Trollopian Form: An Introduction

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[1st part of conference clusters]

Abstract

Once regarded as a minor Victorian novelist, Anthony Trollope has in recent decades become a focus of significant attention. Trollope’s enhanced profile in the field of Victorian studies has doubtless much to do with the interest in liberalism after more than twenty years of neo-liberal economic and cultural ascendancy. Yet while Trollope’s reputation as the novelist par excellence of Victorian liberalism is relevant to the papers collected here, their special motive is to explore his distinctiveness as a practitioner of form. This introduction provides contexts for the three papers that follow, exploring the premise that Trollope’s formal innovativeness has been too long overlooked.

Of course, at least one of literature’s piquant critical voices has seen ‘Trollopian Form’ as an oxymoron. Writing in The Century in 1883, Henry James identified Trollope with a stolid English philistinism—an ideal that holds it ‘rather dangerous to be definitely or consciously an artist.’ In this view, Trollope ‘went in…for having as little form as possible’ (385). Since that time, generations of critics have tended to confirm James’s assessment, indicting a plodding realism that lacks formal reflexivity or self-conscious literariness. Yet, as John Carlos Rowe has observed, the many similarities between Trollope and James suggest that the younger author protested too much. ‘For both writers, the aim of the realistic novel is to teach us how to read culture…[A]lthough James and Trollope are eminently critical of the divisions and distinctions of classed societies, both refuse the anomaly of any complete rejection of such order, substituting instead the sort of “fine discriminations” that come from those sensitive characters capable of understanding and interpreting the different and often overlapping “interests” that the various discourses in a society are made to serve’ (64).

‘Fine discriminations’ offers an interesting perspective on Trollope in formal as well as characterological terms. In ‘Trollope’s Chapters,’ the first of the papers, Nicholas Dames describes the chapter as a mechanism of temporal discrimination to which Trollope adds elements of formal finesse. For Dames, Trollope’s renovation of this novelistic device...
marks a notable turn toward discretion; the moment when British fiction moves from ‘Chapter 38: Mr. Samuel Weller, Being Entrusted With a Mission of Love, Proceeds to Execute it; With What Success Will Hereinafter Appear’ (from Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, 1837) to ‘Chapter 19: Vulgarity’ (from Trollope’s *The Prime Minister*, 1876). In a way that updates realism’s capture of modern experience, Trollope’s tersely named chapters accommodate the torque of atomization and simultaneity. As titular modesty confirms ‘the bounded unit of experience in a life,’ Trollope’s fiction all the more ably recognizes the novel’s challenge as one of translating isolated Bildung into accessible founts of knowledge. In direct contrast to the almost nauseous prolixity with which James associated his predecessor, Trollope’s chapters bring concision and opacity to the task of evoking modernity’s paradoxical situation: irreducible singularity born of totalizing interdependence.

If Trollope’s chapters thus represent formal innovation so subtle as almost to demystify form, the Trollopian series is a rather different kettle of fish as Carolyn Dever illustrates in ‘Trollope, Seriality, and the “Dullness” of Form.’ In one of the few recent studies devoted to the genre, Laurie Langbauer shows that Trollope’s Barsetshire and Palliser series, each of which features six novels published over more than 10 years, should not be dismissed as mere ideological props for the bourgeois society they depict. Dever, in complementary fashion, confronts James head on: ‘Trollope does not eschew form,’ she suggests, but rather satirizes it, ‘in the process…out[ing] the open secrets of realist conventions.’ Contrasting the dilatory temporality of the series to the snappy sensation genre, Dever shows how the Trollopian narrator, famous for divulging plot details entre nous, diffuses narrative suspense over multiple three-deckers. Trollope achieves such artful padding in part through the generating of counterfactual ‘embryo’ plots—a device that adds the spice of multiple outcomes while endowing those plots that do bear fruit with the legitimacy of ‘natural selection.’ The task of fine discrimination is, from this vantage, embedded in the narration of contingencies and the imperceptible forces that somehow shape them. Simultaneously prolonging and gratifying the taste for serendipity, Trollope manages both to ironize and stabilize everyday life.

As the first two papers make clear, Barsetshire novels such as *Doctor Thorne*, *Framley Parsonage* and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* can playfully warp realist conventions while sustaining realist form in part by hewing to a quasi-romantic structure of light providentialism. Barsetshire’s optimistic worldview helps Trollope’s svelte chapters to negotiate atomism just as it assures pleasure when blighted embryo plots give way to fecund alternatives. Light providentialism survives in the first Palliser novel, *Can You Forgive Her?,* when, in a permutation of Barsetshire’s favorite marriage plot, Alice Vavasour plans to jilt the virtuous John Grey in favor of her ignoble cousin George (an embryonic plot since the novel’s many pages conspire to realize the marriage between Alice and John). In a classic aside that articulates the structure of light providentialism, Trollope’s narrator declares that he is ‘inclined to believe that most men and women take their lots as they find them, marrying as the birds do by force of nature, and going on with their mates with a general, though not perhaps an undisturbed satisfaction, feeling inwardly assured that Providence, if it have not done the very best for them, has done for them as well as they could for themselves with all the thought in the world’ (1.109).

Yet, by and large, Trollope’s subsequent Palliser novels offer far bleaker and less providentialistic pictures of Victorian modernity—a shift signaled by the transfer from the firm unity of place (Barsetshire as the salt of England) to the more tenuous anchor of personality (the political, moral, and domestic ups-and-downs of the Pallisers and their set). Trollope’s chapter titles are as laconic, but the form of the series has become less
comically compensatory and more sociologically descriptive. Thus, whereas Trollope’s Barsetshire novels, as Dever notes, regularize the contingent social order of the 1850s by redirecting ‘formal tensions from the global to the local,’ the Palliser novels, centered on the London metropolis, offer limited refuge from the powerful disruptions of capitalist and imperial modernity. In the third paper in this cluster, ‘The Trollopian Geopolitical Aesthetic,’ Lauren M. E. Goodlad argues that the most misleading feature of so much realist criticism is its misunderstanding of the transitional period that gave rise to the Palliser novels. Opening with the aftermath of the Indian rebellion and closing with the emergence of a fully-fledged New Imperialism, the decades that saw Trollope writing *The Eustace Diamonds* and *Phineas Redux* are ones to which no criticism focused on European politics can do full justice. Although *The Eustace Diamonds* is, in fact, a formally experimental work and its sequel more conventional, both novels elucidate the imperial encounter’s esthetic impact on realist narrative: the formal vitality of which does not end in 1848 but, in many ways, begins in 1857.

Taken together, this suite of papers anticipates the end of an oxymoron: ‘Trollopian Form,’ the authors agree, should open the door to a fully post-Jamesean criticism in which formalist study enhances the understanding of Trollope, while appreciation of Trollope enhances the understanding of form.

**Short Biography**

Lauren M. E. Goodlad is associate professor of English and director of the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Johns Hopkins, 2003); the co-editor of *Goth: Undead Subculture* (Duke, 2007); and the co-editor of ‘Victorian Internationalisms,’ a special issue of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* (RaVoN). Goodlad is now at work completing *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic* excerpts from which have appeared in journals such as *PMLA* and *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

**Notes**

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2 For a more recent comparison see Elsie Michie’s ‘The Odd Couple: Anthony Trollope and Henry James.’ For the argument that Trollope’s fiction is formally mixed and open—offsetting traditional realist conventions with sophisticated irony and parody—see James Kincaid’s *The Novels of Anthony Trollope*. More recently, Laurie Langbauer has depicted Trollope’s serial fiction as a narrative mode of proto-deconstruction; see chapter two of her *Novels of Everyday Life*.

**Works Cited**


