A novelist who hunted the fox: Anthony Trollope today

by Roger Kimball

On Trollope’s writing.

Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring, real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating. “Imaginative literature,” therefore, is either boring or immoral or a mixture of both.

—Simone Weil

Of all the great nineteenth-century novelists, perhaps none has suffered more from the obloquy of intellectuals than Anthony Trollope. Writing recently in the London Sunday Telegraph, the English academic John Casey expressed dismay that the current Prime Minister of England should exhibit a fondness for Trollope’s novels. Flaunting the spectacle of “that deadly thing—a Trollopian,” Professor Casey assured his readers that “Trollope is overrated. His prose, adequate enough for his purposes, is undistinguished. His physical descriptions are flat. You rarely see anything vividly through his writing.” Moreover, Professor Casey added, “most confirmed Trollopians do not much like literature.” Doubtless Mr. Major was suitably chastened.

Such strictures have dogged Trollope from the beginning. Trollope has no “ideas”; he is too “comfortable”; his novels, with their abundance of clerics and happy endings, are insufficiently dramatic, passionate, challenging. Thomas Carlyle, than whom a less Trollopian figure can scarcely be imagined, sneered that the novelist was “irredeemably embedded in the commonplace, and grown fat upon it.” And Henry James—in his own, very different, way as un-Trollopian as Carlyle—dismissed The Belton Estate (1866) as “a work written for children; a work prepared for minds unable to think; . . . a stupid book.” “Life is vulgar,” James wrote in another early essay on Trollope, “but we know not how vulgar it is till we see it set down in his pages.” In the handful of pieces that he wrote about Trollope in the 1860s, James allowed himself a certain admiration—Trollope was, he admitted, a “born story-teller”—but the admiration was always hedged with disparaging qualifications: Trollope’s work was essentially “superficial,” his dramatic situations “trivial.” If he felt an undeniable “partiality” for Trollope’s novels, he was nonetheless
“somewhat ashamed” of that partiality.

Such strictures have dogged Trollope from the beginning. Trollope has no “ideas”; he is too “comfortable.”

James later responded more warmly to Trollope’s achievement, placing him below Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, to be sure, yet insisting that “he belonged to the same family” as that great triumvirate of Victorian writers. What had changed was not so much James’s judgment about the character of Trollope’s work—Trollope must ever lack Jamesian “seriousness”—but his recognition that work of such character was nothing to be ashamed of. “His great, his inestimable merit,” James wrote in an appreciative retrospective essay published shortly after Trollope’s death in 1882, “was a complete appreciation of the usual.”

Trollope’s own estimation of his achievement jibed closely with James’s final assessment. He, too, reckoned his place below that of George Eliot and Thackeray. And although he did not particularly care for Dickens or for his work, he acknowledged Dickens’s dazzling success. “The primary object of a novelist is to please,” Trollope wrote in his posthumously published Autobiography (1883); “and this man’s novels have been found more pleasant than those of any other writer.” Trollope would probably also have agreed with James that his own forte consisted in depicting “the commonplace.” “A novel,” Trollope wrote, “should give a picture of common life enlivened by humour and sweetened by pathos.” As N. John Hall points out in his thorough new biography of the novelist, Trollope’s “genius, while capable of depicting tragic figures, was essentially a comic one.” Even his grimmest work, The Way We Live Now (1875), ends with a quartet of marriages and general reconciliation. The evil financier Augustus Melmotte, although he comes a cropper and commits suicide, emerges with a certain dignity; many critics have remarked on the “Roman” trappings of his suicide. The other bad eggs are sent packing to the continent or America. Harmony and happiness reign anew.

It is part of Trollope’s achievement to have managed this without seeming sappy. His characters are generally decorous, but never prim, unless for comic effect. This is the other, more positive side of that “commonplace” Carlyle disparaged. As Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of Trollope’s early admirers, put it in a well-known encomium, Trollope’s work is “written on the strength of beef and through the inspiration of ale, and [is] 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.” George Eliot, who professed as great an admiration for Trollope’s work as he did for hers (and who credited Trollope’s example with helping her to persevere with Middlemarch), remarked in a letter that his books “are filled with
belief in goodness without the slightest tinge of maudlin.” What we might call the easiness of Trollope’s novels is all the more remarkable in view of his frankly didactic ambition. “I have ever thought of myself as a preacher of sermons,” he notes in the Autobiography. The central question an author must ask himself, he reflects later, is “how shall he teach lessons of virtue and at the same time make himself a delight to his readers?” Trollope never provided anything much in the way of theoretical answers to this (or any other) question. But his life and, especially, that long shelf of novels stand as eloquent testimony to the strength and, finally, the complexity of his moral vision. At a moment when art seems often to flaunt its distance from virtue as conventionally understood, Trollope’s example may provide a welcome perspective not only on contemporary fiction but also, as Trollope put it in one of his most famous titles, on the way we live now.

Today, at any rate, the reaction against the creator of Barsetshire and Plantagenet Palliser is probably easier to understand than is his enduring popularity. Tolstoy exclaimed that “Trollope kills me, kills me with his virtuosity.” But there can be few writers of Trollope’s stature less calculated to appeal to twentieth-century notions—what are still, after all our ironies and disillusionments, essentially Romantic notions—of artistic privilege and authorial preciousness.

For one thing, there was Trollope’s politics. He described himself as an “advanced” “Conservative-Liberal.” But such terms meant something rather different in the second half of the nineteenth century from what they’ve come to mean in the second half of the twentieth. One token of Trollope’s distance from contemporary pieties is his view of women. While his cast of clever, spirited women is rightly regarded as one of his most sympathetic achievements, Trollope is not exactly what one would call a feminist. What is a woman’s goal in life, he asks in Can You Forgive Her? (1864). It is to fall in love, marry the man, have two children, and “live happily ever afterwards.”

Also calculated to displease was Trollope’s attitude toward the whole notion of artistic “inspiration,” which he regarded with undisguised scorn. “To me,” he wrote, “it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration.” What mattered to Trollope was application. His discipline was legendary. According to the famous story recounted in the Autobiography, he paid his groom £5 a year extra to wake him at 5:00 a.m. so that he could be at his desk by 5:30. “I do not know that I ought not to feel that I owe more to him than to any one else for the success I have had,” Trollope reflected. “By beginning at that hour, I could complete my literary labor before I dressed for breakfast.”

Punctuality was of supreme importance to him.

Nor did Trollope dawdle and “sit nibbling the pen.” He spent half an hour reading over and correcting what he had written the day before. Then, with a clock in front of him, he managed 250 words every quarter hour, covering ten pages and producing on average 2,500 words before he set
off for a full day’s work on Post Office business. His manuscripts suggest that he did virtually no rewriting. Following this regimen, he generally wrote about 10,000 words a week, on some occasions as much as 25,000 words. And this was week in and week out, month after month, year after year. In other words, Trollope exhibited in spades the Victorian belief in the transformative power of work. “[I]t’s a sheer matter of industry,” he declared. “It’s not the head that does it—it’s the cobbler’s wax on the seat and the sticking to my chair!” Trollope admitted that his procedure might not conduce to works of genius. But, he explains, “the idea that I was the unfortunate owner of unappreciated genius never troubled me.” Punctuality was of supreme importance to him. “With all the pages that I have written for magazines I have never been a day late,” Trollope remarks proudly, “nor have I ever caused inconvenience by sending less or more matter than I had stipulated to supply. But I have sometimes found myself compelled to suffer by the irregularity of others.” Even in this age of word processors and modems, I daresay that there are few writers who can make that worthy boast.

Trollope’s working diaries, in which he jotted down the number of pages he wrote each day, show days missed for illness, holidays, and other engagements, but such lacunae are rare. He could write almost anywhere: not only at his desk but also on the railway (he had a special traveling desk built for this purpose) and on shipboard. Once he became an established writer, he was in the habit of going down to consult with the ship’s carpenter in order to arrange for suitable writing accommodations before setting sail. Traveling from New York to London in 1875, Henry James recalled meeting Trollope on board. “The season was unpropitious,” James wrote, the vessel overcrowded, the voyage detestable; but Trollope shut himself up in his cabin every morning for a purpose which, on the part of a distinguished writer who was also an invulnerable sailor, could only be communion with the muse. He drove his pen as steadily on the tumbling ocean as in Montagu Square.

James supposed that Trollope was working on yet another novel; in fact, he was just then beginning his autobiography.

Thinking about Trollope encourages the habit of tabulation. His first book, The Macdermots of Ballycloran, was published in 1847 as Trollope approached his thirty-second birthday. “The book,” as Professor Hall notes, “did not sell,” even when the publisher vainly resorted to advertisements attributing authorship to Trollope’s mother, by then a popular novelist in her own right. Trollope’s first, albeit exceedingly modest, success came with The Warden in 1855. The Warden, which inaugurated the Barsetshire series and is widely regarded as one of Trollope’s masterpieces, was Trollope’s fourth book; Barchester Towers, probably the most popular of all his novels, came next, in 1857. Over the next quarter century, he produced some sixty-five books. Altogether forty-seven novels and nearly twenty volumes of travel writing, short stories, criticism, and biography, including a book on Caesar’s de Bello Gallico (1870) and a life of Cicero (1880), flowed from his pen. Nor were Trollope’s novels skimpy two-hundred-page entertainments. The
Warden appeared in a single, relatively slender volume; but most of his novels were published serially in magazines, appearing between covers only when they had grown into full-fledged, triple-decker productions. The Way We Live Now, his longest book, is well over four hundred thousand words long.

Such fertility, combined with what Trollope himself called “mechanical” habits of composition, engenders first astonishment and then suspicion. As early as 1858, contemporary reviewers wondered whether Trollope were not writing too much, whether the “rapid multiplication of his progeny,” as the Saturday Review put it, must not require a corresponding diminution of quality. Since then it has been a standard, if not adequately examined, assumption that Trollope sacrificed quality to quantity—something, we are given to understand, no serious artist would think of doing.

Then there was Trollope’s attitude toward money. Like most authors, he liked it. Unlike many, he frankly admitted that he wrote for it. Moreover, he kept as meticulous tabs on his earnings as he did on his writing, reproducing at the end of the Autobiography the sums he received for each of his books through 1879. The total was £68,939 17s. 5d., a result that Trollope described as “comfortable” but not “splendid.” (According to Professor Hall, the total at the time of his death three years later was some £10,000 more.) He comments caustically that “authors are told that they should disregard payment for their work, and be content to devote their unbought brains to the welfare of the public. Brains that are unbought will never serve the public much. Take away from English authors their copyrights, and you would very soon take away also from England her authors.”

More generally, Trollope tended to agree with Dr. Johnson that a man is never so innocently employed as when he is making money. In Can You Forgive Her?, the first of the six Palliser novels, Plantagenet Palliser remarks that “there is no vulgar error so vulgar,—that is to say, common or erroneous,—as that by which men have been taught to say that mercenary tendencies are bad. A desire for wealth is the source of all progress. Civilization comes from what men call greed.”

Dowries, legacies, “expectations,” church livings, and financial speculation play as large a role in the lives of Trollope’s characters as they did in the lives of the people Trollope observed in his travels around the British Isles. Not all his characters are mercenary; few, not even the saintly Septimus Harding in The Warden, are blind to the importance of money in affecting life’s possibilities. “Of all novelists in any country,” W. H. Auden remarked in “A Poet of the Actual,” his aptly titled review of James Pope Hennessy’s biography of the novelist, “Trollope best understands the role of money. Compared with him, even Balzac is too romantic.” One of Trollope’s most famous characters is the appalling Mrs. Proudie, wife and faithful tormentor of Dr. Proudie, Bishop of Barchester. Mrs. Proudie is a frightful busybody and scheming harridan, the real force behind the bishop’s throne. Yet she is not stupid, nor is she entirely without feeling. In Barchester Towers, Mrs. Proudie arranges—well, she connives and maneuvers—for the poor and beleaguered Mr. and Mrs. Quiverful, who have fourteen children (“fourteen living,” as Mrs.
Quiverful plaintively puts it), to receive a church position that will double their income. Mrs. Proudie’s beneficence was far from wholly altruistic: she was pursuing her own political objectives as much as she was aiding the distressed curate and his fruitful wife. But while Mrs. Quiverful understands some of this and rightly regards Mrs. Proudie as “stiff and hard and proud as piecrust,” she nevertheless concludes that the bishop’s wife is “right at bottom.” Trollope notes dryly that “people when they get their income doubled usually think that those through whose instrumentality this little ceremony is performed are right at bottom.”

But it was not only Trollope’s severely pragmatic attitude toward his literary endeavors (how he would have loathed the term “creative writing”!) that sets him apart from the idealized image of literary culture; nor was it simply his candid acknowledgment that money constituted an important spur to writing; there was also his whole mode of life. Contrasting Trollope with such “sedentary” French novelists as Flaubert and Zola, James described Trollope, not altogether nastily, as “a novelist who hunted the fox.” And indeed, among the three chief occupations of Trollope’s life—writing novels, working for the British Post Office, and “hunting the fox”—writing certainly came in third. “Nothing has ever been allowed to stand in the way of hunting,” Trollope declared, “neither the writing of books, nor the work of the Post Office, nor other pleasures.” From the time that he could afford it, in the 1840s, Trollope habitually rode to hounds three times weekly for the entire season, November through April. Although increasingly heavy and dangerously near-sighted—Trollope never rode particularly well—he did not give up the sport until 1876 when he was sixty-one.

It would be also a mistake to think that Trollope regarded his position at the Post Office as a sinecure. He had an absolute horror of seeming to receive public money without earning it. As he often took pains to point out, he devoted vastly more time and energy to his career as a civil servant, which lasted from 1834 until September of 1867, than he did to his writing. He prosecuted his job as Surveyor for the British Post Office with unflagging energy. He probably logged more miles riding over Ireland (where he spent more than fifteen years) and England to investigate complaints and improve service than any other individual. “I became intensely anxious,” he noted, “that people should have their letters delivered to them punctually.” It is characteristic that some of his most critical remarks about the United States concern its postal system, whose service he described as “absolutely barbarous.” In any event, if Trollope’s novels can be said to lack innovation, not so his work for the Post Office. Probably his most important innovation came in 1851, when he proposed erecting letter boxes (which were already being used in France) to make the collection of mail more convenient and efficient. By the mid-1850s, letter boxes were in widespread use in Britain. Not only did Trollope work at the Post Office for more than thirty years, but long after he
had become a successful writer he applied for a position that he knew would sharply curtail his literary activities. His disappointment on not receiving the job was intense. When he resigned a couple of years later, the rebuff still rankled.

The fact is, Trollope strove mightily to embody the nebulous ideal epitomized in the word “gentleman”—what the critic James Kincaid called “the most common standard for moral behaviour in Trollope.” Fox hunting could clearly be accommodated by this standard, as indeed, for Trollope, could a career in the civil service. An excessive devotion to writing novels was perhaps more problematic. In the event, Trollope’s effort to join these activities under the rubric “gentleman” was not accomplished seamlessly. As W. H. Auden pointed out, Trollope was “a very eccentric character who might well, though he would have hated to admit it, have come straight out of a novel by Dickens.” Contemporary recollections of the novelist are pretty much of a piece. Trollope was a bluff, kind-hearted, slightly uncouth man, rough, sociable, and above all loud. James Russell Lowell recalls meeting Trollope in Boston. “Dined the other day with Anthony Trollope; a big, redfaced, rather underbred Englishman of the bald-with-spectacles type. A good roaring positive fellow who deafened me . . . till I thought of Dante’s Cerberus.”

The relation between this comic, whist-playing monster and the delicate delineator of nineteenth-century English manners is perhaps difficult to fathom until we recognize that in addition to being bluff Trollope was painfully shy and fundamentally lonely. The nineteenth century was full of famously unhappy childhoods; but few were memorialized with as much quiet pathos as Trollope brought to the memory of his early wretchedness. “My boyhood was, I think,” he writes at the beginning of his Autobiography, “as unhappy as that of a young gentleman could well be.”

Trollope’s father, Thomas Anthony, was an intelligent though failed barrister who suffered from migraines and a foul temper. He was modestly prosperous when Trollope was born, in 1815, the fifth of seven children. But by the time young Anthony went to school, his father was well on his way to the poverty and unshakable depression that dogged him for the rest of his life. “Everything went wrong with him,” Trollope noted sadly of his father. “The touch of his hand seemed to create failure.” After he had driven away all his clients and failed thoroughly in his attempt to farm, Trollope père turned to compiling an Encyclopedia Ecclesiastica, meant to define all the ecclesiastical terms that had ever existed. It was the perfect vehicle to complete his futility. By the time he died he had gotten to the letter D.

In Trollope’s early years, however, Thomas Anthony was still cogent enough to oversee his children’s education. “From my very babyhood,” Trollope recalled,

I had to take my place alongside of him as he shaved at six o’clock in the morning, and say my early rules from the Latin Grammar, or repeat the Greek alphabet; and was obliged at these early lessons to hold my head inclined towards him, so that in the event of guilty fault, he might be able to pull my hair without stopping his razor or dropping his shaving-brush. No father was ever more anxious for the education of his children, though I think none ever knew less how to go about the work.
Trollope’s real misery began when, like his older brothers Thomas Adolphus and Henry, he was sent as a day boy to Harrow. The Trollopes’ poverty had taken firm hold by the time young Anthony matriculated, and he was ragged mercilessly by his fellow students. “I suffered horribly!” Trollope writes. “I was big, and awkward, and ugly, and, I have no doubt, skulked about in a most unattractive manner. Of course I was ill dressed and dirty.” Nor did the young Trollope find much solace among the masters; he was a poor student, irremediably slovenly and remiss in his studies. Trollope recalls encountering Dr. Butler, headmaster at Harrow, who would stop him in the street and ask whether it was possible that Harrow should be disgraced by so dirty and unkempt a boy. “He must have known me,” Trollope remarks, “for he was in the habit of flogging me constantly. Perhaps he did not recognize me by my face.”

Trollope’s mother, Frances, was the antipode of his father: bright, sociable, and like Anthony graced with extraordinary energy. It was she who pulled the family through after all her husband’s nostrums collapsed. Not that Frances was exactly a practical woman. She hit upon one of her most notorious schemes when making a protracted visit to the States (leaving poor Anthony alone in the “care” of his father). With a combination of capital that she could ill-afford to spend and credit she could not repay, she built a bazaar in Cincinnati, stocked with the tawdry trinkets her husband insisted on sending her from England. “[W]ithin half a year the building was put into receivership,” Professor Hall notes; “everything, even Mrs. Trollope’s own belongings, was seized.”

And yet, the sojourn in America was not entirely wasted, for it sparked her own career as a writer.

And yet, the sojourn in America was not entirely wasted, for it sparked her own career as a writer. *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, a wry and caustic account of American foibles, was published in 1832 when Mrs. Trollope was fifty-three. It instantly became a *succès de scandal*, immensely popular in Britain, loudly detested in the States. While the money she made from *Domestic Manners* staved off disaster for only a couple of years, it did provide her with a vocation and a means to feed her family. From that moment forward she was a writer, turning out with extraordinary fluency a prodigious number of novels and travel books, even as she nursed her sick husband and children, four of whom were eventually to die of consumption. She continued writing until 1856, when she was seventy-six, producing all told over one hundred volumes. “Her career,” Trollope remarks, “offers great encouragement to those who have not begun early in life, but are still ambitious to do something before they depart hence.”

Despite Mrs. Trollope’s efforts, the bailiff continued to threaten. Finally, in March 1834, he could be put off no longer: the family fled to Bruges to escape creditors. Mrs. Trollope managed to secure a teaching position for Anthony, but within a few months a vacancy opened up in the General Post
Office in London. In the autumn of 1834, he started work as a clerk for £90 per year. Trollope’s early years at the Post Office were not a success. His salary was inadequate, so he was always in debt; his work was poor, his habits irregular, his attitude obstreperous. He was several times on the verge of being dismissed.

But then, in 1841, he applied for and was appointed to the position of Deputy Postal Surveyor in King’s County, Ireland. Somehow, Ireland changed everything. Poverty, ignominy, loneliness: all were suddenly banished. “From the day on which I set my foot in Ireland all these evils went away from me,” Trollope recalled. “Since that time, who has had a happier life than mine?” Within a year, he was engaged to Rose Heseltine, a quiet Englishwoman he met at a watering place near Dublin and whom he married in 1844. Not only did he pursue his new postal duties avidly, to the astonishment of his superiors in London, but he finally set about realizing his dream of becoming a writer, beginning work on *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* in 1843.

It was a dream that he had cultivated carefully since childhood. Partly in an effort to relieve his loneliness, Trollope had early on fallen into the habit of daydreaming. “Thus it came to pass,” he confided in the *Autobiography*, “that I was always going about with some castle in the air firmly built within my mind.”

For weeks, for months, if I remember rightly, from year to year, I would carry on the same tale, binding myself down to certain laws, . . . I myself was of course my own hero. Such is a necessity of castle-building. . . . There can, I imagine, hardly be a more dangerous mental practice; but I have often doubted whether, had it not been my practice, I should ever have written a novel. I learned in this way to maintain an interest in a fictitious story, to dwell on a work created by my own imagination, and to live in a world altogether outside the world of my own material life.

By the late 1840s, Trollope’s daydreams had begun to take on a semblance of reality; by the late 1850s, he might as well have stepped out of the pages of one of his novels: the final installments of the romance had begun, and early sufferings and complications were resolved in neat if homely harmonies.

In fact, many commentators have wondered whether the picture that Trollope presents in the *Autobiography* isn’t a little too neat: whether the childhood miseries were quite as severe or the later triumphs quite so unruffled as Trollope presents. While Professor Hall corrects a few dates and other minor lapses, he does not argue substantially with the self-portrait with which Trollope provides us in the *Autobiography*. Indeed, for those familiar with the *Autobiography* none of the recent biographies of Trollope offers much in the way of revelation. This can hardly be a criticism, perhaps, since there are precious few revelations about Trollope to be had. Some youthful indiscretions are hinted at in the *Autobiography*. There was a bit of drinking and the occasional sticky romantic entanglement. (Trollope recounts an episode in which one girl’s mother marched into the Post Office, basket on her arm, loudly demanding to know when Anthony Trollope was going to marry her daughter.)
But Trollope tells his own story with as much decorum as he brings to his novels. What he presents is not the record of his inner life but a chronicle of his endeavors. His discussion of his marriage is a case in point: “My marriage was like the marriage of other people, and of no special interest to anyone except my wife and me.” Professor Hall, like Trollope’s other biographers, cannot do much better. About Rose, for example, he tells us simply that “she remains the great unknown in Trollope’s life.” Apparently, it was the same for Trollope’s friends. George Henry Lewes, having spent a night at the Trollopes’ house in 1861, wrote in his journal that “Mrs Trollope did not make any decided impression on me, one way or the other.” And it was the same, too, for many other aspects of Trollope’s life. Discussing *The Small House at Allington* (1864)—the fifth of the six Barsetshire novels—Professor Hall notes that the hero, Johnny Eames, was hopelessly in love with the inaccessible Lily Dale. Both in *The Small House at Allington* and in *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867), Eames is recognizably a self-portrait of the young Trollope. (Mrs. Oliphant said that she could not read Trollope’s book on Caesar without laughing: “It is so like Johnny Eames.”) But, Professor Hall concedes, “whether there was ever a Lily Dale in Trollope’s early life, a woman he worshipped for years but, for whatever reason, could never win, is beyond discovery.”

“Beyond discovery,” as it happens, describes almost everything of importance about Trollope’s life that is not contained in his *Autobiography*. This means that a biographer, especially one coming on the heels of several recent accounts of the novelist’s life, labors at a marked disadvantage. What will infuse his redaction with new life and interest? Professor Hall, who teaches English at Bronx Community College and who has edited an edition of Trollope’s letters (1983), has probably done as well as one could have hoped. He has brought the habits of a meticulous scholar as well as the passion of an enthusiast to his task. His book proceeds in deliberate steps through every important episode of Trollope’s life, taking us from Trollope’s unhappy school days through his place at the heart of literary London. He dutifully recounts the signal events of Trollope’s career, his rise in the Post Office, the publication of his books, his association with the *Cornhill Magazine*, the *Fortnightly Review*, and *Saint Pauls Magazine*, and his failed bid to win a seat in Parliament; he has sifted through contemporary reviews and provides a kind of running score card on Trollope’s popularity; he follows him as eagerly to America, Australia, and South Africa as to the Garrick Club, the Cosmopolitan Club, and the Athenaeum. Above all, perhaps, he stresses the fundamental Trollopian achievement: that “no one is thoroughly virtuous or thoroughly evil, and Trollope engages a qualified sympathy for almost everyone.”

Professor Hall also reminds us of just how droll Trollope’s *Autobiography* can be. For example, passing through Salt Lake City in 1872, Trollope recounts his brief encounter with Brigham Young. Having sent up his card, he waits to be received. “I did not achieve great intimacy with the great
polygamist of the Salt Lake City,” Trollope confesses.

He received me in his doorway, not asking me to enter, and inquired whether I were not a miner. When I told him that I was not a miner, he asked me whether I earned my bread. I told him I did. “I guess you’re a miner,” said he. I again assured him that I was not. “Then how do you earn your bread?” I told him that I did so by writing books. “I’m sure you’re a miner,” said he. Then he turned upon his heel, went back into the house, and closed the door.

Throughout his long book, Professor Hall is utterly responsible, competent, and not infrequently a bit dull. His basic procedure, once Trollope has gotten around to publishing books, is to insert a potted summary of the latest volume every dozen pages or so. This is a perfectly normal operation, of course, but en masse and without much effort to “place” Trollope in a larger literary context, it soon becomes tedious. If one has read the book, the summary is superfluous; if one hasn’t, it is opaque. Then, too, Professor Hall has allowed himself a great deal of repetition: readers encounter the same points, even some favorite quotations, again and again. Perhaps he would have done well to trim his manuscript by eighty or one hundred pages.

Professor Hall remarks in his introduction that he has not attempted to write a “‘thesis’ biography.” That is certainly all to the good. But those familiar with the lineaments of Trollope’s life are nonetheless likely to find Professor Hall’s book most engaging when he steps back from his chronicle and offers an opinion. He is particularly good on the nature of Trollope’s religious belief. It has often been remarked that Trollope’s clergymen are longer on amenity than theology. Even the dreamy Mr. Harding, for all his charm, doesn’t get beyond asking himself what “can a man’s religion be worth, if it does not support him against the natural melancholy of declining years?” In fact, Trollope specialized in what Henry James called “the full-fed worldly churchman,” men like Archdeacon Grantly: canny, political, vigilant. “Unlike Homer,” Trollope writes, Dr. Grantly “never nods.” But this is not to say that Trollope regarded religion as a species of applied hypocrisy. As Professor Hall notes,

Trollope, like so many Victorians, wanted to believe, but belief itself was so much a mystery to him that . . . he hardly knew, precisely, what he believed. That segment of the Church of England informally denominated ‘broad’ suited Trollope nicely; he could pretty much dismiss the Old Testament, admire the moral teachings of Christ, and keep up an ill-defined belief in a supreme being and a vague hope of some kind of immortality.

Many modern commentators, reading themselves back into Trollope, have depicted him as a kind of closet atheist. But as Professor Hall’s comments imply, this is to misunderstand the complexity of Trollope’s situation and the religious milieu of his time. Whatever religious doubts Trollope entertained, they did not capsize his spiritual equanimity. And why should they have? We may be reasonably certain he would have regarded the deliberate cultivation of doubt—something we take more or less for granted—as a culpable self-indulgence. In this respect, his spiritual outlook, if we
can call it that, differs markedly from ours. It may indeed be one of the chief glories of such serious-minded Victorians that they were able to sustain doubt without jettisoning their faith. Where the modern, secular world begins by assuming doubt, the Victorians had the luxury of beginning from the assumption of faith. Certainly, there were plenty of Victorians assailed by radical doubt; but this was regarded—as much by themselves as by those around them—more as a catastrophe than a liberation. If that dampened their appetite for irony and sometimes rendered their earnestness naïve, well, there are virtues beyond irony and faults beyond naïveté.

Among the virtues that Trollope practiced in his novels was unstinting honesty to the fundamentals of human experience.

Among the virtues that Trollope practiced in his novels was unstinting honesty to the fundamentals of human experience. As he stressed repeatedly, in the Autobiography and elsewhere, it was a matter of “deep conscience” with him how he portrayed his characters. To be sure, “the writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing.” But, for Trollope, the novelist must not sacrifice truth for effect. In this respect, the novelist’s task resembles the poet’s: both work toward “the same end”: “By either, false sentiments may be fostered; false notions of humanity may be engendered; false honour, false love, false worship may be created; by either, vice instead of virtue may be taught.” One way that Trollope sought to avoid “false sentiments” was by reminding his readers that the tale they were reading was just that, a tale. For example, in Barchester Towers, when Eleanor Bold is pursued by a clutch of undesirable suitors, Trollope lets us know early on that Eleanor will choose wisely in the end. “But let the gentle-hearted reader be under no apprehension whatsoever. It is not destined that Eleanor should marry Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope.” James recoiled from such passages, describing them as “suicidal.” But in the context of Trollope’s moral purpose, they may be seen as salutary disenchantments.

And what, finally, was Trollope’s “moral purpose”? It is of course hard to say. Trollope is not a writer from whom one can easily extract formulas. But in her unjustly neglected essay “Trollope For Grown-Ups” (1962), the critic Clara Claiborne Park comes close to the heart of the matter when she describes the novelist as “the laureate of compromise.” Trollope is almost alone, she notes, in telling us “what we need to hear: be reasonable, be moderate, in action, in desire, in expectation, and you will be fairly happy.” This may seem like small beer. But it can be powerful compensation for what Professor Park calls “the desolation caused by naked principle among people.” If Trollope lacked a doctrine to impose as virtue, he came armed with an abundance of experience and psychological insight. As his narrator puts it in Barchester Towers, “Till we can become divine we must be content to be human, lest in our hurry for a change we sink to something lower.”

2. And there can be no doubt that his popularity is enduring. Not only does Trollope continue to be much in demand among readers but he has provided attractive provender for numerous books. Apart from myriad critical studies—among which James R. Kincaid’s *The Novels of Anthony Trollope* (1977) deserves special mention—the last twenty years have seen the publication of a biography by James Pope Hennessy (1971) and an illustrated “appreciation” by C.P. Snow (1975), as well as Robert Super’s *The Chronicler of Barset: A Life of Anthony Trollope* (1988) and Richard Mullen’s *Anthony Trollope: A Victorian in his World* (1990). According to Professor Hall, another biography, by Victoria Glendinning, is on the way. Go back to the text.

3. “Quiverful”? Alas, yes. Among others one encounters in Trollope’s pages are Dr. Pessimist Anticant (a crude caricature of Carlyle), Mr. Popular Sentiment (Dickens), the rich parvenu Sir Damask Monogram, a musician named Blowhard, and a doctor named Fillgrave. Sometimes such fanciful names are amusing; sometimes, one feels that Trollope was not as subtle as he might have been in naming his characters. Go back to the text.

**Roger Kimball** is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia* (St. Augustine’s Press) and *Who Rules? Sovereignty, Nationalism, and the Fate of Freedom in the Twenty-first Century* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 10 Number 7, on page 10
Copyright © 2023 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com