Trollope’s Chapters
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Abstract
The unit of the chapter – so fundamental to nineteenth-century prose narrative, yet so thoroughly ignored in accounts of the form of novels – is fundamental to Anthony Trollope’s work. The chapter stems from the textual practices of antiquity and of medieval biblical transmission, ultimately finding a home in the novel form. Chapters are key to Trollope’s understanding of readerly experience, in that they both license and manage the occasional inattention of the reader, while tacitly permitting an interplay between reading and not-reading; they are also key to his understanding of the temporality of personal experience, which is based on the bounded unit known as the “episode.”

‘Form’: one of the truly vexed words in literary studies, as totemic in its use as it is often ignored in literary-critical practice. Rather than be so rash as to offer a definition of ‘form,’ much less a guide to its many possible manifestations, I want instead to offer today a rather more mundane observation: that the so-called formal categories of fiction are usually, in their own ways, impositions upon the form of the novel, critical inventions (often borrowed from other esthetic or non-esthetic fields) of categories not immediately apparent in either the normal vocabulary of the novel or readers of the novel. Voice; point of view; the implied author; free indirect discourse: each not only useful but innovative approaches to the task of determining the structural units of novelistic form, and they also, collectively, comprise a specialist vocabulary. (Contrast, if you will, the seamlessness of musical discourse, where the major terms of analysis—harmony, rhythm, pitch, and so on—are continuous with the categories of composition and performance; the language is, so to speak, consistent across the different relations one might have to that particular esthetic experience. Not so, I want to claim, with the novel.) Is anything to be gained by studying form through one of the most simple, homely, of categories, so simple that it is inescapable: the chapter? Can such a mundane fact of the texture of novelistic prose become a category of formal analysis, in other words, part of the vocabulary of Form?

I want to suggest that it can, and I want furthermore to suggest that by returning form to what might be called commonsense categories of analysis, we restore at the very least some of the esthetic ingenuity of practitioners often considered formally conservative or even clumsy; and that, possibly, we recover histories of the novel hidden in plain sight. Taking the chapter as my cue, I will focus on its general shape and appearance in Anthony Trollope (using Framley Parsonage as my example), for whom the chapter was an essential unit, with a structural integrity and regularity all its own; and insofar as there might be a history of the chapter, I will suggest the centrality of Trollope to the new ways in which such a unit might be written in the mid-Victorian period. The form of the chapter, in all its inescapability (it is the form we still write in, faute de mieux) and seeming banality, is for Trollope a truly expressive form: it contains not only a technique but an ontology.
An opening premise: no bibliographic term had the psychological and cultural impact of the ‘chapter.’ It is the most prevalent way in which the technology of the novel has entered everyday speech and everyday thinking about our selves, our lives, our pasts. To ‘close that chapter of my life’ with regret; to finish a repetitive story by saying ‘and so on to the end of the chapter’; to excitedly ‘start a new chapter’: these are at once experiences of reading and experiences of living. They are ways in which our lives, in fact, take on the shape of a novel. One initial example might suffice to demonstrate my contention, as well as serving as a kind of epigraph for my inquiry. Introducing an episode early in Vanity Fair (1847-8), Thackeray announces his regret that his tale will not be more full of heroic action:

But my readers must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarcely deserves to be called a chapter at all. And yet it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody’s life, which seem to be nothing and yet affect all the rest of the history? (61)

The perfect elision here between a literary and textual practice—the thing we call a ‘chapter,’ which has a generally and vaguely agreed-upon length and shape—and the reader’s sense of biographical time is not only characteristic, and still too modern to need an editor’s footnote, but also telling. It shows us how we, perhaps despite ourselves, use novels as guides to living and remembering.

The chapter is an invention of antiquity, growing gradually out of a confused mass of techniques for segmenting text for easier reference; it stems from the practice in Roman legal texts of prefacing sections with capitula (‘head,’ or ‘heading’), brief introductory summaries of what follows. The notion of the capitulum was imported into Biblical manuscripts in late antiquity, and by the early thirteenth century ‘chapters’ were standardized forms within Western European bibles. A gradual shift took place, in which the term ‘chapter’ came to refer to the segmented unit of text, while a new term—‘argument’—came to refer to the summary heading itself; the ‘chapter,’ in other words, signified from the thirteenth century onward the division of texts into manageably sized units. Not that the practice of chaptering was welcomed without occasional concern. Perhaps, the most significant complaint against the epistemology implied by the chapter was lodged by John Locke in his 1707 An Essay for the Understanding of St. Paul’s Epistles, By Consulting St. Paul himself. Locke lamented his inability to effectively study Pauline scripture because of the sudden stops and starts enforced by the chapter and verse divisions of contemporary bibles:

‘Coherence’ versus memorable fragment: such was the conceptual battle that biblical chapters created in the sixteenth century, and such is the story of the chapter in all its various iterations. A comprehension of smaller parts rather than coherent wholes might, Locke worried, be a lesser comprehension. Yet, throughout the eighteenth century, as the chapter becomes a normative part of fictional composition, it gained more adherents than detractors, primarily for the ease it promised readers. Witness the following moment from the 1750 History of Charlotte Summers, The Fortunate Parish Girl, an anonymous novel often attributed to Sarah Fielding. When a Miss Arabella Dimple, lying half naked in bed, calls her maid Polly to fetch ‘the first Volume of the Parish Girl I was reading in the Afternoon,’ the maid returns and sits down with the book: ‘Pray, Ma’am, where shall
I begin, did your Ladyship fold down where you left off?—No, Fool, I did not; the Book is divided into Chapters on Purpose to prevent that ugly Custom of thumbing and spoiling the Leaves; and now I think on’t, the Author bid me remember, that I left off at the End of—I think it was the 6th chapter’ (68).

What the novelistic chapter does, then, is to license discontinuous reading—to aerate the reading experience by providing internal breaks that allow us to put the book down, and that ease our return to it. As Locke had feared, textual fragmentation like the chapter permits a piecemeal consumption of a text; and as a result, it also permits the infiltration of everyday life by the text. Being assured of the text’s complicity in our bit-by-bit reading (go ahead: stop here; it’s OK) allows us to interweave our lives with our reading more thoroughly. For Locke, this was a regrettable consequence of textual division: Locke envisions a world where the Biblical reader too easily, and facilely, brings their personal concerns to bear on their reading, cherry-picking moments or citations rather than considering the text as a whole. For the novelistic reader like Arabella Dimple, however, such mutual interpenetration of life and text, permitted by the blank space between chapters, makes the novel endurable.

In its transition from Biblical technology to novelistic practice, however, the chapter not only gets secularized but also ends up producing its own epistemological lesson. That lesson is what I will call the concept of the ‘episode’: a temporally bounded, internally coherent experience that can be encompassed by the chapter and which (because of the pre-novelistic characteristics of scriptural writing) biblical chapters could not express. Cervantes, Fielding after him, and countless other writers starting primarily in the eighteenth century discover the ways in which the chapter can function not just as a means of dividing text into summarizable units, but the ways in which chapters can become units of meaningful time: miniature narratives that observe Aristotle’s ‘unities’ of time, place, and action, and that can be extracted from the stream of life as a whole. If perhaps the whole sweep of life is narratively messy—without clear beginnings, neat endings, and consistent participants—there can be, within it, self-contained moments that make sense in and of themselves, that can be excerpted without harm to the work as a whole, and that can be used as places to rest, put the narrative aside, and ponder (even in its midst) the meaning of what has just passed. The modern novel, I argue here, essentially comes into being by promoting its own interior segmentations, its ease with the ‘broken and divided’ print technologies of the chapter, and the notion of the bounded unit of experience in a life.

From here I will turn to Trollope’s use of the form and particularly his attempt to naturalize it. Put in another way, Trollope ensures the survival of the chapter form not by updating its epistemology—he is committed to the notion of bounded units of experience—but by muting its appearances and transitions, by making it more discreet. The change can be marked by the disappearance in Trollope of the long chapter title modeled on Biblical capitula. Take, for instance, an entirely typical chapter heading from Dickens’s 1837 Oliver Twist: ‘Chapter The Thirteenth: Is a Very Short One, And May Appear of No Great Importance In its Place, But It Should Be Read Notwithstanding, as a Sequel to the Last, and a Key to One That Will Follow When Its Time Arrives’ (281). Not substantially different from the mid-eighteenth-century version, Dickens’s chapters play with and also employ the capitula as an explicit vehicle for authorial summary. How, then, do we get from here, from ‘Chapter 39: Mr. Samuel Weller, Being Entrusted With a Mission of Love, Proceeds to Execute it; With What Success Will Hereinafter Appear’ (Pickwick Papers 634) to ‘Chapter 19: Vulgarity’ (The Prime Minister 1.170)? Why does Trollope turn away from the garrulously self-advertising form of the chapter title (be
those advertisements Dickens’s winkingly antique titles or Eliot’s epigraphs) toward the elegant, if opaque, versions of the modern novel?

To answer this question, I will offer a catalog of some of Trollope’s most common chapter title methods, as a way to see in some wider sense his understanding of how his chapters themselves were to function.

1. Inner Quotations: perhaps the most frequent of Trollope’s devices, in which the chapter title offers a phrase that will then recur within the chapter in a variety of ways. Paradigmatic in this regard is a chapter from *Framley Parsonage*, in which the parson Mark Robarts realizes that his political and social ambitions have tainted his image as pastor. Within the chapter Robarts returns often, in solitude, to the notion that he has ‘touched pitch’—as Trollope puts it in free indirect discourse, ‘he had thought to touch pitch and not be defiled.’ The past tense of this phrase becomes a gerundive in the chapter title, however, which is ‘Touching Pitch.’ In this sense, chapter titles in Trollope often offer a keyword or phrase which the reader will then see developed within; but the keyword or phrase is usually innocuous, not repeated too overtly; and the chapter can be taken as a complete account of what the phrase signifies (this is ‘touching pitch’), even if for Trollope’s characters the experience is not yet comprehensible in its entirety. These inner quotations are often rendered in Latin (such as *Framley Parsonage’s* ‘Amantium Irae Amoris Integratio’) as chapter titles, but Anglicized within the chapters themselves, often by characters.

2. Interrogatory Statements: in which Trollope poses a question that characters within the chapter will grapple with as well. Examples from *Framley Parsonage* include ‘Is She Not Insignificant?’ and ‘Why Puck, The Pony, Was Beaten.’ Chapters such as these usually implicitly answer the preferred question; the question is not allowed to hang obtrusively over succeeding chapters.

3. Character or Place Names: the simplest, and yet in some sense most complex of Trollope’s methods, in which the chapter title with a character’s name—‘Lucy Robarts,’ or ‘Gatherum Castle,’ for instance—promises nothing less than an episode within the life of a character or place than can then be taken, synecdochally, as indicative of that character or place’s ‘character.’

This is only a partial catalog, although I think it lists the most common of Trollope’s methods. But what is common to all these methods is the following: an implicit sense that small units of narrative time (or of existence) can be labeled, and that labeling should be as discreet, as innocuous, and as mild as possible. The hectoring, or parodic hectoring, of the normative eighteenth-century chapter heading—which was far more openly indebted to Biblical capitula, and which persisted into the work of Dickens, Thackeray, even Eliot—is severely muted if not entirely abandoned. As a result, chapter transitions in Trollope become ever more delicately handled.

The bridge between chapters nine and ten of *Framley Parsonage* is typical in this regard. Chapter nine, which concludes the installment published in the March 1860 *Cornhill Magazine*, ends with a simple sentence, in free indirect discourse, that echoes in Mark Robarts’s head in regard to the ruinously unwise debt he has contracted: ‘And now, how was he to tell his wife?’ (112). Chapter ten, beginning the following month’s installment, begins with the same sentence (if without the comma), as if to quickly, without fuss, pick up the thread of the following episode. The units are distinct, but joined; separate in essence but also interdependent. They are also, as with almost all of Trollope’s chapters, committed to the Aristotelian unities: chapter nine follows Robarts’s regretful return
home from his excursion to the Whiggishly dissolute precincts of Gatherum Castle (‘The Vicar’s Return’ is its title), while chapter ten, ‘Lucy Robarts,’ traces Lucy’s introduction to the traditionalist-Tory Robarts and Courcy families at Framley Court. The shift is epistemological as well as temporal and spatial; whereas chapter nine concerns itself with actions that Fanny Robarts, Mark’s wife, cannot know —thus the ‘and how was he to tell his wife?’—chapter ten is occupied with Fanny’s perceptive appraisal of her sister-in-law Lucy, an appraisal of which Robarts is as yet ignorant and incapable of grasping.

Two worlds, then, in two chapters; I am tempted to say, two monads, nonetheless linked. The repetition of sentences bridges two disparate plots (Robarts’s fecklessness and Lucy’s disruption of Lady Lufton’s plans for her son), two serial numbers, two centers of consciousness, and two separate days, deftly and without obtrusive comment—thereby suggesting that these two chapters, and the two experiences they encapsulate, are articulated segments of an overall unity, both distinct and joined. Trollope’s technique here demonstrates how the relationship between segmented experiences (the episode) and a concept of overall education (a life) is the central formal problematic of the novel in its classical period, and how the chapter is the key structure that mediates between the singularity of certain events, the need to leave those events behind, and the need to learn from them, to summarize them and bring them to bear in the future. This is also, of course, a task of readerly epistemology: to learn to conclude one episode while opening another. The challenging task facing the novelist is, then, to explain ‘experience’—both the experience of characters and of the reader—as a function of both the segmentation and binding of separate experiences: as more than the sum of the chapters of one’s life, but dependent nonetheless on those chapters remaining isolated lessons. The chapter break therefore is a paradox: both a hum of cognitive activity (the effort to leave behind and begin anew), and yet also an invitation to rest from it, to interrupt the experience. The strain between overall coherence, in Locke’s terms, and individual episodes echoes in these white spaces. Trollope’s understanding of the formal challenge of the chapter is to make that echo as mute as possible. The form continues to be expressive, but not loudly so. Of interest here is D. A. Miller’s recent analysis of a similar sentence-repetition across a chapter divide in Jane Austen’s *Emma*; what I would suggest that Trollope’s instance shows us, in addition to Austen’s, is the persistence of interest throughout the nineteenth century in how the chapter can function as simultaneously barrier and bridge. Or, put another way: as a unit of formal play.

Can the chapter be a unit of formal analysis? Only, one might say, if it can be understood as a unit of technical interest—something novelists can wrestle with or against—and also a unit of philosophical interest. In Trollope, at least, it is both, and it is all the more ‘formal’ for the barely perceptible ways in which it operates; Trollope’s chapters are slight but significant adjustments to a textual procedure so common as to usually pass just beneath notice. To say as much is, I would suggest, to demystify Form while expanding the range of categories it might encompass. It is also to suggest that the formal imagination is both more, and less, ingenious than we have been taught.

**Short Biography**

Nicholas Dames is Theodore Kahan Associate Professor in the Humanities and Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is the author of two books on the nineteenth-century British novel: *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (Oxford, 2001), and *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford, 2007). His current
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Note

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Works Cited