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John Townsend Trowbridge and his Practical Christianity in *Father Brighthopes*

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John Townsend Trowbridge was born in 1827, only eight years after Herman Melville. While he shared with the creator of Captain Ahab almost all of his disgust and disdain for Calvinism, he shared almost none of his anger and anxiety. He became a much different writer—for better or worse, a more sedate writer. In this paper, I will first examine (as closely as his autobiography, *My Own Story*, allows) how Trowbridge's demeanor developed in his youth, how it differed from Melville's, and how it affected his attitude toward Calvinism and turned him into an advocate for a more "practical" brand of Christianity. Then I will analyze the nature of this "practical Christianity" as presented in his first book, *Father Brighthopes*, published in May, 1853.

Herman Melville, as Delbanco puts it, was born into "good circumstances" (Delbanco 17). Both his grandfathers were renowned Revolutionary War heroes, not without financial means or social status. The young Herman seems to have believed, as David Copperfield did, that he had great expectations. Unfortunately, his father proved a dismally poor businessman, and at the age of eleven Herman found himself in tow as his father fled New York City and his creditors. A year and a half later, his father fell into a state of delirium that he did not survive. His mother would scramble, not very efficiently, to keep her and her children from financial ruin. Herman's older brother's dreams of attending Harvard vanished, and Herman himself was taken out of school altogether and "put to work as an errand boy" in a bank in Albany (Delbanco 25).

"I had learned to think much and bitterly before my time," Melville wrote in *Redburn*, years later, in the voice of his fictional narrator, but more or less confessing how his own family's social and financial demise had affected him. "I must not think of those delightful days, before my father became a bankrupt" (10). But it

seems Melville could not stop himself from dwelling on his family's misfortune, and he makes clear, again in *Redburn*, how permanent the damage from youthful bitterness can be.

Talk not of the bitterness of middle-age and after life; a boy can feel all that, and much more, when upon his young soul the mildew has fallen; and the fruit, which with others is only blasted after ripeness, with him is nipped in the first blossom and bud. And never again can such blights be made good; they strike in too deep, and leave such a scar that the air of Paradise might not erase it. (11-12)¹

Trowbridge, on the other hand, was *born* into humble circumstances — and his parents' content with a "simple" livelihood seemed the most natural of things to him. In *My Own Story*, he passes along the tale of his parents first settling in Ogden, in rural New York, to establish a homestead, a tale his mother passed on to him. Somehow, in the midst of winter, his parents had managed to raise a log dwelling—and without a single nail. Daily life was far from easy.

No stones could be gathered on account of the deep snow, and my mother's kettles would sink down into the soft ground which formed the hearth. The snow stayed until April. When it was gone, and she went out and found some "good, nice stones" to set her kettle on in the fireplace, she "felt rich," as she used smilingly to tell us children in later years. (*MOS* 8)

For Melville, this may have become a tale of shameful hardship. For Trowbridge, it was a tale of joy and content—a story he could remain forever proud of.

Trowbridge was one of nine children. Except for the first and the last, they were all born in the log cabin that was raised the following spring to replace the original makeshift one. Trowbridge was the eighth-born, and he tells how, if his birth had come a few weeks later, he would have been born in the new framed house that his parents built to replace the log cabin. "But as it made not the slight-

¹ Delbanco includes these quotations from *Redburn* in his interpretation of Melville's childhood difficulties.

est difference to me at the time,” he writes (*MOS* 11), “so now I am as well content as if my eyes had first blinked and my infant lungs piped in a palace.” Like this, he seemed, as a young boy, as *unbitter* with his upbringing as one possibly could. And unlike Melville, he had a father who proved an exemplar and a stabilizing force—never “shirking of obligations” and always “a model of upright conduct and neighborly dealing” (*MOS* 35).

Surely, Melville’s personal sense of injustice and the anxiety it brought him fueled his anger against the Calvinistic God. It is an anger we can see most clearly in Captain Ahab. To Ahab, the Calvinistic God slyly and cowardly uses “all visible objects” in this world “as pasteboard masks,” hiding behind them, so that no man can ever know for sure whether he is or isn’t behind those masks, or whether movements by those objects/masks reveal his movements or not. And thus a man feeling misused, angry, and vengeful has no choice but to flail out at those masks—in Ahab’s case, a visible object/mask called Moby Dick.

If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ’tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. (*MD* 164)

The whale becomes for Ahab “the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung”—and he feels compelled to “[pile] upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down,” compelled to “burst his hot heart’s shell upon it” (*MD* 184).

The young Trowbridge, too, longed to see beyond the “wall,” as the passage below illustrates.

Problems which have baffled the greatest minds oppressed me at a very

early age. I can remember lying on my back under an orchard tree, when I couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old, gazing up through the boughs into the blue depths of the sky, and trying to think of time and space, until my inmost sense ached with the effort. It was the beginning of time that troubled me, for it must have had a beginning; and yet — what was before that? And there must be a limit to the sky; *but when I conceived of that limit as a great blank wall, no matter how far away, the same difficulty met me, — what was beyond that wall?* (MOS 26, emphasis added)

But even if he felt “oppressed” by that “wall,” and even if he found his mother’s recitation of Calvinistic creed unconvincing and unsatisfying, he was not the sort, as Melville, to let it eat at him until he was left with “half a heart and half a lung.”

Trowbridge had developed an Emersonian view of nature and spirit long before he became enamored of Emerson’s works, which he did near the end of 1852 (MOS 338), as he was on the verge of penning *Father Brighthopes*. It was an empowering view that gave him the confidence to believe that the best way to liberate oneself from traditional Calvinistic doctrine was not to argue against it, but simply to ignore it.

I was always wondering at the beauty and mystery of the earth and sky,—the air in its place, the water in its place, the birds adapted to their life, the fishes to theirs, the growth of trees and grass flowers, the sun by day, and by night the moon and stars; and I never once imagined that these visible miracles could have come about by any sort of chance. (MOS 31)

His believe in “invisibles,” he writes, was “wholly instinctive” and “antedated” the Christian teaching he received “regarding God and the angels” (MOS 25). Unsurprisingly then, having to spend Sundays sitting in a “straight-backed” pew seemed nothing but “irksome restraint and gloom” (26), and when his mother dwelled on “total depravity and eternal torment,” he could not help thinking that those things, no matter what she said about them, were “external to her spiritual nature” (29)—and, of course, to his own. The story below, however, reveals clearly how his irritation with the Calvinistic God never became the rage that Melville’s did.

But the more I thought about the fall of man, total depravity, the scheme of redemption, and kindred tenets, the more strongly they impressed me as being unnatural, and humanly contrived. Once I became angry with a sled I was making, the pieces of which would not fit according to my plan. I gave it a vindictive kick. Then I checked myself and said, "That's like what they say God did when he made the world and found it didn't suit him." I was *calmed* and shamed, and at once set about putting the pieces together. (*MOS* 31, emphasis added)

A momentary burst of anger, completely understandable for a young boy. But then calm and a simple understanding that from unchecked "vindictive" kicking nothing good can come. It is, of course, a concept that Melville's Ahab can never grasp. "There is one God that is Lord over the earth," Ahab bellows, as the novel races towards its tragic conclusion, "and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod" (*MD* 474). He exclaims this holding a musket, ready to shoot anyone who disobeys him. Trowbridge "instinctively" knew that this was a position one best avoid.

In all, Trowbridge's "instinctive" understanding of spirit in nature enabled him to go "back to the Bible with a fresh sense of the beauty of its literature, and of the spiritual insight and power that illumine the best parts of it" (*MOS* 32). That "spiritual insight" revealed to Trowbridge a set of essential virtues—and not much more. Embodying these virtues became, for Trowbridge, the most practical way for a man to live a good life—a practical way that could be followed without giving hardly a thought to creed at all.

Melville, we know, was all fury as he worked on *Moby-Dick* in the summer of 1850. "Give me a condor's quill!" he has his narrator, Ishmael, exclaim. "Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!" (*MD* 456). Trowbridge displayed a completely different temperament. For him, writing with a calm, even keel was of the upmost importance. Confronting readers with uncomfortable ideas, encouraging them to feel indignation, whipping them into angry frenzies were the last things he wanted to do. His natural tendency was to offer up scenes and happenings that would, first, make readers smile, and then, if possible, give them direct comfort and support. He wanted to give them a pleasant, non-offensive, wholesome reading experience. He wanted to help them feel serenity. And he remained, as he had evalu-

ated himself, “by disposition the least quarrelsome of boys” (*MOS* 41).

Trowbridge may have agreed in principle with many of the radical thinkers of his time, but the relentless, confrontational nature of their rhetoric made him uncomfortable. He thought William Lloyd Garrison, the founder and editor of *The Liberator*, too “uncompromising,” and held him at fault, as his “aim was solely to convince, and not to charm” (*MOS* 168). And here’s what he thought of the oratory of Theodore Parker, an ardent critic of both slavery and traditional Christian dogma.

I was at first repelled by the occasional mercilessness of his judgments and the force of his invective; for he could out-Garrison Garrison in his denunciations of slaveholding and its political and clerical supporters; and even while he voiced my own early convictions regarding the theological dogmas in the gloom of which I had been reared, I was often made to wince by the harshness of metaphor he applied to them. (*MOS* 170)

Gradually, he became more forgiving of Parker’s style, as he believed in his inner goodness, but when, in the autumn of 1852, he penned a sonnet in praise of Parker’s disdain for “[r]eligion cased in creeds” and submitted it to what he describes as “Boston’s favorite evening paper,” the editor returned it to him with the following eye-opening comment: “I suppose you are aware that these sentiments are contrary to those entertained by nine out of ten of our readers?” (*MOS* 171). Surely, this was food for thought. If the way you expressed your thinking lost you nine out of ten readers, what was the point? It was perhaps the *nine* that you most needed to reach. Mustn’t there be a more effective approach?

Another such enlightening experience had occurred back in early 1851 when he’d been entrusted with the editorial duties of *American Sentinel*. Its publisher, Ben Perley Poore, had had to leave town for an extended period, and Trowbridge, left fully in charge, had printed his own “poor little innocent article”—which touched (humorously and harmlessly, he thought) upon slave-catching and Southern threats of secession. A great many readers, unfortunately, had been far from amused. The result had been a loss of subscribers that sent the magazine into a tailspin and eventually led to its demise.

Then, in the spring of 1853, he was given the opportunity to submit for publication the book that would become *Father Brighthopes*. William Matthews, who ran *The Yankee Blade*, a magazine Trowbridge contributed to, had suggested that he try his hand at a book. When Trowbridge had replied he'd like to find a book publisher who thought likewise, Matthews had taken him around to Phillips, Sampson, & Co., a major book publisher, and given him a personal introduction to Mr. Phillips. The question of what *sort* of book might be possible was discussed.

"Not a novel—not just now; that may come later," Mr. Phillips said, in answer to a suggestion from me; "but *a domestic story*, something that will make *wholesome reading for young people and families*. To be a book about this size,"—handing me *a small volume*. "If you want to try your hand at something of the sort, I shall be happy to give it favorable consideration." (MOS 193, emphasis added)

An old wound of Trowbridge's was likely irritated. Phillips had previously rejected another of his manuscripts, one he had considered reasonably ambitious, and here he was, still being deemed not quite ready for a "novel." At the same time, he must have realized that the type of book he was being requested to write was one that was right up his alley. Painting scenes of ordinary domestic life—the simple joys, the amusing episodes, the touching moments—in a manner easily accessible to readers, was something he excelled at, and encouraging what he felt the most essential "Christian" virtues while *not* touching on controversial theological issues, issues he *preferred* to avoid, would certainly be "wholesome." He could avoid being overly confrontational *and* provide a meaningful message.

A few days later, Trowbridge handed over the first fifty pages of *Father Brighthopes* to Mr. Phillips. Not too many days after that, he went back to see what Phillips had thought of them. He hadn't read them yet, Phillips said, momentarily disappointing Trowbridge. But then he added that his wife had. He then handed over a printed proof page. The decision to publish had already been made. *Father Brighthopes* was set to be Trowbridge's first book.

There's no doubt that *Father Brighthopes* was, in its time, a very popular book. In its first five months, it sold 4,500 copies (Zboray and Zboray 73). *The Ladies'*

Repository ("New Books," Sept. 1853) called it "a most attractive book, abounding in passages of exquisite humor, clothed in language chaste and beautiful, and conveying a fine moral." *Southern Literary Messenger* ("Notice of New Works," January, 1855) said it "should be a household possession of every person who wishes his children to be at the same time deeply entertained and permanently benefited." *The New York Times*, in announcing the publication of Trowbridge's autobiography, *My Own Story* ("Topics of the Week," Jan. 3, 1903) labeled Trowbridge, "Author of 'Father Brighthopes,' 'Neighbor Jackwood,' 'Cudjo's Cave,' and a dozen other *immensely popular prose stories* of a simpler epoch" (emphasis added).

In *Literary Dollars and Social Sense* (2005), Zboray and Zboray write that Trowbridge arrived in Boston as "a hack writer" (46), and that at the time he was writing *Father Brighthopes*, he felt he was still serving "a *lowly* apprenticeship to celebrated authorship" (73, emphasis added). Certainly, Trowbridge longed to publish a longer, more involved work, something of Dickensian stature (a stature that surely most critics would agree, he would *never* come close to approaching), but this does not necessarily imply that *Father Brighthopes*, to him, was nothing more than glorified, book-length hackwork. In a novel soon to follow, *Martin Merivale: His X Mark*, Trowbridge has a publisher tell a young writer who has just had an ambitious manuscript rejected, "[H]igh-wrought fictions are not in great demand. The popular taste is for simple, natural pictures of life" (153). Well, an author might long to display the command that a lengthier and more complex work might demand, but there could be far worse things than drawing "simple, natural pictures of life"—and there is no reason that such a work could not be successful artistically. In the end, whether one reads *Father Brighthopes* and grants Trowbridge the title of *literary* novelist, or merely considers him a hack, or perhaps assigns him a place somewhere in between, the basic facts do not change: in *Father Brighthopes*, Trowbridge *did* draw accessible "simple, natural pictures of life"; he was able to imbue his various scenes and sketches with the virtues of a "practical Christianity"—really, not much different from the "Christian" virtues Ishmael absorbs from Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*—virtues of great importance to Trowbridge personally; and a reasonably large number of readers found both pleasure and legitimate value in it.

* * *

Father Brighthopes is the story of the Royden family and the visit it receives to its farm from Mr. Royden's cousin, the elderly Rev. Rensford, nicknamed Father Brighthopes. Father Brighthope's philosophy on life and his attitude toward day-to-day living have a profound impact on Mr. and Mrs. Royden, their eight children, and the community as a whole.

From a reader's point-of-view, it might be said *Father Brighthopes* is comprised of three elements: humorous, and sometimes trying, domestic scenes — meant, more or less, to stand alone as set pieces; character sketches, sometimes providing lighthearted amusement, sometimes providing examples of how or how not to deal with life's vicissitudes; and an extraordinary number of moments in which Father Brighthopes steps in and brightens someone's life with his optimism and practical Christian thinking. Father Brighthopes's words, thoughts, and example are meant both to edify readers and to offer them comfort. The plot, if that's the right word, tends to be episodic, with the two most important issues to be resolved being, one, how Mr. and Mrs. Royden will be able to better get along with each other and become better parents for their children, and two, whether the community will choose to build a new church or make do with the old one and help the poor with the money saved. Throughout, Trowbridge is intent on arguing that true religion has little or nothing to do with gloomy Calvinism and almost everything or everything to do with practical approaches to daily living.

The ages of the Royden children are left unclear for the most part, but the eldest, Chester, has been away at school and fancies himself engaged to a girl he's met there, and the youngest is still an infant. In between are Sarah, James, Lizzie, Sam, Willie, and Georgie. When the older children learn that their father's cousin—Father Brighthopes — is coming to spend some time with them, they let out a collective groan.

“Oh, I hope he won't come!” cried James. “If he does, we can't have any fun,—with his long face.”

“Ministers are so hateful!” added Lizzie.

“He sh'an't come!” cried Georgie, flourishing his knife. (*FB* 25)

Mr. Royden himself thinks the visit will be “disagreeable,” and Mrs. Royden worries that a minister “will want to study and be quiet” (*FB* 27). She believes that the children will drive him nuts—and that she’ll be left at a complete loss (*FB* 27).

The family’s attitude toward Christian ministers, it seems, has developed from the ones they have known personally—and that includes the latest, the young Mr. Corlis, who, when he makes his appearance a bit later, is described by the third-person narrator as showing “no very warm inclination to sociability” (*FB* 77). Chester complains of Mr. Corlis that he only “compiles commonplaces, which he calls sermons” and then preaches “dullness from the high pulpit” (*FB* 78). The Royden children have had bad experiences with Sunday-school teachers, whose habit seems to have been to speak in “a melancholy, droning manner” of “the horrors of sin and the awfulness of God’s wrath” (*FB* 147).

Father Brighthopes defies all their expectations. He is not dark, not grim, not severe. Chester expects him to come down hard on them for playing cards—which is what they are doing when he arrives—but he merely gives Lizzie some advice for better playing her hand, and then, using the cards himself, tells an enchanting story of Napoleon in a “simple, beautiful manner” (51) that surprises and charms them all. By the next day, he is shedding “a pleasant sunshine all around” (64) and with his “sweetness of temper” (73), his “calm eyes” (76), his “kindness and sympathy” (88), and his “simple and natural words” (77), he begins to draw from the habitually bickering brood what no church leader ever has before —“their better feelings” (64), that is, their instincts for empathy and kindness.

The Emersonian nature of his religious thinking becomes clear as he, Mr. Royden, and Chester are in their carriage to go and pay a social call on Mr. Corlis. After Father Brighthopes talks “of the religion to be drawn from fresh meadows, running brooks, the deep solitude of woods, and majestic mountain crags, Mr. Royden declares, “You always give me new ideas of religion. It always seemed to me a hard and gloomy thing.” Father Brighthopes’ rejoinder, and the manner of it, amaze both Chester and his father.

“Hard and gloomy?” The old man’s face radiated with fine emotion. “Oh, how softening, how bright it is! The true spirit of religion makes men happier than all earthly comforts and triumphs can do; it is a cold and mechani-

cal adherence to the mere forms of religion — from fear, or a dark sense of duty—which appears gloomy. Look at the glorious sky, with its soft blue depths, and floating silvery clouds; pass into the shadowy retreats of the cool woods; breathe the sweet air that comes from green fields and beds of flowers; hear the birds sing, and you must feel your heart opened, your soul warmed, your inmost thoughts kindled with love, — love for God, love for man, love for everything; and this is religion.” (75-76)

This love for both God and man, Father Brighthopes concludes, cannot be expressed by those who merely “lie idle in the shade of the creeds our fathers planted,” but only by those who carry the love for God and man about with them everywhere they go, *outside* of church, “carrying it like an atmosphere about them, and warming with its warmth the hearts of the poor and the sorrowful” (78-79). Ultimately, Mr. Corlis, the young minister, touched by Father Brighthopes’s sunshine, will give the best sermon of his career. It will not be “so deep in doctrinal research”—but will contain “more practical Christianity than any of his previous productions” (145). In all, this “practical” religion of Father Brighthopes’s connects an Emersonian view of nature—something that can be understood instinctively—with the Bible’s “best bits,” those parts which show the nature of Christ’s love, a type of love that would be just as real and essential had there never been any Bible at all. As Father Brighthopes is telling Mr. Royden of his own past, of how his own nervousness, irritability, and lack of fortitude made it difficult to deal with affliction, he says, “I never saw my remedy until my eyes were opened to the *sublime beauty* of Christ’s *character*. The wisdom he taught filled me with the deepest shame for my folly of fretting at the trivial perplexities of life” (116, emphasis added). He does not refer to Christ’s divinity or his role in God’s plan for salvation, but only of his “character.” And that “sublime beauty” is exactly what Emerson and Trowbridge discovered instinctively in nature. Thus, it is a “practical” form of Christianity in that it can, one, be understood instinctively, through the senses, without any vexing intellectual juggling of traditional Christian concepts, and two, provide a daily guide, in the midst of affliction and adversity, for being a good member of a family and of a community.

Indeed, dealing with affliction and adversity is a key theme in the novel, and

the most obvious development of it comes in the presentation of the local shoemaker — Job. Whether or not Trowbridge had read *Moby-Dick* or at least known of it I am not sure, but it is tempting indeed to think that he had Ahab in his mind as he wrote, for Job Bowen too has an artificial leg — and that artificial leg is a symbol of all the affliction that life has heaped upon him. His story is mainly told in a chapter called “The Philosophy of a Wooden Leg.”

Job lost his leg in the War of 1812, and now he scrapes out a bleak existence cobbling shoes. His wife provides little comfort — and he has his own senile mother to look after, too. Mr. Royden, with Father Brighthopes in tow, stops by Job’s humble home to inquire about hiring out Job’s daughter for the busy mowing season. When Father Brighthopes suggests that his misfortune seems to have made him merry, Job replies, “Better be merry than sad, you know. There’s no use complainin’ of Providence, when my own folly tripped me up. My understanding is not so lame as that.” Brighthopes appreciates Job’s attempt at humor and continues to express sympathy.

“On the whole, you made a bad bargain when you traded your hammer and awl for a musket and a cartridge-box?”

.....

“I might have made a worse bargain,” he said. “As long as I had one leg left,” — he touched his solitary knee, — “I ought to call it a good bargain. You see, I didn’t come off altogether without something to boot.” (126)

For Father Brighthopes, Job’s attitude and temperament are just right—for he, too, knows that there’s “no use complainin’,” that the *only* healthy way to handle affliction is to buck up against it—and to try, despite hardships, to find and nurture love. “The great secret is, Love,—” Father Brighthopes tells the Royden clan after leaving Job’s house—“love to God, love to man,—and a serene and thankful temper” (102).

Many modern readers may find this declaration by Father Brighthopes a sentimental platitude and not be convinced by how quickly all who hear him could feel “so well instructed in the use to be made of afflictions” (103), but Father Brighthopes’ conclusion, derived from a lifetime of afflictions, including the loss

of a child, is really no different from that arrived at by *Moby-Dick*. The only difference is in *Father Brighthopes* we have someone calmly tell us that it's best not to be enraged by affliction, whereas in *Moby-Dick*, we have someone show us how destructive affliction-roused rage can be. While the latter makes better theater, the former provides ordinary readers with a character type they might meet in real life—a character that can become a realistic positive role model.

Job Bowen has not only lost a leg but two children as well.

"I've had considerable to try me, though," said Job. "Two fine boys, 'at would now be able to take care of me and the family, got the small-pox both 't a time; one was nineteen, t' other fifteen; I'd rather lost a dozen legs, if I'd had 'em," he murmured thoughtfully. (127)

Job's thinking is the exact opposite of Ahab's. Ahab, when asked by Starbuck if it wouldn't be better to abandon such a dangerous mission considering he has two children back home who need a father, refuses to be moved—as he refuses to be moved when the captain of *Rachel* asks him to take time out from his pursuit of Moby Dick to help him find his lost son.

Both Melville and Trowbridge are concerned with how the development of the intellect—or a pursuit governed strictly by the intellect—can adversely affect the heart, and their thinking on the matter is pretty much identical. However, their presentations of their thinking are completely different. Melville, we know, was fascinated with Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand," a tale in which the title character's search for the unpardonable sin leads him to discover that it was a sin that he himself had committed: "The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims!"—a sin which has turned his own heart to stone (235). In a June, 1851 letter to Hawthorne, Melville reacts to "Ethan Brand" like this:

It is a frightful poetical creed that the cultivation of the brain eats out the heart. But it's my *prose* opinion that in most cases, in those men who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to hams. And though you smoke them with the fire of tribulation, yet, like veritable hams, the head

only gives the richer and the better flavor. I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. ("Melville's Letters," 540)

The monomaniacal Ahab, of course, is no "fool with a heart." He is just the opposite. He is an Ethan Brand. When Ahab imagines creating a perfect man, he imagines him having "about a quarter of an acre of fine brains"—and "no heart at all" (*MD* 390). And possessed of such fanatical thinking, Ahab plunges into his epic three-day battle with the white whale and brings on his own death—and that of the entire *Pequod* crew save Ishmael.

On this issue of the intellect and the heart, Trowbridge provides us with no such dramatic fireworks, only a very simple, plain, prosaic, and *practical* conversation between Father Brighthopes and Chester. The first speaker is Father Brighthopes.

"[. . .] Persons following intellectual pursuits are apt to take purely intellectual views of great as well as petty crimes. The independent MIND can analyze the nature of a murder coolly, as the anatomist dissects his human subject. Eugene Aram has too much intellect. Perhaps his heart is not bad,—what there is of it,—but its virtue is negative. When we silence the conscience in judging of right and wrong, reason is sure to lead us astray."

"I understand now, better than ever before, why expanded minds are so prone to smile upon and shake hands with crime," said Chester. "Enlarging the intellect to the neglect of the soul, we leave this to become shriveled, like a flower growing in the shade of a great tree."

"A truth, my young friend, every student should bear in mind," observed the clergyman, earnestly. (182-183)

Ahab, "a Jupiter Olympus," is surely the more compelling fictional character—we're eager to see how far this madman can go—but Father Brighthopes, "a fool with a heart," might make the better uncle. When he tells Chester and another young man, Marks, "It is the heart God reads—the heart, the heart!" they get his message loud and clear.

The messages in *Moby-Dick* and *Father Brighthopes* are the same, but while Melville sensed that he had written “a wicked book,” Trowbridge knew that he had written a non-offensive one, one with a non-offensive leading character—and one that might garnish a reasonably large readership. In that sense, his choice of central character may have been as practical as the Christianity he has that character represent.

* * *

Many 21st-century readers would likely deem *Father Brighthopes* an successful work of fiction. The characters, for the most part, remain flat. We are introduced to the afflictions that they have overcome or will overcome but we are never made to feel the intensity of their suffering. If we were, we would probably be even less convinced when a few simple words from Father Brighthopes—and a dash of his sunshine—bring about seismic changes in their attitudes toward life. As the passage below illustrates, Trowbridge himself seemed to recognize the shortcomings in his book.

The present chronicle of the old clergyman’s vacation is necessarily meager. It would require a larger volume to do anything like justice to the scenes which opened, shifted, and closed, during his stay. I have only seized upon the most salient points, that presented themselves to my mind, and portrayed them with as few hasty touches as I could, without order, and with little study for effect. How much must be gone over in silence, and left entirely to the imagination! (*FB* 233)

Well, yes, a writer must expect a reader to use his or her imagination, but surely, in most readers’ view, it’s the *writer* who is most obliged to use his imagination. It’s the writer who must flesh out scenes, make the emotions convincing, and *show* how compelling and intense the conflicts are—not just summarize what they were and what became of them.

Merely apologizing for the book’s shortcomings — while suggesting that he was limited by the format he was given — does not get Trowbridge off the hook completely. And if we believe Ishmael when he tells us that “[n]o great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried

it" (*MD* 456), then we will surely be disappointed when we learn that the reason Chester has felt such shame in the presence of Father Brighthopes's sunshine is that the first time their paths crossed, inside a stagecoach, he was guilty of . . . using a swear word. The stakes, at least for the modern reader, just don't seem quite high enough. In the end, the book, as a novel, feels a bit contrived, a bit too much like an outline.

Still, it's of great interest, I think, to consider *Father Brighthopes* and *Moby-Dick* together. They are both anti-Calvinistic. They are both ultimately about the all importance of brotherly love. But while *Moby-Dick* seems built more like the Bible itself (Ahab of the Old Testament, Queequeg, three times risking or giving his life to save his fellow man, much like Christ of the New Testament), *Father Brighthopes* is much more like what the New Testament would be were it to stand alone—and without the need to complete the story that original sin began. In that case, there would not be much difference between what Father Brighthopes offers us in Trowbridge's novel and what Jesus offers us in the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus's references to the Old Testament would be lost. It would be the same if Melville had left out Ahab and focused solely on Queequeg and his spiritual counseling of Ishmael.

In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael describes how fascinating a whale's tale is, as it exhibits both magnificent strength and grace. He then compares it to typical paintings of God, the Father and God, the Son—suggesting the structure of his own novel, the juxtaposition of the hyper-masculine Ahab, so much like God, the *Father*, with the more feminine, loving Queequeg, so much like God, the *Son*—and the powerful artistic effect thereby created.

When Angelo paints even God the Father in human form, mark what robustness is there. And whatever they may reveal of the divine love in the Son, the soft, curled, hermaphroditical Italian pictures, in which his idea has been most successfully embodied; these pictures, so destitute as they are of all brawniness, hint nothing of any power, but the mere negative, feminine one of submission and endurance, which on all hands it is conceded, form the peculiar practical virtues of his teaching. (*MD* 376)

For modern readers, *Father Brighthopes* may seem a little like these “negative” pictures of Jesus Christ—without the robust pictures of God, the Father as counterpoint. It may feel destitute of brawniness and hint very little of any great power — though still offering the same “practical virtues” that the teachings of Jesus do.

Though the dramatic presentation of Father Brighthopes may be unsatisfactory in a number of ways — especially the way in which the world always seems to turn in order to provide him the opportunity to make a moving speech — the inner character he exhibits is one that can legitimately inspire. That the book both shared thematic concerns with *Moby-Dick* and appealed to the general readers of his day should not be forgotten. Many readers may have been less interested in theological debate and literary style and more interested in a simply-rendered, straight-forward, and practical moral outlook on life, one that they could easily feel made good sense in a world they instinctively felt held something of the divine. Hack work or not, *Father Brighthopes* entertained, comforted, and presented clearly an anti-Calvinistic, practical Christianity that Trowbridge believed in deeply.

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