by adapting themselves partially to the alien cultural community. On
the part of the Typees, to assert themselves as non-cannibals, whether it is true or not, is strategically important to their purpose of holding the two whites captive and preventing a frightened escape. But Tom still suspects that the natives try to conceal their cannibalistic practice deliberately from him, for example, by forbidding him to enter the Ti when they are reveling in a human sacrifice. Tom’s suspicion and fear are interwoven with his colonial mind that is born of the prevailing colonial ideology of his time. The scene of cannibalism in *Typee* reveals not only a colonial ideology that paints a white’s psychic landscape when he comes to terms with the colonial other, but also the resistance of the colonized to the myth, or more subversively, their attempt to benefit economically from their identity as cannibals. Besides, as the whole story is basically an adventure yarn, cannibalism figures importantly in the development of the plot. Without the ghostly presence of cannibalism the adventure of two American sailors would not be reputed as a hazardous and thrilling experience, for the quality of the suspense is for the most part in the mysterious nature of the Typees, who seem to be at once a horde of benevolent savages and satanic man-eaters. In fact the book is popular with its contemporary readers, as much because it is an intriguing ethnographical record as because there is a carefully wrought suspenseful story in it.

The theme of cannibalism is continued into the other two books of the South Seas Trilogy, and finds expression in *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, as well as other less momentous works. For example, in *Moby Dick*, besides creating such a cannibal figure as Queequeg and describing his bonding with Ishmael, Melville discourses on the universality of cannibalism, which can be found not only in the man-eating rite observed by indigenous people, but also in the natural world. For instance, marine creatures prey upon another. Cannibalism can also be seen in the civilized people’s cannibalistic consumption of the meat of animals. Melville exemplifies this with the episode that Sub eats the meat of the slaughtered whale by the light made of its oil. When the writer moves to describe the scene of butchering bipeds in the meat market, he finally belts out in fury: “Cannibals? Who is not a cannibal?” (*Moby* 318). He contends that it will be even “more tolerable for the Fejee that salts down a lean missionary in his cellar against a coming
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