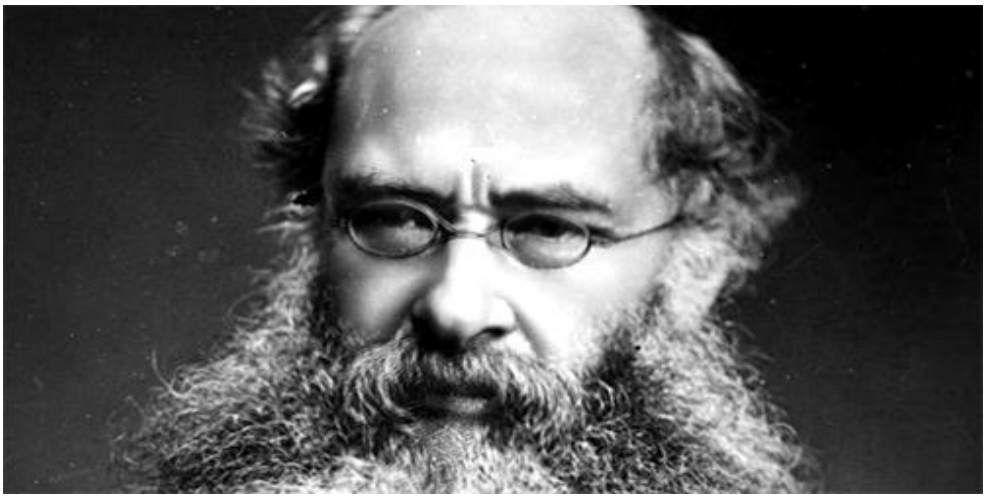

Victorian Realism, Anthony Trollope & Charles Dickens

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Dickens was a subversive writer, or so George Orwell insists in his essay on the great nineteenth-century novelist who was wildly popular on both sides of the Atlantic.[1] Anthony Trollope, I may confidently assert, was *not* a subversive writer or a rebel, impeaching the load-bearing institutions of Victorian England in his fiction. Indeed, he wrote in his *Autobiography* that "I have always thought that to sit in the British Parliament should be the highest object of ambition to every educated Englishman."[2] It would be misleading to classify him with our contemporary terms, *conservative* or *liberal,* but, believing as he did in the "divine diminution" of inequality,[3] he adhered more closely to 21st-century ideals of liberalism than to those of conservatism.

He was three years younger than Dickens, and, like him, Trollope had felt himself excluded from the gentry in his youth, coveting popularity and never winning it among the boys at his school,[4] and Trollope's unpopularity as a boy fed a ravenous desire for status as an adult. Financial success as an author opened doors for him, especially the doors to the numerous private men's clubs he joined. As Victoria Glendinning, one of his biographers, noted, "The clubs were the key to a pleasant and gentlemanly social life, and a wide circle of acquaintances."[5]

[1] George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," in *Dickens, Dali & Others.* San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, 2.
[2] Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography and Other Writings.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 181.
[3] Ibid, 183.
[4] Ibid, 18.
[5] Victoria Glendinning, *Anthony Trollope.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 293.

As the novelist L.P. Hartley observed in *The Go-Between:* "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."[6] It would be a futile endeavor to attempt to map Trollope's character or his life onto 21st-century England or, indeed, onto any other country or any other time than his own.

> "His writings reflect admirably the manners and thoughts of the dominant classes in our society; they are full of brilliancy and good sense; and without the slightest pretence of any loft philosophy of life, contain a good deal of quiet teaching in their way."[7]

This appeared in an unsigned review of *Can You Forgive Her?* in 1865, and it reflected a common reaction to Trollope's novels in his own day. Another reviewer observed that "he looks at human nature as a man looks out of a window, painting exactly what he sees, up to the exact square of a pane."[8] An American writer remarked: "Perhaps no author gives the American reader a more correct view of English society in its average aspect."[9] Contemporaries of Trollope said much the same thing of him, again and again: that he accurately reflected the English society in which he lived. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote that Trollope's fictional world was "just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were being made a show of."[10] In 1863 an unsigned reviewer even complained, while praising the latest Trollope novel, *Rachel Ray,* of too much verisimilitude: "We wish fiction would do something for us besides giving us these accurate likenesses of the common run of those whom we see or know."[11]

If we are curious, then, about the day-to-day reality of English life, at its more privileged end, in the middle of the reign of Queen Victoria, we could do worse than turn to Trollope, for we have the testimony of those who were there that the behavior of his characters and their settings were accurate, or at least plausible. One of my favorite British intellectuals in my youth, A.L. Rowse, wrote that "Trollope created a world, a parallel in fiction to the historian's mid-Victorian age."[12] Rather than facts and figures about the British empire and its maintenance, or the accomplishments of one prime minister as opposed to his predecessors and successors, or the social consequences of industrialism, Trollope gives us conversations of well-educated people in their drawing rooms, bedrooms, and clubs, their expectations and their fears, their business

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[6] L.P. Hartley. *The Go-Between.* New York: New York Review of Books, 2002, 17.
[7] Unsigned review of *Can You Forgive Her?* in *Month,* September 1865, in *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage,* edited by Donald Smalley. London: Routledge, 2013, 243.
[8] Unsigned notice, *The Times,* 26 August 1869, in *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage,* 329.
[9] Edith Simcox, unpublished review of *He Knew He Was Right,* in *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage,* 322.
[10] Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography,* 93.
[11] Unsigned notice, *Saturday Review,* 24 October 1863, in *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage,* edited by Donald Smalley. London: Routledge, 2013, 187.
[12] A.L. Rowse. "Trollope's *Autobiography,*" in *Trollope: Centenary Essays,* edited by John Halperin. London: Macmillan Press, 1982, 141.

dealings, and their love affairs. What he withholds from us are the schemes and fantasies of which they themselves could never speak: the erotic side of their lives, seductions and unwanted pregnancies. Indeed, even *desired* and lawful pregnancies had to be cloaked in euphemistic phrases that deflected their meanings, so that an uninformed reader might gather the impression that a married woman was newly hopeful of something, but the precise nature of the hoped-for event was left implicit. What Trollope gives us, Rowse insisted, is "a faithful portrait of his age."[13]

Trollope's characters are obstinate to a striking degree. Quite often the story of a novel turns on the stubbornness of a central character, and not infrequently that character is a woman. I do not know that this is a characteristic that has been much remarked in Trollope's fiction, but his female protagonists are conspicuously self-willed. Whether we are talking about Alice Vavasor in *Can You Forgive Her?,* Emily Trevelyan in *He Knew He Was Right,* Lady Glencora Palliser in *The Prime Minister,* or Lily Dale in *The Small House at Allington,* the women in his novels are seldom portrayed as passive or yielding. In his *Autobiography,* Trollope tells us that he killed off one of his strongest female characters, the bishop's wife, Mrs. Proudie, because he overheard two clergymen excoriating her in the drawing room of the Athenaeum, one of his London clubs. "I got up," Trollope tells us, "and standing between them, I acknowledged myself to be the culprit. 'As to Mrs Proudie,' I said, 'I will go home and kill her before the week is over.' And so I did."[14] Mrs. Proudie, who appears in five Trollope novels, stamps herself onto every page on which she appears as a woman not to be trifled with. A.L. Rowse, among others, disagrees in the strongest terms with the two unnamed clergymen in the Athenaeum: "she is a wonderful character, of whom we can never have enough."[15]

Trollope's male characters are capable of being no less stubborn than the women in his novels. In *He Knew He Was Right,* Louis Trevelyan is even more obdurate than his wife, and his perverse unwillingness to deal reasonably with her results ultimately in his insanity. A contemporary reviewer in the *Spectator,* however, judged Mrs. Trevelyan—"a self-willed, haughty, steely woman"—to be the party more at fault,[16] and that is scarcely surprising, because in 1869, the year *He Knew He Was Right* was published, the just predominance of the husband over the wife was accepted almost everywhere in Europe and North America. In fact, the surprising development in this novel is the author's tacit support of the wife's side of the dispute. Here is something a reader encounters again and again in Trollope: his even-handedness in considering the female perspective when it is opposed to the male. More often than not, the wife's case is seen to be at least as reasonable as her husband's when the two are in dispute, and in those instances when the wife's actions have unhappy consequences—as when, in *The Prime*

[13] Ibid, 141-142.
[14] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 172.
[15] Rowse, "Trollope's *Autobiography,*" 144.
[16] Unsigned notice, *Spectator,* 12 June 1869, in *The Critical Heritage,* 325-326.

Minister, Lady Glencora supports for a vacant seat in the House of Commons a candidate her husband, the prime minister, does not wish to support—her reasoning is thoroughly characteristic of her, as aspect of her nature, rather than being a piece of feminine silliness that might be held to the discredit of her sex.

It has been too infrequently noted, I think, that Trollope's women are as idiosyncratic, thinking, feeling, inconsistent, and estimable persons, as his men. George Eliot's female characters are a match in complexity and intelligence for Trollope's, perhaps, but she has a superior excuse for delving into the minds of her female characters. I cannot think of another male novelist in the anglophone world who dwelt in the minds of his female characters as much as Trollope did. In an era when women could not vote and in which women were generally regarded as not only the weaker but the more emotional and less rational sex, Trollope gave to the reading public a cast of female characters who could easily hold their own against, and sometimes even triumph over, their male counterparts in terms of their psyches, their humanity, and their human appeal.

Trollope, like other English authors in the middle of the nineteenth century, was writing to fill a prescribed quota, either in monthly installments of a magazine or in volumes for the publisher to sell. Mulishness could be a stalling tactic, both for the character and for the author. It is a plot device that Trollope uses frequently, perhaps excessively, but it also seems to reflect his own preferences in human nature: unwillingness to yield a position taken on principle—as, for example, by Plantagenet Palliser, one of his favorites, as prime minister—is not only not a fault but a positive virtue that Trollope admires even in women, despite a strong societal bias against it. A character holding pertinaciously to a principle, or even to a whim, in the teeth of mounting opposition could supply an author with a much longer run, in terms of the story, than if that character were to relent and apologize after only a single chapter.

This device for prolonging the conflict in his story not infrequently has exhausted some of his less patient readers. Trollope's twentieth-century biographer, Victoria Glendinning, apparently finds that Alice Vavasor's refusal, in *Can You Forgive Her?,* to give up the man who doesn't love her and accept the man who does stretches the issue beyond endurance, for she dismisses Alice as "proud and tiresome."[17] Lily Dale, in *The Small House at Allington,* is likewise perversely determined, it seems, to cling to the humiliation of having been jilted by a snob, and Trollope himself, in *An Autobiography,* condemns her as "a female prig."[18] One is reminded, though, that the choice of a husband was, in most cases, the most significant decision a woman could make in her entire life, and therefore it is not surprising that a strong-willed woman might opt to deliberate for weeks or months before casting her lot with a man who, after all, she may know only superficially and with whom she has conversed primarily in the company of others.

[17] Victoria Glendinning. *Anthony Trollope,* 445.
[18] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 113.

In *Can You Forgive Her?* there is a passage in chapter six, "The Bridge Over the Rhine," in which three cousins—Alice, George, and Kate Vavasor, the protagonists of one of the two dominant story threads of the novel—are standing together on a bridge in Basle, Switzerland. Alice, the heroine of the tale, shivers. George, to whom she is about the become betrothed, suggests that she is cold. Alice denies that she is, and the following exchange ensues, with George speaking first:

> "If you are, let us go in. I thought you shivered with the night air."
>
> "It wasn't that. I was thinking of something. Don't you ever think of things that make you shiver?"
>
> "Indeed I do, very often;—so often that I have to do my shivering inwardly. Otherwise people would think that I had the palsy."
>
> "I don't mean things of moment," said Alice. "Little bits of things make me do it;—perhaps a word that I said and ought not to have said ten years ago;—the most ordinary little mistakes, even my own past thoughts to myself about the merest trifles. They are always making me shiver."[19]

This little shiver of conscience is a small window into the character of Alice Vavasor, preparing us for her—as some readers find them—overly refined scruples. These scruples will lead her, in the 384 pages that follow the scene on the bridge, to switch back and forth between fiancés in a way that many readers, including Victoria Glendinning and the youthful Henry James, have found tiresome. But the story of the human race, including all the individual stories that are compounded in it, is nothing more than the tracking of the movements of consciousness, and in following so closely upon Alice Vavasor's consciousness, Trollope is offering his readers a more fully rounded character—and a female character, at that—than those ordinarily introduced to readers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the consciousness of Alice Vavasor, as presented in *Can You Forgive Her?,* may serve as her credentials to be received, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto, into full citizenship in the community of fictional characters whose breath we almost feel on the backs of our necks as we read, a polyglot citizenship restricted by boundaries neither national nor temporal.

Alice Vavasor flushes with color, Galatea-like, as Trollope summons her into his novel, and she is not the only one of his characters to do this. Mrs. Proudie, Lady Glencora Palliser, Josiah Crawley, and others of Trollope's characters also refuse to lie quiescently entombed in the novels in which we find them but linger with us after we have closed the book and visit us in odd moments, sometimes even when uninvited. This is what our favorite characters in fiction do: they refuse to be re-absorbed by the oblivion from which their authors have coaxed them.

Henry James noted Trollope's evident fondness for his female characters:

[19] Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, 63.

> Trollope settled down steadily to the English girl; he took possession of her, and turned her inside out. He never made her a subject of heartless satire, as cynical fabulists of other lands have been known to make the shining daughters of those climes; he bestowed upon her the most serious, the most patient, the most tender, the most copious considerations. He is evidently always more or less in love with her, and it is a wonder how under these circumstances he should make her so objective, plant her so well on her feet. But, as I have said, if he was a lover, he was a paternal lover; as competent as a father who has had fifty daughters.[20]

For Trollope, as James noted: "Character, in any sense in which we can get at it, is action, and action is plot. . . . Trollope's great apprehension of the real, which is what made him so interesting, came to him through his desire to satisfy us on this point—to tell us what certain people were and what they did in consequence of being so."[21]

When we talk about characters who continue to live among us long after we have set aside the novels in which we have made their acquaintance, Charles Dickens necessarily enters the conversation. Born three years before Trollope, Dickens was famous as a novelist almost twenty years before Trollope won public favor with *The Warden,* the first in his "Chronicles of Barsetshire" series. Dickens was to other Victorian novelists much as Shakespeare was to other Elizabethan playwrights, dominating the field so thoroughly that it is possible to forget that he had any contemporary rivals. In his *Autobiography* Trollope says as little as possible about Dickens, while heaping praise on William Makepeace Thackeray ("His knowledge of human nature was supreme.")[22] and George Eliot ("At the present moment George Eliot is the first of English novelists."),[23] while grudgingly acknowledging Dickens's success with the public ("probably the most popular English novelist of any time").[24]

The Dickens tide swamped all the smaller boats for the better part of the nineteenth century. Many of Dickens's characters are more familiar to readers today than the most famous Victorian statesmen. What wanderer in the fiction stacks of the public library can cite a single salient fact about Lord Palmerston or William Ewart Gladstone? Wilkins Micawber, however, is a permanent guest in the consciousness of anybody who has read *David Copperfield* or has seen Ralph Richardson inhabit him in the 1970 TV dramatization of the novel directed by Delbert Mann.

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[20] Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," *Partial Portraits,* in *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Donald Smalley. London: Routledge, 2013, 542.
[21] Ibid., 530.
[22] Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography,* 152.
[23] Ibid., 153.
[24] Ibid., 154.

Very few presidents, prime ministers, or generals come alive on the pages in which their deeds are recorded. Wilkins Micawber, like Abraham Lincoln and only a handful of political leaders (FDR, Churchill), belongs to the ages, and there are platoons of Dickens characters who live more fully in the mind than many of our flesh-and-blood acquaintances. Mr. Murdstone, also from *David Copperfield,* is one of them, casting his lowering frown at us across two centuries. And not just the main characters in Dickens, but the incidental figures who appear briefly and then disappear, like Mr. Vincent Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby,* or "the infant phenomenon" from the same novel, refuse to be dismissed from the mind when the book is returned to its shelf. "He was rather a low sort of pony," Mr. Crummles says of an equine member of his theater troupe. "The fact is, he had been originally jobbed out by the day, and he never quite got over his old habits. He was clever in melodrama, too, but too broad—too broad."[25]

The knock against Dickens's characters, both in his own day and the present, is that they are—or, at any rate, many of them are—like that overworked pony, too broad, too broad. Wackford Squeers, the schoolmaster in *Nicholas Nickleby*, is certainly grotesque, as are many of the characters in Dickens; we need not fret that we will ever encounter the like in our own lives, but the degree of grotesquerie varies. Grotesques are not uncommon in Victorian fiction or in fiction of any age. Heathcliff is a grotesque, as are most of the characters in *Wuthering Heights.* A grotesque is a character who breathes only the peculiar atmosphere of a certain fictional world, usually a single novel. He, she, or it will not survive in *our* atmosphere, or in the atmosphere of our imaginations, except as an amusing oddity or freak.

There are grotesques in Trollope's fiction, too, I suppose, but they are not exhibitionists to the extent that Dickens's are. They don't leap off the page at you. Trollope held that the characters in a novel should be neither better nor worse than the people one invites to dinner.[26] He was opposed to the mawkishness often encountered in Dickens, as when excessively frail characters are persecuted by excessively wicked ones.[27] Many readers, I think, both in Dickens's day and in our own, would maintain that his weaknesses, such as his mawkishness and his grotesque characters, were also his strengths. We take Dickens all in all, even though he makes us cringe at times.

"Trollope is not what is called a colourist," as Henry James observed in his recollection of Trollope after the latter's death.[28] That is to say, Trollope's scenery is not as lavishly painted as Dickens's. Any number of scenes in Dickens might illustrate his descriptive profuseness, but perhaps the following passage from *Dombey and Son* will suffice:

[25] Charles Dickens. *Nicholas Nickleby.* London: Penguin, 2003, 280.
[26] Richard Stang. *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850-1870.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, 145.
[27] A.L. Rowse, "Trollope's *Autobiography,*" 144.
[28] Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," 532.

> The Castle of this ogress and child-queller was in a steep by-street in Brighton; where the soil was more than usually chalky, flinty, and sterile, and the houses were more than usually brittle and thin; where the front-gardens had the unaccountable property of producing nothing but marigolds, whatever was sown in them; and where snails were constantly discovered holding on to the street doors, and other public places they were not expected to ornament, with the tenacity of cupping-glasses. In the winter time the air couldn't be got out of the Castle, and in the summer time it couldn't be got in. There was such a continual reverberation of wind in it, that it sounded like a great shell, which the inhabitants were obliged to hold to their ears night and day, whether they liked it or no.[29]

While not remarkable for its appearance in any Dickens novel, the passage above could never been mistaken as having come from Trollope's pen. Dickens's world, as a physical place, is not only more minutely rendered, in terms of detail, but more sensuously imagined than anything in Trollope, and this is a contributing argument supporting Dickens as, by far, the greatest English-language novelist of his age.

Realism was the most fruitful literary movement of the mid-nineteenth century.[30] It was an emanation of the burgeoning middle-class, which cared less for tradition than for the conditions of the moment, combining hopefulness for a better future and anxiety about the present. It valued prudence, decency, and stability.[31] According to the British literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, "The novels of Anthony Trollope are standard realist works which seek to pass themselves off as slices of real life."[32] But, as Eagleton also points out, "If the form is hard to pin down, it is partly because what counts as realist is culturally variable,"[33] and "art presents things as they are only by an imaginative transformation of them—one which may make them seem even more real than they appear in everyday life."[34] Eagleton implies that perhaps Trollope did not transform reality *enough* for his novels to quality as literary realism at its best.

If Dickens's realism is marred by what Eagleton calls his "bunch of grotesques, perverts, amiable idiots and moral monstrosities,"[35] Trollope's is comparably free of this defect, although occasionally he introduces characters—in the criticism of his own time, often referred to as "vulgar"—who deserve demotion to the class of caricature.

In his review of *Can You Forgive Her?,* written in September 1865, when he was twenty-two, Henry James regretted the length at which Trollope dwelt upon "a vulgar widow" and two

[29] Charles Dickens. *Dombey and Son.* Boston: Squid Ink Classics, 85-86.
[30] Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850-1870,* 139.
[31] Terry Eagleton. *The Real Thing: Reflections on a Literary Form.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024, 37-39.
[32] Ibid., 79.
[33] Ibid., 43
[34] Ibid., 57.
[35] Terry Eagleton. *The English Novel: An Introduction.* Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005, 149.

of her "vulgar suitors."[36] I am in complete concord with the young James on this point. Smirking at the antics of yokels has an honored pedigree in literature, and Trollope is doing no more than following standard practice in giving his readers two such in that novel, the wealthy farmer Cheesacre and the down-at-the-heels retired soldier Captain Bellfield in that novel, but their competition for the hand of a rich widow, Mrs. Greenow, soon becomes tedious. Trollope attenuates it in the manner of a boor confident that his story is riotously funny. We know, in fact, exactly what Trollope thinks of these characters, because he tells us in his *Autobiography:* "The humorous characters, which are also taken from the play,—a buxom widow who with her eyes open chooses the most scampish of two selfish suitors because he is the better looking—are well done. Mrs Greenow, between Captain Bellfield and Mr Cheesacre, is very good fun—as far as the fun of novels is."[37]

Not quite on every page of a Dickens novel, but almost certainly in every chapter, the reader is likely to encounter new characters emerging on the periphery of the action or suddenly thrown into the midst of it, like Miss Miff and Cousin Feenix in *Dombey and Son,* both of whom appear, recruited from what one might imagine to be a milling crowd of such characters, all of them awaiting the author's summons. Trollope's characters may seem schematic in comparison to Dickens's, so few and comparatively mild are the eccentricities they exhibit. There is no Mr. Toots in Trollope, writing letters to himself from distinguished people and exclaiming, whenever anything untoward happens to him: "It's of no consequence!" Also lacking in Trollope, though, are the uncomplaining, though mistreated, characters of unadulterated sweetness and galling humility such as Dickens's Florence Dombey in the novel just mentioned. Her Christ-like forbearance is scarcely to be borne by even the most tractable of readers. Similarly, Dickens's villains, like Paul Dombey the elder, are so unremittingly remote from any touch of human warmth as to lose something of their plausibility; none of us, I hope, has ever encountered in "real" life a person of such implacable malice. You are unlikely to come across such a character in Trollope.

"I must frankly confess to not having read everything that proceeded from his pen," wrote Henry James in 1883, not long after Trollope's death.[38] I must confess to a similar lapse in conscientiousness. Relatively few people, I imagine, have read more than a few of Trollope's forty-seven novels. James added, "It ceased to seem obligatory to have read his last story; it ceased soon to be very possible to know which was his last." [39] Keeping up with Trollope was a problem for readers even in Trollope's lifetime; his output was so inhumanly enormous. In his *Autobiography,* Trollope tells us of the regimen he created for himself: he would write forty pages per week, every week, come what may. "I have prided myself on completing my work

[36] Henry James, *Nation,* 28 September 1865, in *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage,* 251.
[37] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 114.
[38] Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," 537.
[39] Ibid.

exactly within the proposed dimensions. But I have prided myself especially in completing it within the proposed time,—and I have always done so."[40] This rate of production sent over two thousand pages to his publishers every year. Trollope is proud of his prodigious production, which, as he observes toward the end of his *Autobiography,* "I think are more in amount than the works of any other living English author."[41]

He affects not to understand writers who wait upon inspiration. "To me it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting."[42] But then comes the Trollopian humility: "I am ready to admit the great variations in brain power which are exhibited by the products of different men, and am not disposed to rank my own very high."[43]

A.L. Rowse argues that Trollope must be numbered among his own harshest critics. He has a "passion for self-depreciation" in his *Autobiography* and "really did think that he was no genius." But Rowse adds, "there he was wrong."[44] He advances a tentative explanation for Trollope's seemingly perverse under-valuation of his own work: the Victorians were "unselfaware", and Trollope "had the Victorian dislike of probing too far into himself."[45] I find this unconvincing. Twenty-two years after finishing his first novel, Trollope resigned from the Post Office, which had employed him since his twentieth year.[46] This clinging to his day job, long after he had achieved a considerable financial success as a popular novelist, suggests insecurity. Feelings of inferiority had haunted him since adolescence, at least,[47] and though he pushed back, later in life, by demonstrating his clubbability, he never became a monster of egotism, judging himself to be a lesser artist than, for example, Thackeray. Holding a civil service position through the most productive years of adult life does not convey towering self-confidence, but rather a relentless anxiety about failure. Contrary to what Rowse suggests, Trollope *was* self-aware, and to an unusual degree, as his *Autobiography* demonstrates. Moreover, Rowse is surely mistaken in alleging the Victorians generally were deficient in self-awareness.

"It is not unjust to say that he sacrificed quality to quantity," Henry James wrote after Trollope's death.[48] Trollope insisted that "My novels, whether good or bad, have been as good as I could make them."[49] What it comes down to, I think, is that Henry James and Anthony Trollope were very different sorts of writers; the daily work habits of one may not have seemed

[40] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 78-79.
[41] Ibid., 223.
[42] Ibid., 79.
[43] Ibid., 80.
[44] Rowse, "Trollope's *Autobiography,*" 137.
[45] Ibid., 138.
[46] Victoria Glendinning, *Anthony Trollope,* 365.
[47] Ibid., 88.
[48] Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," 525.
[49] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 80.

natural to the other. Indeed, the expectations and ambitions of one cannot with assurance be attributed to the other. Rather than judge Trollope by Henry James's measure, we ought, I think, to take him at his word: he wrote the only way he could, and if his method of composition denied him the chance of ever writing a book like *The Portrait of a Lady,* that was a misfortune to which he was easily reconciled. Trollope could admire other living novelists, but he did not seem to envy them.

Anthony Trollope wrote realist novels in a period when the nature of realism was in some dispute. The definitions for *realism* and *realist* remain elusive to this day, which may explain why Terry Eagleton, in his book *The Real Thing: Reflections on a Literary Form,* devotes two chapters to the question, "What is Realism?" The term, *realism*, was introduced into English literary criticism in 1853, in reference to the stories of Honoré de Balzac.[50] Realism is not always synonymous with plainness, Eagleton tells us. "For the most part it is a sober, no-nonsense affair, hostile for the most part to the stylised art of the older, more aristocratic social order. It is the favored form of a middle class which is for the most part at ease with its world, and which enjoys contemplating its own face in the mirror of the art that it produces."[51] By this definition, Trollope is a quintessentially realist novelist. As Henry James argued, "His great, his inestimable merit was a complete appreciation of the usual."[52]

When Trollope was writing the concept most directly opposed to realism was idealism, which was embraced by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who advocated that fiction should be judged by "how far it embodies what we can imagine," rather than what we have actually seen.[53] "This anti-mimetic theory was very closely related to the aesthetic speculation of the German post-Kantian philosophers, whom Bulwer, in his enthusiasm for the German Romantic movement, read widely."[54] Now removed from German Romanticism, we may regard realism in literature with some skepticism as a concept that served for a time to draw attention to one aspect of literature rather than others, especially to the view of the world adopted by an emerging middle class. Realism in the middle of the nineteenth century might be likened to photography or to museum recreations of the natural world. Readers of realistic fiction could recognize themselves and their own social milieus in the novels they read. In truth, though, realism was always a style of representation, although even the authors of realistic works may have been unconscious of the degree to which those works were adjusting to a new regime of stylization.

Stylization in this context means the adoption of an idiom or a certain kind of metaphor, the idiom seeming to the author to be more "authentic" than the idiom it is replacing. All of this is fairly standard literary theory of our own time.

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[50] Eagleton, *The Real Thing,* 32.
[51] Ibid., 32-33.
[52] Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," 527.
[53] Stang. *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850-1870,* 153.
[54] Ibid.

Just as, in viewing Renaissance art, the visitor to the Uffizi or the Vatican Museum must accept the convention that Christ had shoulder-length auburn hair and that the Holy Land looked suspiciously like Renaissance Italy, so the reader of mid-Victorian realist fiction must accept conventions that are pervasive but nowhere made explicit. The reader submits to the assumption that the author has unlimited access to the minds of numerous fictional characters, often of different sexes and a range of ages, and that the author's language is adequate to rendering their consciousnesses. It may not occur to the reader that consciousness does not flow in a stream of words or that language falls short of executing its assignment. The sense of dread, for example, which may pervade thought for a few minutes or an hour, is like a colored light thrown over a scene in a play but not acknowledged in anything the characters say or do. Words are a translation of thought offered by a translator whose grasp of the original language is imperfect.

There are innumerable ways in which realism in literature fails to render a full appreciation of human experience, and in acknowledgment of this literature has continued to refine its techniques from Trollope's day to our own. Trollope, however, seems to have been satisfied with his own command of the language of experience, and I don't think he doubted that his characters were virtually as "real" as the men he met at his various clubs. Indeed, he tells us so in his *Autobiography:* "I have lived with my characters, and thence has come whatever success I have obtained. There is a gallery of them, and of all in that gallery I may say that I know the tone of the voice, and the colour of the hair, every flame of the eye, and the very clothes they wear."[55] A few pages before Trollope tells us that Plantagenet Palliser, who becomes the duke of Omnium as he progresses through the novels, "stands more firmly on the ground than any other personage I have created."[56] In this he was mistaken, misled, probably, by the prejudice of class, which was pervasive in nineteenth-century England. It was natural for Trollope to believe that his noblest character was also his best. Nobility is sprinkled through his novels like raisins in a rice pudding, but Plantagenet Palliser, when he succeeds to the title of duke upon his uncle's death, is certainly, to borrow a phrase from Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* "the *crème de la crème*." To a twenty-first-century reader Plantagenet Palliser may come off as brittle and insufferably haughty (though Trollope assures us that the duke's seeming haughtiness is really no worse than a disinclination to engage in what we now call "small talk" at social gatherings).

Trollope's most convincing characters—those standing firmly on the ground under them—are more generally, I would argue, his women than his men, and more often characters drawn from the middle classes than those plucked from the aristocracy. He is a dealer in fictional realism, and he stands on the firmest ground, himself, when he is depicting the lives of English men and women of his own class.

[55] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 146.
[56] Ibid., 117.

The success of literary realism over the past century and a half may obscure the fact that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was still possible to view novels of the sort written by Dickens, George Eliot, and Trollope as scruffy imitations of more exalted literary forms. It must be remembered that in that era the novel still struggled for acceptance as a literary form to be accepted on an equal footing—or, at any rate, a footing not far below—drama and epic poetry.[57] David Masson, a literary critic, a contemporary of Trollope amd the author of *British Novelists and Their Styles,* regarded the novels of his day with considerable scorn. He wrote, "We do not often see now that effort at artistic perfection, that calm resolution to infuse into a performance the concentrated thought and observation of the writer, and to give it the final roundness and finish, which did exist in old times, and which supreme authorities have always recommended." Masson held that the novel, at its best, approached the verse epic and adapted to prose the effects of narrative poetry.[58] Masson denigrated prose fiction for its sameness and for being merely faithful studies of contemporary society, which was not, in his view, sufficiently epic in nature. He wished to see more of "the grand, the elemental, the ideal."[59]

A century after Masson inveighed against the dullness of novels in mid-Victorian England, there were yet critics who clung to his vision, though they no longer held up the verse epic as their ideal. They rushed to extol door-stopper novels offering their readers historical or sociological vistas and compendia of "groundbreaking" ideas. Novels such as Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* were seized upon as contemporary epics, on the underlying assumption that fiction could be "important" only if it were "uplifting" and comprehended a sweep of the best in contemporary thought; a virtual college education between cloth-bound covers. In order not to waste his or her time, the reader should learn something before finishing a work of fiction.

Trollope himself would probably not have disagreed with this view of literary fiction. He readily accepted the assignment to be a guide to the young and a guardian of feminine virtue. He also maintained that the novelist was necessarily a teacher, or rather a clergyman out of vestments: "he must teach whether he wish to teach or no. How shall he teach lessons of virtue and at the same time make himself a delight to his readers? But the novelist, if he have a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman, and must have his own system of ethics."[60]

In his *Autobiography,* Trollope is chiefly concerned to defend English prose fiction from the charge that it induces immodesty and immorality in the young women who read it, and it particular he speaks out for Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Thackeray, Dickens, and George Eliot: "Can any one by search through the works of the six great English novelists I

[57] Stang. *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850-1870,* 47.
[58] Ibid., 86.
[59] Ibid., 88.
[60] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 139.

have named, find a scene, a passage, or a word that would teach a girl to be immodest, or a man to be dishonest?"[61] Trollope would never have marched under the banner of "Art for Art's Sake," but that has something to do with the time into which he was born. \He was unprepared, as was Henry James, to think of his novels as artistic creations, but James was born twenty-eight years after Trollope and belonged to a completely different realm of sensibility. James followed Flaubert, whereas Trollope followed Austen and Scott.

For Trollope, prose fiction operated in the realm of imagination and solicited the sympathies of its readers, particularly the young.[62] It was a form of amusement that saved itself from frivolity by maintaining high standards of morality and decorum.[63] The teaching of morality in both sexes and modesty in women was what saved the novel from being merely an "idle pastime."[64] Poetry held pride of place in literature, owing to its "nobility of expression" and "divine grace with words.[65] Poetry was art; prose fiction was amusement allied with gentle moral instruction. Too much laboring over sentences by a writer of novels would leave upon the page the smell of lamp oil.[66] It must be remembered that in the middle of the nineteenth century the novel still struggled for acceptance as a literary form that might be considered a cousin to drama and epic poetry, though belonging to a cadet branch of the family.

Trollope acknowledged George Eliot as the first among living English novelists in his day, but he thought that she exercised too much of her imagination in analyzing her characters rather than in their creation, and in her later works, he said, she was more of a philosopher than a novelist.[67] Trollope and Eliot were contemporaries; he was born four years before she was and died two years after she did, the two maintained a friendship through most of their productive years as novelists, and Trollope felt affection and respect for her.[68] It should not surprise us, therefore, that there are similarities in their conceptions of human nature. In particular, the difficulties set loose upon society by young women who show tendencies to think for themselves form a large part of the matter of *Middlemarch* and *Can You Forgive Her?* Dorothea Brooke and Alice Vavasor are not rebellious by nature, but each is determined to act according to her own lights, and this leads to consternation among the people who most care for her.

In Trollope's novel *Can You Forgive Her?* Alice Vavasor's stubborn independence of mind, regarding her engagement to Mr. Grey, is contrasted with Lady Glencora Palliser's unwillingness to put her love for Burgo Fitzgerald firmly behind her. Lady Glencora is persuaded by family and friends to marry Plantagenet Palliser instead of Fitzgerald, although it's Fitzgerald

[61] Ibid., 140.
[62] Ibid., 138.
[63] Ibid., 139.
[64] Ibid., 94.
[65] Ibid., 136.
[66] Ibid., 112.
[67] Ibid., 153.
[68] Virginia Glendinning, *Anthony Trollope,* 489.

she loves, and this decision is supported by Lady Glencora's friend, Alice Vavasor. Alice's canceling of her engagement to Mr. Grey is presented in a more equivocal light, hence the title of the novel in which she figures as a principal character.

Dorothea Brooke's acceptance of Edward Casaubon's proposal of marriage, which dismays those who love her, turns out to be a debacle for her; she is saved from a lifetime of misery only by Casaubon's death. Unlike Alice Vavasor, however, Dorothea begins, in the misery of her marriage, to manifest some of the qualities of saintliness enumerated by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience:* asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity.[69]

Alice Vavasor—about whom Trollope inquires if forgiveness is possible—is almost, despite the indecision that leads her to jilt Mr. Grey, as ascetic and pure of heart as Dorothea. Indeed, Alice's jilting of Mr. Grey may be regarded as an expression of humility; she is activated in part by her conviction that she cannot make Mr. Grey happy in marriage.

There are probably at least a few readers, over the century and a half since Trollope wrote, who find that Alice Vavasor's indecision as to whom to marry is dragged on, from chapter to chapter, at a tedious length. These same readers may secretly believe that they would have dispatched half a dozen uncles in the time that Hamlet wasted trying to nerve himself up to dispatch one. Suitors should be wed and uncles eliminated with conviction and celerity. But the mid-nineteenth saw things differently. Once married, a young middle or upper-class woman would almost certainly find that the field in which her will could operate would be drastically confined to domestic matters: at most she might have a say in the hiring and firing of domestic servants, if she and her husband were fortunate enough to be able to afford servants.

Scenes involving Alice Vavasor and Lady Glencora in *Can You Forgive Her?* illustrate Trollope's ability, unusual in a male author, to eavesdrop on women together in the absence of their male protectors and to record the differences in tone between two women talking together confidentially and either one of them talking to a man. This might have seemed a trivial accomplishment to a reader in mid-Victorian England, or to a book reviewer of that period, but to a reader in the twenty-first century it marks Trollope's pervasive sympathy for—and intimate complicity with—his characters, and particularly his female characters.

Trollope, as a writer of fiction, had some points in common with an American novelist of the twentieth century: John O'Hara. To be sure, O'Hara's oeuvre was considerably smaller than the Englishman's, but both authors concentrated their attentions on the gentry in their respective nations. Ernest Hemingway and others chided O'Hara for his evident regret at not having attended Yale, and Trollope was acutely conscious of not having attended Oxford or Cambridge, as was Thomas Hardy. Both O'Hara and Trollope had experienced reversals in their families' fortunes when they were young. O'Hara, prevented by his father's death from attending Yale, was obliged to become a newspaper reporter, while Trollope became a clerk in the General Post

[69] William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, edited by Bruce Kuklick. New York: Library of America, 251.

Office. Both writers made much, in their later lives, of their material success, and their successes were to some extent founded on their abilities to invest themselves imaginatively in the minds of their female characters.

The effort to conform to the strictures of the English class system presented Anthony Trollope with a challenge that, at the beginning of his career, seemed certain to defeat him. The deprivations forced on him by his father's failures as a provider were to shape his character and his views on society and politics for the rest of his life. His sense of having been a pariah as a boy at Harrow and Winchester schools likely contributed to his seemingly obsessive clubbishness in later life. As a successful author, his chosen society comprised the men with whom he dined and played cards at the Garrick, the Arts, the Athenaeum, the Cosmopolitan, and the Civil Service Club. This evident need for signs of acceptance into the most exalted strata of society was another characteristic he had in common with O'Hara and Marcel Proust.

Trollope acknowledged that Dickens was the most popular novelist of his day, that his novels were not injurious to morality, and that the names of many of Dickens's characters had become household words throughout the anglophone world, "as though they were human beings." But as far as Trollope was concerned, Dickens's characters were puppets invested with a charm that "enabled him to dispense with human nature. There is a drollery about them, in my estimation, very much below the humour of Thackeray. Nor is the pathos of Dickens human. It is stagey and melodramatic."[70] Trollope did not think much of Dickens's prose style, either, of which, he wrote, "it is impossible to speak in praise. It is jerky, ungrammatical, and created by himself in defiance of rules."[71] It is quite possible, of course, to admit that Trollope has scored points with certain of his thrusts at Dickens—the pathos *is* melodramatic, much of the time—without coming anywhere near to convincing us that Thackeray is the greater novelist. Grotesques, perverts, amiable idiots, and moral monstrosities mingle with the crowd of his other characters, because Dickens is profligate. Life swarms onto his page. Entering a Dickens novel such as *Nicholas Nickleby* is like walking onto the concourse of a thronged airport or shopping mall and feeling oneself almost assaulted by so much humanity on the hoof: so many faces, each carefully particularized and representing a world of its own. There is almost too much to see, too many names. It is confusing, disorienting. Thackeray's world is narrower than Trollope's or Dickens's, and he is more worshipful of the aristocracy than either of them. Thackeray is a novelist. Dickens is a phenomenon.

But then, Trollope is also a phenomenon. Unlike Dickens, he is not profligate. His characters are not as exotic or as consistently entertaining as Dickens's, and he rarely induces laughter in a reader, while Dickens frequently does. "I don't think Trollope has enough energy as a novelist to make us want to read him."[72] This is the verdict of a literature professor I respect

[70] Trollope, *Autobiography,* 155.
[71] Ibid.
[72] John Farrell. "Good Question!" podcast, episode 19.

highly, and I little doubt that it represents the prevailing opinion among professors of literature over the past century, but it reveals a prejudice in favor of the exotic as against the mundane in literature. This is a little like a preference for Dostoevski over Tolstoy or the movies of Steven Spielberg over those of Louis Malle or Robert Lowell's poetry over Elizabeth Bishop's. Aesthetic preferences are notoriously difficult to defend or attack. The exoticism of *The Brothers Karamazov* need not blind us to the more domestic virtues of *Anna Karenina,* enjoyment of *Jaws* can sit comfortably beside an admiration for *My Dinner with Andre*. Feeling a shiver of aesthetic pleasure while reading "Skunk Hour" does not deaden the appeal of "At the Fishhouses." In the 2016 presidential primaries, Donald Trump tagged one of his opponents, Jeb Bush, with the epithet, "low-energy." Professor Farrell's dismissal of Trollope has a similar ring. It might be argued that the nation would have been better served by a "low-energy" president than by Trump. Literature runs well on high-octane fuels, but a reader may opt for battery-driven fiction.

Alice Vavasor's dilemma, as she struggles to decide between the two men who have proposed to her, is certainly a domestic drama, and it is drawn out to such a length that many, perhaps most, readers may find their interest flagging long before the conclusion of *Can You Forgive Her?* Twenty-first century readers may become impatient with Alice's apparent docility in scenes that seem to cry out for her to talk back to the lover who is browbeating her in her own drawing room, but the impatient reader must always bear in mind the line from L.P Hartley quoted earlier in this essay: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Alice Vavasor did not have the choices available to a female character even sixty years later in the novels of Virginia Woolf.

Any attempt to impose our sense of justice on real or fictional characters who lived a century or more before us is likely to lure us to the bench from which we will feel impelled to condemn them on charges of racial, ethnic, cultural, or sexual insensitivity, if not outright racism, male chauvinism, or a panoply of other hideous crimes against humanity. The antisemitism that flies off the pages of Thackeray's novels, for example, may cause the reader of today to gasp in horror or disbelief, though for most devout Church of England congregants during Queen Victoria's reign, the allusions to "Hebrews" were almost innocuous. Our sense of exasperation with the nineteenth century may be prodded into indignation by conceptions of feminine virtue that condemned a woman for even slight breaches of decorum, but that was how society was conducted then, and it was not the fault of the author or any of the characters that it was so.

After you have come to favor an author, you are likely to look for, and find, some virtues even in that author's weaker productions. This is particularly fortunate for Trollope; very little of his fiction—indeed, none of it—can be admired for its sustained brilliance. His imagination looks threadbare in comparison to Dickens's, and his interstitial soliloquizing about his characters and life in general is woefully inferior to George Eliot's. His repertory company is large and varied, but the actors summoned onto his stage represent a comparatively narrow range of humanity. They do not barge into the reader's life as Dickens's do; compared to the figures you are likely to encounter in almost any Dickens novel, Trollope's may seem subdued and

conventional, but then Wally and Andre, in *My Dinner with Andre,* are subdued and conventional in comparison to Quint and Hooper in *Jaws.*

Surely, one source of the attraction that nineteenth-century British fiction has long exerted on Americans—as well as on readers of other nationalities, including British—is a fascination with and a sort of wondering awe at the aristocracy who glide through the pages of Thackeray and Trollope. A plebeian reader in Idaho or southern California, while reading about how Lady Glencora Palliser entertains her guests—while never having to lift a finger to provide the food or the entertainment—will be one of that party in the imagination who converse easily with dukes and duchesses. Naturally, the reader's mind shies away from the possibility of being one of the housemaids or the liveried footmen in Lady Glencora's employ.

The vicarious pleasure in reading about day-long entertainments at a country estate derives entirely from seeing oneself exquisitely attired and coiffed—thanks to servants of course—and mixing as an equal with people of the highest rank. There is an indulgence for the reader, especially in the novels of Thackeray and Trollope, that is cognate to that of watching television costume dramas such as *Upstairs, Downstairs, Downton Abbey,* and *The Gilded Age.* Let's face it, the rich have always been egregiously fascinating to plebeians. The wealthy of the distant past—when people got about in coaches and women wore floor-length gowns and lots of jewels—are perhaps more glamorous than our contemporary rich, who merely cavort on yachts and have sex more often than we do, or so we imagine.

Awareness of caste is omnipresent in Trollope's fiction, as it is in the novels of every other Victorian writer, because it was omnipresent in Victorian society. To a reader in the twenty-first century, the obsession with caste may seem to impinge on life to an extent that is stifling—don't those people ever get tired of bowing and addressing other people as "Your Grace"?—but the reader must remember that whatever pervades life, and has always pervaded it, is accepted by most people as the condition natural to life, as clothes and hot food. It does not appear either right or wrong, just or unjust, but a given, like ruts in dirt roads, something that may cause annoyance from time to time but that is borne because it is unavoidable.

Of course, readers in Trollope's day might remind themselves that the French had, toward the end of the previous century, made a violent attempt to shrug off caste and rearrange their society on an egalitarian and rational basis, but look how *that* turned out. The Terror brought on by the French Revolution—memorably evoked by Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*—stood as a lesson to all who might dream of performing a similar exercise in *lèse-majesté.* In the long run, the monarchy and the nobility were restored in France, and all the bloodshed, it could be argued, had been for nothing. Besides, Victorian readers could tell themselves, conditions in England had never been as bad as those in France under the *ancien régime.* The English king was not an absolute monarch, and the English had a Parliament to which they could address their grievances.

Nevertheless, life in England was structured by caste. Some were superior to others, and that superiority derived solely from birth. The landed aristocracy were not only wealthier than

other people, they were not obliged to earn their wealth, and they demanded deference from their inferiors, having received that deference from time out of mind. Structure is sensible. That society has a certain structure is, in a way, comforting for both high and low, because society without some sort of structure would be chaos. Society in the United States today, structured as it is on wealth, has a flimsiness that contributes to the anxiety of its citizens. Victorian England has a reassuring solidity. Trollope never for a moment doubts the essential correctness of the caste system. For him, the aristocracy is as essential to a stable society as Edmund Burke said it was. Without a conception of nobility, we would have only material wealth to serve as an object of admiration and envy, and then we would be no better than Americans.

One of the necessary conditions of a caste system, at least in a nation in which democracy has planted its foot, is that it be permeable, but not *too* permeable. People may rise, but only in limited numbers, for if *anybody* can rise in caste, the entire system will break down. Trollope's disdain for Jews is an expression of English society's resistance to those persons who, even if they are born on British soil and carry British passports, are not entirely assimilated. We see this in a parlour-maid's instinctive hostility to Mr. Levy, who appears at the front door and wishes to see Alice Vavasor in *Can You Forgive Her?* "We all know the tone in which servants announce a gentleman when they know that the gentleman is not a gentleman. Mr. Levy was certainly not a gentleman of the sort to which she had been most accustomed. He was a little dark man, with sharp eyes, set very near to each other in his head, with a beaked nose, thick at the bridge, and a black moustache, but no other beard."[73] In *The Way We Live Now* the unworthy intruder is Augustus Melmotte, who is suspected of being a Jew, and in *The Prime Minister* he is Ferdinand Lopez, also suspected of being a Jew. Even to be suspected of being Jewish should disqualify an applicant for admission to the gentry, in Trollope's view of the matter.

The caste system held that it took at least three generations to produce a gentleman. Whether or not a person qualified as a gentleman or lady was determined by many things, and the importance of class distinction provided much of the fuel for Trollope's plots. Whether to marry the son of an earl or the son of a tailor was a decision so fraught with consequences that it would readily have been recognized by Victorian readers as momentous, easily as momentous as the choice of a career in the army or in the clergy could be for a young man.

If we grant that Anthony Trollope was a lesser novelist than George Eliot or Charles Dickens, as I think we must, the question arises: "Why read Trollope?" His books tend to be very long, and even the best of them contain arid patches that may extend over entire chapters. His characters lack the density of Eliot's and the madly proliferating diversity of Dickens's. It is frequently possible in Trollope, though seldom in Eliot or Dickens, to feel that the characters have done a reverse Pinocchio, turning from flesh into wood, and when this happens the novel gasps along on life support until a more plausible character turns up.

[73] Anthony Trollope. *Can You Forgive Her?* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, chapter LX, 216-217.

With all his faults, though, Trollope remains a novelist you cannot afford to skip if you want to see the Victorians as they saw themselves. It would be a mistake, I think, to read Trollope instead of Eliot or Dickens, but reading even one or two of his novels opens a window through which it may be possible to glimpse the now-mythical realm in which society was more carefully divided into classes than it has been since, approximately, 1910.

We turn to Trollope after Eliot and Dickens as we used to turn, when I was a boy, from movies to television. Yes, movies were more deeply satisfying, at least occasionally, but there was a deal of fun to be found in "The New Steve Allen Show" (1961-1965) and "The Twilight Zone" (1959-1964). The lesser thing offers its own inimitable rewards.

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