Trollope, Seriality, and the ‘Dullness’ of Form

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[3rd part of conference clusters]

Abstract
Trollope’s serial fiction satirizes literary tropes and conventions in order to produce a sense of historical veracity. In the Barsetshire series, Trollope uses undeveloped or ‘embryo’ plots in order to build narrative suspense within highly conventional plots. Within plots so conventional that conclusions are foregone, Trollope engineers excitement by offering multiple paths toward the foregone conclusion.

Henry James found Anthony Trollope’s chatty, intrusive narrator to be most irritating. Trollope ‘took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, make believe,’ he wrote (116–7). Chiding Trollope’s interventions as ‘inartistic,’ James continues: ‘It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regards himself as a historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as a historian that he has the smallest locus standi. As a narrator of fictional events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a back-bone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real’ (116–7). James is correct in one sense: Anthony Trollope did not work within the conventional constraints of fictional form. Indeed, I suggest that Trollope reveled in his disruption of formal expectations that he regularly and indeed gleefully exposed the creaky machinery of mid-Victorian realism. In the Emerald City of Oz, the exhortation to ‘Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain’ draws all attention to the man behind the curtain. Much to the chagrin of James, Trollope glories in the clear prominence of his own narrative invisibility.

He does so most shamelessly when his narrator is forced to do something—such as to draw a multiplot novel to its close. For example, near the end of Barchester Towers, Trollope writes, ‘What novelist, what Fielding, what Scott, what George Sand, or Sue, or Dumas, can impart an interest to the last chapter of his fictitious history?…Do I not myself know that I am at this moment in want of a dozen pages, and that I am sick with cudgeling my brains to find them?’ (481). Granting that critics find novelists’ conclusions lame, Trollope argues that novelists are trapped by the selfsame critics’ expectations: ‘When we become dull we offend your intellect; and we must become dull or we should offend your taste…[For] who can apportion out and dovetail his incidents, dialogues, characters, and descriptive morsels, so as to fit them all exactly into 930 pages, without either compressing them unnaturally, or extending them artificially at the end of his labour?’ (481). Like Thackeray before him, as Nicholas Dames has suggested in his contribution to this cluster, Trollope satirizes form itself; in the process, Trollope outs the open secrets of realist conventions. So, at the end of Doctor Thorne, he has brought his marriage plot to its expected climax—yet he writes, ‘And now I find that I have not one page—not half a page—for the wedding dress. But what matters? Will it not all be found written in the columns of the Morning Post?’ (556).
In *The Small House at Allington*, Trollope places this same critique in the mouth of a character, Bell Dale. Her sister Lily has just closed ‘that exquisite new novel which had just completed itself, amidst the jarring criticisms of the youth and age of the reading public.’ Bell, in contrast, retorts acerbically, ‘It is always right in the novels. That’s why I don’t like them. They are too sweet’ (462). As I have argued elsewhere, *The Small House* itself is anything but the ‘sweet’ Victorian novel that makes Bell Dale go all Henry James. Both here and in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Trollope resists the obvious happy ending by refusing to consummate the romance of Lily Dale and Johnny Eames.

My intention in this article is to focus a different kind of attention on the way Trollope composes ‘history.’ Like James I see a troubled connection between Trollope’s dismantling of narrative conventions and the strategies he uses to construct a sense of historical reality. Unlike James, however, I believe that Trollope is deeply invested in the production of a ‘realistic’ history, and that Trollope’s satire of formal tropes advances his constitution of the ‘real.’ Trollope displays this pattern with particular clarity in the Barsetshire series, which commenced with *The Warden*, published in 1855, and ran through *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, published in 1867. In these six novels, Trollope experiments relentlessly with the tensions—not the correlations but the tensions—between novelistic capacity on one hand, and the romantic plots of *Bildung*, romance, and liberal modernity on the other. The Barsetshire novels are full of what I will call below ‘embryo plots,’ a strategy that Trollope deploys in order to situate the plot points that actually develop among a thousand ‘plots not taken,’ possibilities left to die on the vine. Trollope’s appreciation of the contingencies of form extends as well to the tropes of conclusion he utilizes in the Barsetshire novels: it is a great and obvious fib when Trollope moans about having just twelve pages or half a page left to him when he knows he is writing a series. Indeed, I’d go so far as to wager that Trollope’s melodramatic frustration with the constraints of novelistic conclusion functions as an advertisement for the serial form: The novel which cannot end does not end. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.

Nicholas Dames has recently probed Trollope’s thematic concern with ‘career’ as a means of exposing the logic of seriality in the Barsetshire novels. Dames suggests that serial temporality offers Trollope an aesthetic alternative to the short, sharp shocks that characterized the sensation novels so powerful in the marketplace of the later Barsetshire novels. Dames describes Trollope’s serial temporality as ‘an aesthetics of slow accumulation.’ He writes: ‘Unlike narratives of “vocation,” where sudden epiphanies of devotion or failure are the norm, the career-narrative presents a sequence of tutelary examples whose full meaning can only be known once the entire sequence has been consumed and all the examples are present to compare to one another. The aesthetic appeal of the career narrative, aside from its deep familiarity to a middle-class readership, is perhaps the savoring of tactical time: the dilated, elongated temporality of careful choice, where each new piece of information slightly adjusts our sense of the previous choices made’ (253–4). Dames’s analysis demonstrates how effectively Trollope deploys a thematic investigation—a new middle-class career-oriented masculinity—on behalf of a formal project. By elongating time, Trollope produces serial fiction in which each novel is compelling and compulsively readable because each individual novel is in-conclusive; because no one novel in the series stands synecdochally for the whole.

If Trollope’s serial narratives require a dilatory narrative logic in such contrast to the logic of sensation fiction, how, then, does Trollope manage the production of narrative suspense? In *Barchester Towers*, he presents his narrative manifesto: ‘It is not destined that
Eleanor should marry Mr Slope or Bertie Stanhope... He ventures to reprobate that system which goes so far to violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers, by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery to the fate of their favorite personage... Our doctrine is that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with one another’ (126–7). Though the novelistic conventions of conclusion are known to one and all, Trollope is astutely aware that the aesthetic pleasure of novelistic consumption depends on the pretense that the conventions are not the conventions. Thus, he speaks to the politics of the spoiler:

How grievous a thing it is to have the pleasure of your novel destroyed by the ill-considered triumph of a previous reader. ‘Oh, you needn’t be alarmed for Augusta, of course she accepts Gustavus in the end.’ ‘How very ill-natured you are, Susan,’ says Kitty, with tears in her eyes; ‘I don’t care a bit about it now.’ Dear Kitty, if you will read my book, you may defy the ill-nature of your sister. There shall be no secret that she can tell you. Nay, take the third volume if you please—learn from the last pages all the results of our troubled story, and the story shall have lost none of its interest, if indeed there be any interest in it to lose. (127)

Trollope’s claim to narrative transparency is a red herring, a strategic statement of egalitarian transparency that distributes the suspense conventionally resolved in volume three liberally throughout the narrative. It is hard to imagine how Trollope’s ideal of transparency would keep dear Kitty reading not only to the end of the novel but across that looming chasm to the next book in the series. I would argue, in fact, that Trollope lures Kitty to the next page, chapter, and indeed novel by engineering a *micropolitics* of suspense in the form of subjunctive plots and counterfactuals. Such ‘embryo’ plots build suspense by situating narrative tension within individual psyches that are tested by the uncertain expectations of social modernity. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that in the Barsetshire series Trollope attempts to produce, on dear Kitty’s behalf, a post-1848 narrative epistemology: it may be true that everyone knows how *novels* end, but Trollope underscores the point that in the modern social logic of the 1850s, the social order itself is uncontainable within the conventions of narrative form. This is a new world in which anything might happen, in which the rich become poor and the poor rich, and the nomenclature of ‘gentleman’s daughter’ and ‘professional man’ transcends class standing. In this world, the immanence of possibility burdens even casual social transactions with the thrill of the mysterious. Trollope puts immanent possibility to strategic use and subtly redirects formal tensions from the global to the local, from the narrative to the individual psyche.

The Barsetshire novels are littered with embryo plots, a very few of which are described exactly so. Just twenty pages after the narrator of *Barchester Towers* has assured the reader that Mr Slope will not marry Eleanor, Mr Slope is surprised—while visiting the alluring Signora Neroni—to find ‘his own embryo spouse made one of the party’ (159). Great with ‘embryo grandeur’ through his presumed match with Eleanor, Mr Slope continues nonetheless to court (or so he believes) Signora Neroni (442). The matchmaking Miss Thorne attempts to manage Eleanor’s presumed romance with Mr Arabin by foregoing the chance to ‘perplex her with her embryo lord’ (459). Later still the scheme to make Mr Arabin Dean of Barchester is withheld from him until ‘he received the minister’s letter from the hands of his embryo father-in-law’ (489). Some of these ‘embryos’ develop into fully-realized plots. Others, the ones pertaining to Mr Slope’s scheme to marry Eleanor, do not, a point on which the reader has been briefed in advance. This is significant: the reader knows something Mr Slope does not know; she or he knows that Eleanor is no embryo Mrs Slope. Nonetheless the *fantasy*, the certainty,
of its realization is entirely immanent for Mr Slope. Until he is rudely checked by a slap on the cheek, Mr Slope occupies a counterfactual narrative whose facts are every bit as plausible—and far more socially visible—than those of the competing embryo plot involving Eleanor and Mr Arabin.

In bourgeois Barchester, romantic eligibility floats freely above all manner of antiquated social distinctions. This is a problem for every one of the Barsetshire novels. In fact, there is no barrier to disqualify Mr Slope from consideration as Eleanor’s suitor; much to the narrator’s chagrin, women adore Mr Slope: ‘He knows how to say a soft word in the proper place; he knows how to adapt his flattery to the ears of his hearers; he knows the wiles of the serpent, and he uses them. Could Mr Slope have adapted his manners to men as well as to women, could he ever have learnt the ways of a gentleman, he might have risen to great things’ (55). Alas, like his marriage to Eleanor, Mr Slope’s patterning as a gentleman is destined to remain consigned to the status of plot embryo. The point, simply, is that such plots are socially plausible if appalling possibilities. *Barchester Towers* is the second in a series of six novels that offers the cumulative appearance of social stability against a backdrop of dramatic and even revolutionary social change. Trollope manufactures the appearance of stability through the shrewd manipulation of narratively-fascinating, counterfactual, ‘embryo’ plots. By this means he legitimizes the plots that are realized not as inevitable, but as meritorious victors forged in the crucible of open competition.

I describe here a form of natural selection among competing narratives. To read a Trollope novel through the lens of the embryo or subjunctive plot is to encounter thousands of paths not taken: the seeds of plot sown and reaped within the novel at hand; the seeds of plot sown and reaped elsewhere in the series; the seeds of plot sown and reaped out of sight of the readers altogether. This enables Trollope to transcend the mean conventions of narrative conclusion through his implicit acknowledgment that the novels and the series canonize just one set of plots among the many histories that might have been—or that may still be—recorded.

The strategy enables Trollope to have his cake and eat it too—to disavow formal conventions as tired and mechanical, and to reinsinuate a telos newly legitimized by its status as the survivor among many possible outcomes. Catherine Gallagher has written about the forceful effects of counterfactual narratives, ‘the kernel of which is an attempt to change the present by subtracting a crucial past event and thereby sending history off in an alternative direction’ (11). In the Barsetshire series, Trollope deploys plot counterfactuals at the micro-narrative level. To be a character in Trollope’s realist world is to exist in a multiple-choice universe even as agency and volition themselves are mediated by the constraints of social circumstance. Just as in Gallagher’s plots of ‘undoing,’ however, Trollope’s embryo plots proliferate in order to suggest that history is always in the process of creating itself, in some sense serendipitously. This is how Trollope manages to portray massive social change firmly within the framework of social stability.

As a result, the ‘history’ that Trollope describes emerges as far from inevitable and indeed as entirely contingent upon chance and circumstance. ‘No one could say what might happen’ writes the narrator in a moment of speculation about the romantic fate of Frank Gresham in *Dr Thorne* (81). ‘No one could say what might happen’ because the social and economic structures that seemed natural to the novel’s older generations have given way to what appears to be a democratic meritocracy. Frank Gresham faces his own multiple-choice test—whether to marry for love and not for money, whether to return to finish university, whether to strike out and earn his own living—and in this he also figures modern masculinity as it comes haltingly into being. Fortunately for Frank, Trollope gives him credit for effort: his love match to the penniless and illegitimate Mary
Thorne turns into a marriage for money when Mary inherits the massive fortune her alcoholic uncle accumulated as a builder of railways and other industrial novelties. How can a novelist who so obnoxiously disavows the conventions of ending write a fairy-tale ending of such hackneyed predictability? I have no doubt that dear Kitty and her sister sighed with delight when Frank and Mary settle into a love match padded with wealth so absurd that Frank is able to undo his own father’s impecunious history. I’m sure that the pleasure of Kitty and her sister is diminished not one bit by the fact that Trollope allows them a full-frontal view of the machinery of plot grinding away for hundreds of pages before this ending is realized. The pleasure, I suggest, comes precisely from the sorting process by which bad outcomes are discarded one by one in favor of the one viable embryo: the right romance.

This might begin to explain how Trollope gets away with using the same plot twice or arguably three times within the Barsetshire series. Lucy Robarts of *Framley Parsonage*, a woman of modest means, refuses to marry her wealthy and aristocratic suitor until his mother, Lady Lufton, proposes to her on his behalf. Just 6 years later, in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Lucy’s young friend Grace Crawley has grown into a well-educated and impoverished young beauty who vows not to marry her wealthy suitor, Henry Gresham, without his parents’ approval. That approval requires that Grace’s father be exonerated of the crime of stealing a cheque for 20 pounds. The *Framley* and *Last Chronicle* plots come together in the figure of old Lady Lufton, who in the *Last Chronicle* reflects on what she has learned through her personal history as documented in *Framley Parsonage*: ‘But at last she had yielded—not from lack of power, for the circumstances had been such that at the moment of yielding she had still the power in her hand of staying the marriage—but she had yielded because she had perceived that her son was in earnest. She had yielded, and had kissed the dust; but from the moment in which her lips had so touched the ground, she had taken great joy in the new daughter whom her son had brought into the house. Since that she had learned to think that young people might perhaps be right, and that old people might perhaps be wrong’ (581).

Clearly, Trollope is not worried about building suspense toward a foregone conclusion: the novel and the Barsetshire series conclude with the marriage of Grace Crawley to Henry Grantley. Her father, exonerated, performs the ceremony. All rejoice. The young know best and the old are educable when confronted with genuine virtue. In one case the young people are comfortably affluent; in the other, impossibly rich. They live happily ever after. Dear Kitty might have started the novel with Chapter 84, its last, with no detriment to her reading pleasure, for suspense dwells elsewhere in Trollope’s series fiction. In the thousands of possible plots, Trollope pits against one another, both within individual novels and within the series, the question is not *whether* the right history will be written, but *how*.

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**Short Biography**

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**Note**

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