

IS IT ALL RIGHT TO READ TROLLOPE?

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I have been reading through Trollope again and find I am becoming a little defensive about it. My friends who are Trollope readers seem defensive too. They are not sure if it is all right to read him. My friends who are not Trollope readers wonder why we do read him.

That first question, about whether it is all right to read Trollope, seems to have arisen, as everybody knows, because Trollope skewered his own reputation in his autobiography. Those orderly work habits! Those recorded earnings, down to the shillings and pence! To the Victorians he made himself seem like a Grub Street hack. But surely these days we have got over the Victorians' romantic delusion that the true mark of a life in the arts is a feckless bohemianism. In fact, Oxford University Press now has come out with new hardcover sets of the *Barsetshire* and parliamentary novels, and bright new softcover offerings of these and other Trollope works. Somebody must be buying them. There is an outpouring of new biographies. And yet (as Trollope would say — he loves to begin lines with “And yet,” or even “But yet”), something remains seriously wrong with his reputation today. There are readers who not only don't but won't read Trollope. Above all it is the English who refuse to read him. It is their idea that only horrible people do (I envision maiden aunts and retired majors). I suppose their feeling is that Trollope has become, or always was, middlebrow. He is to be lumped, in this, with Gilbert and Sullivan, who have nothing else in common with Trollope except their undervalued wonderfulness. The irony is that this essentially English author is becoming an American taste. Whoever the “horrible people” may be who read Trollope, we Americans have joined them. Frankly, I suspect we *are* the horrible people.

I talked all this out in London with a youngish person in publishing. She said, “Look: Trollope is second-rate Dickens. If we wanted that sort of thing we would read the genuine article, thank you very much.” Her companions made little English umphing sounds of accord. She added, “And anyway everyone's bored with Dickens.” I do not know why she paired Trollope with Dickens. Perhaps she meant that Dickens is middlebrow. Perhaps she was thinking, as people who have not read Trollope tend to do, of Trollope's penchant for arch names with meanings. But it is a mistake to pair Trollope with Dickens, and not only because people like me could not conceivably form a project to re-read Dickens. (Like my English friend, we are bored with Dickens.)

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The two writers have very little in common. Dickens, after all, has a progressive social agenda. He is trying to soften our inner sternness toward what today we might call the homeless, the underclass, the working poor. He wants us to see how *adorable* grubby people really are and how endearing their annoying characteristics can be, and how cruel the middle classes and their institutions can be to lovably vulnerable women and children. Trollope is not interested in any of this. It is in explicit reaction to Dickens, whom he calls “Mr. Sentiment,” that Trollope announces, in *The Warden*, that his own characters will be both endearing and venal at the same time, like people. Of course, as Trollope at once in the same place confesses, he loves Dickens; he (1993) *American Scholar* 448 marvels at Dickens’s secondary characters, who live; “yes, live, and will live” until the very name of nurse shall be Mrs. Gamp. And no doubt Dickens does transcend his own programme from time to time, notably in such masterworks as *Great Expectations*. But Trollope does not have the glamorous genius that could have given us a Miss Havisham and her Estella. These characters are too lurid, too unreal; Trollope could never have conceived of them. Trollope simply does not have the dazzle of Dickens.

My English acquaintance used the damning “second-rate.” She was expressing the general feeling that Trollope is not “literature,” not high art. He may be singularly entertaining, but he seems somehow lightweight; there is a want of grandeur there. I believe that Henry James, my other favorite writer, once said of Hardy that whatever his faults, he could *strike the tragic note*. Now, Trollope does not strike the tragic note; James called Trollope the master of the ordinary. Not that Trollope’s pages do not darken occasionally. One thinks of Melmotte’s end in *The Way We Live Now*, or the utter ruin of Lady Laura’s life in the Phineas Finn books. And there are heart-stopping missteps: the forged deed of *The Way We Live Now*, the forged will of *Orley Farm*; Lizzie Eustace’s stolen diamonds. But these shadows seem to fall gently under Trollope’s calm, compassionate eye. He is not in the tragedy business. The funny thing, though, is that I am not sure Henry James ever struck the tragic note either.

Actually, Trollope and James have quite a bit in common. I do not mean only that both writers are preoccupied by threats to unworldly people from the worldly: in Trollope, from the worldly new; in James, from the worldly old. Indeed, eerily identical material appeals to them; both make a good thing of the visiting Continental adventuress and her bohemian artist brother—James in *The Europeans*; Trollope in part of *Barchester Towers* (Trollope beat James to the punch by about twenty years). The more important thing, the grand thing these otherwise dissimilar writers give you in common, is an intimate narrative companion. He is very good company indeed, this companion: urbane, suave, worldly, yet confiding, gossipy, chatty. And this companion knows how to strike the note of hilarity.

But Trollope’s books, unlike James’s, will not build toward some paroxysm of interpersonal anguish, or some creepy revelation. James does have grandeur, even without striking the tragic note, even discounting his aesthetic theory and mannered prose. It is not at all surprising that people would make pilgrimages to James’s house in

Rye and call him “Master.” No one would think of behaving that way toward Trollope. Trollope has none of the *mystery* of James.

Anyway, all of this may be beside the point. I am beginning to suspect, rather, that if it is not all right to read Trollope these days it is because he is not “politically correct.” After all, isn’t the most powerful presence in Trollope, hovering over virtually every page, the English gentleman? The question “What is an English gentleman?” transfixes Trollope, and his characters keep falling short in a thousand ways. No one wants to be perceived as reading such stuff with curiosity. My young English friend might no more want to be caught with a book of Trollope’s than with a book of etiquette. Worse yet, there Trollope is, a civil servant—a civil servant in the post office, no less—embarrassingly preoccupied with dukes. How can we cheery egalitarians admit we share any such fascination? And what is absolutely beyond bearing, Trollope is always talking about race, birth, blood, breeding.

Actually, Trollope is much too complex to repel us on any such grounds. For one thing, he is a liberal, and not just a Liberal. In *The Warden*, Mr. Harding’s salary is what tradition has evolved it to be, but he cannot justify it to himself, since it comes from a fund meant to benefit his wards. Trollope sees when the customary is questionable. He sees that some English prejudices, or settled English ways, are bad or silly. To be sure, Trollope loves the old ways and on the whole would not change them. Mr. Harding’s salary in fact should not be much less than it is, and his wards could not profit from a shilling more than is allotted to them. When Mr. Harding does resign, the effect is only to leave his elderly wards without the nearness of a friend who has been necessary to them. In Trollope—let’s face it—change is almost always for the worse. But Trollope can also laugh at the old ways. In *Barchester Towers* he gives us the relentlessly retro Miss Thorne of Ullathorne, the squire’s maiden sister. Miss Thorne expects party guests to join in a jolly medieval game that involves getting **(1993) American Scholar 449** dusted by sacks of flour. She is miffed when nobody will play.

Trollope does have pride of race. The blond English lad is Trollope’s curled darling. But there are dark, Frenchy sorts of women in Trollope, some of whom turn out to be English, like Lizzie Eustace and *Barchester Towers*’s Signora Neroni; some to be quite nice, like Marie Melmotte (*The Way We Live Now*); and one even to be superb—Madame Max Goesler, of the parliamentary novels. And Trollope thinks the unthinkable and lets education trump blood, even marry blood. In *Doctor Thorne*, incredibly, he offers us as a romantic heroine a girl who, however ladylike, is a lowborn illegitimate. In *The Duke’s Children*, Plantaganet Palliser, that greatest Trollope Liberal of them all, winds up having to give each of his children in marriage to a very nice person he spends much of the book excluding as impossible.

We come to see that the idea of the English gentleman so cherished by Trollope is not the preoccupation of a snob but rather of a sly leveler. In book after book, his characters argue in favor of their friends and lovers of lesser birth, or rank, or station: “If

he is a gentleman [or she is a lady], what difference can it make?" In the end, Trollope's is a genial and tolerant pen.

So it should be all right to read him. But that brings me to my other question: What is good about him? Why is he always in print? Why at this moment are there people all over the world tucked up cozily with him? Of course we read Trollope, as we do Jane Austen, for social comedy. Trollope is so good at it. But there is more to Trollope than there is to Austen. I don't mean he is greater, only that he is bigger.

Trollope's world is more masculine and dynamic and scary than Austen's. This is a world of stockjobbing and newfangled railways, changing administrations, reform bills, and distrust of the established clergy. Trollope tells love stories just as Austen does, but his people are under a lot of pressure. And Trollope is a realist. A Trollope man who is financially pressed—and they almost always are—will not invariably vanish, as he would in Jane Austen or Henry James, into some remote colony or downtown office to see what can be done. Some Trollope men make real deals about phony railways, have real phony directors' meetings, and in painful scenes physically borrow money from surprisingly gullible people in the City.

Henry James once said that everything happens at dinner parties. In Jane Austen, things happen also at balls and picnics and in the front parlor. Now, I think you will permit me to say that these are rather feminine settings. But things happen in Trollope also at men's clubs—both of the right sort (the Reform), and the wrong sort (who can forget the Beargarden?); in dusty rooms in the City and in the inns of Court; in bachelors' digs; and in the House of Commons.

And think of his cast of characters. In Trollope, Jane Austen's pretentious middle-class sojourners in Bath, and her blood-proud baronets, are joined by commercial travelers selling awful metal furniture, world-class swindler financiers, powerful demagogic journalists, and members of Her Majesty's government. I have to acknowledge that even in the better books Trollope gives us some really boring heroines — good and wise ones. But he also gives us an impressive range of interesting women. There is the hoyden Viola Effingham who enters the parliamentary books in *Phineas Finn*. There is spunky naively shrewd Lizzie Eustace, and independent Lady Carbury in *The Way We Live Now*. There is ambitious Lady Laura who loves Phineas; and the overbearing Mrs. Proudie, the true Bishop of Barchester. And then there is sexy Signora Neroni, emitting a sort of "incense" that would make a man standing close to her want to touch her. There are the wise and worldly and wonderfully mature women, like Madame Max, and the wonderfully unworldly and unwise and never mature women, like Lady Glen.

All these people have a reality to them. In Trollope, as he intended, there are few out-and-out villains and few out-and-out saints. When the curtain opens on *Barchester towers*, Archdeacon Grantly is waiting, with a son's true love and grief and reverence, for the death of his father, the bishop. And yet at the same time he is hoping his father will

hurry up and die. If the government goes out before his father dies, Grantly will lose his chance to be appointed to the bishopric. Trollope makes us forgive and even sympathize with Grantly's very human worldly ambition, and he makes us believe just the same in Grantly's love and grief and reverence. (1993) *American Scholar* 450

Think of Lady Carbury in *The Way We live Now*, scheming for favorable reviews of her pastiche of a book, *Criminal Queens*. She has three editors at her feet; she is ready to give . . . not quite her all. And she charms them, and us, utterly. After all, Trollope was his mother's son. Frances Trollope lived by her pen. Her acerbic portrait of us, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*, is still read. Trollope knows that independent women of modest talents must make their way, and he can make us admire as well as smile at the courage of their little schemes.

Recently a friend asked me a fascinating question. What would Trollope have done with the story, then much in the news, of Zoë Baird's failed nomination as attorney general in the new Clinton administration? What would Trollope have made of Baird's supposed "violation" of the immigration laws she was to enforce? Trollope, I think, would have let her life go smash, and would have secured a triumph for the muckrakers of the *Jupiter*—his fictional embodiment of *The Times*—very much like their triumph in *The Warden*. But the reader would understand that Trollope regarded the noisy undoing of Zoë Baird as moralistic and absurd, quite as he did that of the warden. In *Doctor Thorne*, an incidental character, Mr. Romer, a barrister, is working for the conservative interest in a county election. A beery publican with power to deliver votes complains to Mr. Romer that after the last election his bill, presumably for beer, was not paid. Romer points out that payment was withheld because the bill was disputed, but the publican cannot be budged. "A man likes to be paid his little bill." Romer then good-naturedly pays the bill. That is all very well, but when the conservatives win, the liberals discover Romer's accommodation to the publican, and the *Jupiter* thunders forth that Romer has bought the election. A life in England becomes impossible for Romer, and friends find him something in Hong Kong. Worse, parliamentary zealots then have him recalled from Hong Kong to face utter disgrace and destruction. This although, as Trollope points out, all members were then sitting in seats it had cost them this kind of money, and much more, to win and retain. Mr. Romer's story is rather like Mr. Harding's in *The Warden*. So I think Trollope would ruin his Zoë Baird, but he would not be on the side of her triumphant destroyers.

I might be wrong about this. In *Orley Farm*, Lady Mason makes her misstep, a more serious one than Baird's, for the good of her children, and in true justice to her children. She is acquitted in a court of law. But Trollope finds the legal process a despicable sham; and notwithstanding her acquittal, and the fact that Trollope likes and sympathizes with her, he makes her do terrible penance. Far from finding absurd and moralistic the sacrifices she demands of herself, Trollope sorrowfully judges them necessary. But Trollope, the pained moralist of *Orley Farm*, seems to me less convincing and less himself than Trollope, the wry skeptic about the fates of Harding and Romer.

Trollope has bigness of scale. His characters develop over long arcs of time, over big books, over a half-dozen or a dozen books, in their tangled interrelations, back to the grandparents. To grasp the bigness of his conception, you need to see that “the Barseshire” novels and “the parliamentary” novels are not the two separate boxed sets in which we now can find them. They are much more of a whole than that. The Barseshire clerical books become parliamentary, and the parliamentary novels wind in and out of Barseshire. It is in Barseshire that the alcoholic railway magnate, Scatcherd, stands for Parliament. That shy hero, or unhero, of the parliamentary books, Plantaganet Palliser, meets his first love in a Barseshire book, *The Small House at Allington*—the pre-Glencora love only hinted at in the parliamentary books. The Duke of Omnium, that exclusive old debauchee, presides at Gatherum Castle in both series, in *Doctor Thorne* as he does in *Phineas Finn*, and even outside the two series, in *The Way We Live Now*.

The development of these people can be slapdash. Trollope occasionally kills one off between books, just to clear the slot for a new character. And the books are not truly serial books. The characters wander into the next book, but now it is somebody else’s story. Trollope keeps track of scores of them. Even within the narrower confines of a single book, one senses the massiveness of the intellect that could have created and controlled such worlds within worlds. This is not just social comedy; it is the human comedy.

Sometimes the effect can be uncanny. In *The Small House at Allington*, when we first hear of Lady Glencora, the news is only that Plantaganet Palliser is engaged to her. And when (1993) **American Scholar 451** we first meet her in *Can You Forgive Her?* she is not the title heroine; she is only an incidental character. But suddenly Trollope greets her as an old friend. He conveys the impression of old affection for her, as though the whole of her story in the five later books in which she will appear is substantially familiar to him before he has written them down. You hair stands on end when Trollope says this first hello to Lady Glen, very like the way it does when the French horn greets Clara in the last movement of Brahms’ First.

Except for *The Warden*, a perfect gem, these are not tidy, well-arranged little books. But when Trollope tells you frankly at the start that the heroine will marry the hero, he is rightly confident that you will enjoy reading him anyway. In these capacious, messy books there is room for all sorts of good things, most especially that characteristic Trollope set piece, the fox hunt. A great hunting scene is somewhere in the middle of most of Trollope’s books, the best of them in the parliamentary novels. A good deal happens in a Trollope hunt. The story moves, the characters’ lives change, and yet you feel you have been out hunting. I do not mean only that you step into the Constable-ish English landscapes Trollope fills in so deftly, although you do. There is the progress of a Trollope hunt, from the time one loiters about on horses waiting for something to happen (what happens is usually lunch, on horseback), to the time the fox is found and you stick as close as you can to the master of the hounds and ride away into danger. The field is crowded. There are the yelping dogs. There are the hangers-on and ne’re-do-wells, and

also the big men of the county, and the downright women who know what they're about, and the wise sportsmen who know when a horse must not be allowed to jump a fence, and the bounders who take shortcuts and get in at the kill without having ridden at danger at all. These fox hunts are among the jewels of English literature.

Trollope's characteristic method is to open to you, between pages thick with dialogue full of irony and tension, the great masterly internal monologues of his characters. He is interested in what people will do in a given situation; his particularly way—open a page at random and there it is—is to log on the character's internal argument, to enter the consciousness of the character and review the situation from that character's point of view. The situation is usually nerve-racking; this is why I think the question about Zoë Baird was so apropos. In *The Way We Live Now*, Melmotte's dinner for the emperor of China happens in page upon page of hilarious dialogue; and then Melmotte, near the end of his rope, has a brooding, resentful, self-deluding yet self-knowing internal monologue as he surveys the scene and contemplates his future. This is vintage Trollope.

Elegant twists in the plot transmute the characters' respective apprehensions and analyses. In Zoë Baird's story, Trollope would have given us her internal monologue on whether to come forward for the cabinet post; again, on whether to reveal a peccadillo to Clinton's people; again, on whether to withdraw. In *Mr. Scarborough's Family*, or *The Eustace Diamonds*, you see Trollope brilliantly ringing the changes on the effects on his characters' internal lives of Scarborough's shifting testamentary dispositions, or of the shifting whereabouts of the Eustace diamonds. The characters argue with themselves about how it all has come about, and about their options. They yield, or do not yield, to their weaknesses; they rationalize or reject rationalizations. When the characters speak or write a letter, any of these internal strands may motivate what they say, and so their human inconsistency from moment to moment is an open book to the reader. Some of the best scenes in Trollope are those in which the characters, in their nerve-racking situations, meet and clash and reveal themselves, if not to each other, then to us. As his manipulative old Mr. Scarborough likes to gloat, "It is as good as a play."

So here I am, once again in thrall to Trollope. There is a little bit of sadness in setting out to re-read him, because sooner or later he will be used up. Even good things come to an end. But it is heartening to me to remember that, with this most generous of authors, the end is a long way off.

Other writings by Louise Weinberg are available at

http://www.utexas.edu/law/faculty/pubs/lw482_pub.pdf