Introduction

TROLLOPE AND HIS ART: SOME SUGGESTIONS

I

IN WORLD literature there are only a few masterpieces of autobiography. It is generally conceded that Anthony Trollope's is among them. Recognition of the merit of this book has come very slowly, however, for it has none of the sensationalism that makes for immediate and widespread interest. Trollope was not a hero of romance. His pages do not flame with the amorous adventures of Cellini, or Casanova, or Rousseau. Neither was he a mystic. There is nothing of the desperate soul-searching of St. Augustine, or Cardinal Newman, or even Henry Adams. Nor was he a scientist or philosopher. He cannot tell us, as do his contemporaries Huxley, Spencer, and Mill, of ideas which shook his age. He lacks the massive solidity of Gibbon, the chatty egoism of Leigh Hunt, the limpid ease of Ruskin.

What qualities of Trollope's *Autobiography*, then, have assured its permanence? Perhaps it is in part those same qualities which give lasting vitality to *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*: a warm sense of the irreproachable integrity of the author and a lively appreciation of his simple, utterly lucid style. Trollope has always been admired for his uncompromising honesty. There is no posturing, no affectation, no attempt to exaggerate triumphs or to minimize defeats for the sake of dramatic emphasis. His pride in his accomplishment is boldly stated, undiminished by mealy-mouthed subterfuge. Yet with engaging modesty

he never equates himself with his peers, so far underestimating his ability as to prophesy, "I do not think it probable that my name will remain among those who in the next century will be known as the writers of English prose fiction."

Were it not for one circumstance there would perhaps be more than an element of drabness in the chronicle history of Anthony Trollope. But in the story of the male Cinderella there is always the saving grace of romance, as well as the sympathy which Trollope felt to be one of the indispensable ingredients of a successful narrative. Only a callous nature could remain untouched by Trollope's pitiless account of himself as a dull, awkward, slovenly schoolboy, necessarily neglected by his unfortunate family, flogged by his brother and his tutor, desperately longing for understanding, friendship, and affection. Without mawkish sentiment Trollope enlists our interest in the career of the ugly duckling whose maturation was more complete for its deliberateness, in the idle boy who became a dynamo of tireless energy, in the sluggish dullard who became one of the great English novelists. It is a pure, unvarnished tale that Trollope delivers, in a singularly pellucid style, without ornament, sparse to the point of bleakness, but economical and precise.

II

In his sketch of Thackeray, Trollope admitted that people are eager to know the personal characteristics of great writers as well as the work which they create. If we are sharp enough, he implies in his *Life of Cicero*, we can satisfy our curiosity by a critical reading of his books, for "the man of letters is, in truth, ever writing his own

autobiography." We are all pleased, nevertheless, when he spares us the subtleties of distinguishing between personal opinion and the dramatic exposition of character, and develops his philosophy systematically. Looking carefully at the *Autobiography* and glancing occasionally at other works, what kind of man do we find Anthony Trollope to have been?

Trollope was a vigorous, assertive man, charging here and there under the vagrant impulses of an ebullient spirit. His boisterous laugh rang through the rooms of the Garrick and the Athenaeum in a way which some members who lived by the rules of conventional decorum thought vulgar. The charge of coarseness and ill-breeding has frequently been brought against him. I can find in the evidence nothing but a stentorian voice and a manner heartier than that common to diffident Englishmen. He was, however, an opinionated man who loved the hurly-burly of a loud argument and who by his own admission crossed his fellows defiantly when one of his deep-seated convictions or prejudices was brought under attack. Nevertheless, he bore no malice, loving debate for its own sake, finding stimulation in the game of matching wits. By the testimony of a phalanx of friends and enemies, informal forensics was as dear to Trollope as hunting. In general, the impression which he created personally was that of a big, bluff extrovert, voluble and animated, somewhat contentious but sincere, openhanded, and scrupulously honest.

Politically and socially, Trollope was of his time, not before it. George Orwell in his recent *Dickens, Dali and Others* declares that Dickens, in spite of his native generosity of mind, was essentially bourgeois in that he never

saw anything wrong with the system. This is perhaps more true of Trollope. Orwell predicts that when ordinary people enter mentally into the world of "realism" and power politics, "Dickens will be as out of date as a cab horse." So too, then, will be Trollope and most of the other writers now highly esteemed. Like Ibsen, Trollope believed that the world will not be better until men are better. This is the point of view of the Victorian "liberal conservative," as Trollope described himself. An ameliorist skeptical of the efficacy and permanency of revolutionary processes, he says through one of his characters, "Till we become divine we must be content to be human, lest in our hurry for a change we sink to something lower." On the score of his social inclinations Trollope's admissions, "I prefer the society of distinguished people" and "the society of the well-born and the wealthy will as a rule be worth seeking" are a bit chilling, and, indeed, damaging when used against him out of context. But if he would have approved the aphorism of his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, "I go politically for equality and socially for *the* quality," he would have gone no further. Every man must have his chance, he felt, but leveling is a delusion.

III

Trollope's success in fiction came with his happy decision to abandon Irish melodrama and historical romance for quiet narrative of English town and countryside. Jane Austen, who shared with Thackeray the distinction of being his favorite novelist, had once said, "Two or three families in a village are just the subjects to work on." Whether or not Trollope acted on this suggestion, he created a world whose enduring reality should confound

the occasional critic who complains that Trollope lacked imagination. If the critic means *poetic* imagination, he may find some support in his contention; but Barchester has become virtually a geographical fact, and its people, whom Mr. Micawber would have described as "a happy admixture of the agricultural and the clerical," have been perpetuated by at least two distinguished modern novelists unto the third and fourth generation.

Walter Bagehot once deplored Gibbon's reluctance to deal with the lower reaches of truth: "He cannot mention *Asia Minor*." Not only did Trollope not scorn the lower reaches of truth; he showed that they have a relevance in the interpretation of human experience. Barchester is indeed *minor*—a flyspeck on an imaginary map; but, like Wessex, such is its solidity that travelers have been known to thumb their Baedekers and their Muirheads to establish its precise location. Nothing startling ever happened there. No new truths were ever enunciated with apostolic assurance. The tragicomedy of life was enacted solemnly or gaily with no apparent recognition of its microcosmic significance. Some philosophers have felt that the lower reaches of truth illumine the higher. A few have asserted that on the lower level they found Truth itself.

Trollope was a miniature-painter. He could not splash his colors over a large canvas. Barsetshire narrowed and concentrated and deepened his perceptions, and it is significant that in all his greater novels he worked within self-imposed limitations of design. He was likely to lose his way and wander aimlessly when he crossed county lines. Within the boundaries of sleepy Barsetshire, mere narrative could not be expected to support the total weight of interest. It became necessary to concentrate on people,

and on the symbolism of small events. There were no heroics: village Hampdens and mute inglorious Miltons were left to the poet. As Trollope put it, "There was a little fox-hunting and a little tuft-hunting, some Christian virtue and some Christian cant. There was no heroism and no villainy. There was much Church, but more love-making." Van Wyck Brooks has said of Howells, "That he made something out of this nothing was the marvel of his mind and art." He might have been speaking of Trollope. It is in the middle business of life, in scenes neither definitely tragic nor definitely comic, neither definitely profound nor definitely shallow, that Trollope is wonderfully facile and always interesting. Perhaps his curious exaltation of Richardson at the expense of Fielding may be traced to his recognition of common ground with the earlier writer. It is the "ordinariness" of Trollope that has prompted Somerset Maugham to say, "One gets the impression of a truer picture of life in the novels of Anthony Trollope than in those of Charles Dickens." It might be added that Trollope fails only when he takes for exposition and analysis not ordinary experience but melodrama.

A very different kind of limitation to the Trollopian novel, an unhappy one, not so much self-imposed as dictated by the demands of Victorian fiction, is the conventional love story. Trollope was restive under its insistencies, as we know from *Miss Mackenzie*, but not strong enough to make a complete break. Often the love story is the merest tribute to the taste of the readers. Not even Trollope himself is interested in the fate of Eleanor Bold, and he hastens from the trysting place into the rectory with all possible speed. Love does bulk large in life, to be sure, but Bacon is probably right—"the stage is more beholding

to love than the life of man." Without doubt, the Victorian novelists emphasize its importance beyond all reason. "Life," said Ellen Glasgow, "is not the inalienable property of youth," but for the Victorian novelist marriage seems to be the termination of all that is interesting, a whistle stop just this side of senility. "Even in the novel," continued Miss Glasgow, "we are beginning to demand a larger presentment of life than may be condensed into a formalized depiction of love." It is instructive of Trollope's real interest and genius that it is through his older characters—the Proudis, Archbishop Grantly, Septimus Harding, and Josiah Crawley,—not his young lovers, that he is known. It is with him as Brooks says of Howells: "his world was a paradise of lovers, though the centre of his picture was not love." One must read carefully to be sure of this, however, for numerically the aspirants for paradise tell heavily against Trollope's grasp of reality. "The first of Isabel Archer's convictions on marriage," Henry James tells us, "was the vulgarity of thinking too much of it." From this point of view all of Trollope's heroines are vulgar!

The modern reader may not so much object to the prominence given to love as to the passionless treatment. Here, again, Trollope is the child of his age. The proposition to which he acceded is this: art must serve the purposes of morality; its primary function is to teach through designed and controlled amusement. The Victorian English novelist never forgot that his audience was composed chiefly of young ladies. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen recognized the handicaps imposed by this circumstance: "In England novels nowadays are written for families—in France they are written for men." He knew

that Balzac, for example, had a far higher conception of the objects and nature of his art than did Trollope, yet he and his fellow reviewers were willing to endure such a debilitating limitation in order that "pure unmarried girls" should be protected from one kind of evil. Lest we be tempted to severity against the novelists for perpetrating a travesty against human nature, it is well to remember that the writer's first duty is to see that his books are published. He can accomplish nothing otherwise. Trollope was known to the trade as a novelist whose treatment of love was restrained nearly to the point of prissyness, yet even he felt the lash of Mrs. Grundy, twice having manuscripts returned on the grounds of immorality. By the end of the century men were beginning to read novels again. They demanded a saner, more realistic treatment of passion, and attention to the welfare of young ladies was no longer a *sine qua non*. The battle for honesty was not immediately won, but the forces were engaged. Meanwhile, such old-school novelists as Trollope were sold short. Ultimately, however, the excesses of naturalism drove men back to contemplate a simplified analysis of life and to study what, if any, lessons might be learned from an earlier philosophy.

IV

What Trollope has to say in the *Autobiography* about plot indicates the subordinate place he assigned it in his hierarchy of literary virtues. Arthur Koestler has recently supported such a judgment: "My conviction is . . . that the plot of a novel is of no importance whatsoever." Since the stories have all been told, the most the novelist can hope to accomplish in this category is to play variations

on old tunes. If he tries to do more than this, he may fall into the error described by E. M. Forster: "Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it, and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence." Trollope rarely made this mistake, his normal and happiest vein being placidly undramatic.

But if Trollope escapes our censure on this point, he merits it on another. In structure, his plots are very haphazard. That is to be expected from a novelist who tells us that he never knew when he began how his stories were going to end. Howells was to say that what is important is *revision*, not *prevision*. Yet the story that, like Topsy, "just grew" is likely to be wanting in proportion. Galsworthy once declared that "a good novel like a successful author is well rounded in the middle and skimpy at both ends." In that sense few of Trollope's novels are good. They are frequently heavy at the beginning and fuller than need be at the end. His long, wheezing introductions are both tiresome and inept. He pauses in several novels to apologize for the interminable genealogical foreword.

One of the worst of the structural defects of the Victorian-novel plot was the inset story (see *Pickwick Papers*). Charles Reade saw that this device was completely disruptive of unity and coherence, and he called it "a frightful flaw in art." Trollope would have agreed. But his novels with multiple subplots barely escape the same description. *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, for example, is a four-ring circus which nobody could have managed dexterously. Padding of the core situation is probably inherent in the three-decker novel.

Never was the familiar phrase "Le style est l'homme même" better exemplified than in Trollope. As a man he was plain, direct, unpoetic, uncomplicated. Readers of the *Autobiography* will see that the adjectives serve nicely to describe his style. Nobody will ever say of Trollope, as he said of Meredith, that he "twisted his work to curl-papers." Few English writers are less fussy. Channing Pollock once asked Galsworthy if he ever reread Dickens. "No," said Galsworthy, "it's too embarrassing!" It is not likely that anyone would say the same of Trollope, whose apparent artlessness is such that any novice thinks he can do as well. Dickens is colorful, scintillating; with Trollope "a common grayness silvers everything." But that grayness, beautifully harmonious, must never be confused with drabness.

In Trollope's last years his work did not maintain its former level of competence, and the *Autobiography* might have passed without much notice had it not been for the pages in which he candidly described his methods of composition. Nothing so damaged his reputation. Among the ultrapoetical, supraaesthetical young men of the 'nineties Trollope became a pariah, and even today his working habits and his interest in selling his stories at a reasonable price are sometimes lampooned by people who have never read a chapter of his novels or written a line themselves. It is conceded that by carefully budgeting his time and dispatching a minimum amount of daily work a lawyer, a foreign secretary, or a plumber proves himself a shrewd, able man of commendable ambition. But an artist! He is expected to be erratic and eccentric, for the imagination cannot be controlled. Trollope had a disciplined mind and proved the validity of Dr. Johnson's

assertion, "A man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it." Of course, few novelists have had (or, better, have developed) Trollope's iron will; but, among others, Dickens, Somerset Maugham, and Thomas Mann have all written very systematically.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan once said that "when literature is the sole business of life, it becomes a drudgery." Nothing is of more significance for the full understanding and appreciation of Anthony Trollope, the businesslike novelist, than the fact that he loved his art as his life. Robert van Gelder's survey of the attitude taken toward their craft by some ninety contemporary authors shows that for most of them writing is a ghastly nightmare of blood, sweat, and tears. Trollope loved it! If the angels do not require novels, he felt he would not be happy in heaven. He was, certainly, a facile writer; six months or less normally sufficed for a three-volume novel. Some may say that he found writing easy because he never put himself to the grinding labor of revision. Thackeray toiled two years on each of his major novels; Flaubert worked four years on *Madame Bovary*. But Thackeray and Flaubert were stylists, with whom Trollope never dreamed of comparing himself. He had a keen sense of his limitations, and he is probably right in saying that he could not have materially improved his writing by sitting over it and weighing syllables. He could say what he meant, concisely and intelligibly, but he could not make his words dance and sing. That he wrote too much he was quick to admit. Edith Wharton must have had him in mind when she wrote, "Whatever a man has it in him to do really well he usually keeps on doing with an indestructible persistence."

v

What can be said of Trollope's total accomplishment, both in the novels, upon which in the long run I think his reputation must rest and in the *Autobiography*, which many well-credentialed critics consider his best book? The impression has gained some currency today that Trollope is a major figure in the literature of escape. Randolph Churchill has recently said of Evelyn Waugh: "He becomes more old-fashioned . . . every day. His favorite novelist is Trollope. . . . He seeks to live in an oasis." Of course, Trollope takes us into a world remote from our own; that is why his books were in such tremendous demand in England during the war. But Trollope's world is in its way as *real* as our own. He does not take us into a world of fantasy from which the return to reality is a shock. English readers in the middle of the blitz wanted to lose themselves in a *different* world, but not in an impossible one. There must be at least an underlying reality of characterization that transcends temporal and spatial limits. Shakespeare's characters, it is a platitude to remark, are primarily men and women of indeterminate historical period. Only secondarily are they Elizabethans. It is hardly too much to say of Trollope's best characters that they are only secondarily Victorians.

Ellen Glasgow listed the elemental properties of all great novels as "power, passion, pity, ecstasy and anguish, hope and despair." Against these qualities it must be admitted that Trollope makes a rather gloomy showing. Yet even the most captious critic will hardly deny that he wrote a spate of superior novels. If, as Henry James suggested, the primary function of a novel is to stimulate thought, Trollope is not worth reading. There is another

function, however,—on a lower level, perhaps, yet still important. As Verdi said “I’m just trying to make a little music,” so Trollope might have said “I’m just trying to write a little fiction.” He knew too much about literature to think himself among the foremost of the immortals. But if he could not move men profoundly, he could at least interest and amuse them. This may be the distinction between genius and talent. Nevertheless, men very much need intelligent amusement, and to provide them with it is a legitimate and important function of the novelist. I cannot agree with the recent pessimistic prophecy by Charles Morgan that in future generations “sometimes one or two of [Trollope’s] many volumes will be read.” It seems to me that he occupies an advantageous position for continued popularity, for he is neither too deep nor too shallow for the generality of practiced readers, and his power of creating memorable characters is rare in the history of fiction.

An inferior man might conceivably write a superior poem, but I do not know that an inferior man ever wrote a superior autobiography. A self-revelatory book, even though, like Trollope’s, it be not of the confessional type, demands from the writer an interesting career, a coherent philosophy, and a sympathetic as well as an illuminating understanding of life. It demands also a nice adjustment of the personal and the universal, as well as most of the virtues of a distinguished prose style. No need to ask why the masterpieces are so few. One man rarely possesses all the qualities to assure success. It suffices that Trollope had most of them. We do not find Santayana’s subtlety of mind, or H. G. Wells’s ingratiating candor, or John Buchan’s heartwarming friendliness; but we do find stubborn ideal-

ism, patent sincerity, and clean, forthright exposition. That is perhaps enough for one masterpiece.

Lowell in reading Grote on Greece found his "prosy good sense . . . medicinal," his "honest incapacity for imagination . . . singularly soothing." I do not think that I am depreciating Trollope when I suggest that with some modification this judgment may explain his continued hold on the twentieth century. Whether or not there is full agreement on this point, all who value Trollope for merits which are all too rare in literature will join in Edward Fitzgerald's hearty endorsement: "Oh, for some more brave Trollope!"

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