

## Trollope's Autobiography of a Novelist (Chapters 1-10, really 12)

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The first half of a diptych. A familiar talk

I begin with Trollope's description of his experience of the creative state he knew when conjuring up or writing down his novels where he “produced the best truth and highest spirit that I have been able to produce: “

At such times I have been able to imbue myself thoroughly with the characters I have had in hand. I have wandered alone among the rocks and woods, crying at their grief, laughing at their absurdities and thoroughly enjoying their joy. I have been impregnated with my own creations til it has been my only excitement to sit with the pen in my hand, and drive my team before me with as quick a pace before me as I could make them travel (*An Autobiography*, Ch 10, 175-76)

Note the mixed metaphors. There are many passages of this type in the second half of his diptych (Chapters 12-20), and you may find the like in other pieces of his writing about the art of fiction and his experience of it (e.g. “A Walk in a Wood” or “The Panjandrum”).

Trollope had the unusual gift (not found in all creative writers) of being able self-consciously when outside his creative reveries to describe and half-enact what it felt like when he was in one fully and presumably unself-consciously, and when outside to tell his conscious motives and aims when using such material in his fiction. We find this ability and such passages in Henry James's notebooks. In her also posthumously published autobiography edited by a trusted relative, Margaret Oliphant marvels at Trollope's objectified descriptions as “astonishing and strange” and says while as a fellow novelist and having read his other writing, it seems to her that “these self-explanations” are “quite sincere,” she cannot, and is not going to, perform and describe the like about herself, since they make her uncomfortable because, she thinks, they are presented to please a contemporary “overly self-conscious and rationalizing era” (*The Autobiography*, 4-5)

The common complaint about Trollope's life writing is that he neglects to give us (to quote him at the close of his book) “a record of my inner life” (Chapter 20, 365) or omits, skips over, or worse, gets details of his story wrong, maybe falsifies them. I have wondered what could be going in readers' minds as they read his life as he chooses to tell himself, what they are expecting to learn, or feel justified in demanding as if Trollope were cheating them. Yes he tells us little about his wife, only a

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specific set of traits and life experience of one of his sons (Fred, who figures directly in Trollope's fiction); of one of his liaisons, if we can call it that, or friendships with a woman, only that it occurred and that since he loved her for some fifteen of his later years more than any other person outside of his family, he must at least "speak of" her or he would be writing falsely or be obfuscating references to experiences that mattered dearly to him and are therefore fundamental to the matter of his fiction (Chapter 17, 316-17).

He does not tell us of other private things (actual memoirs about his many travel experiences) since, as he suggests, these are experiences he deems not germane because he is not writing of himself as an ordinary or usual man. For him to tell those sorts of things would be to tell what you could hear from anyone. He is writing of himself as a professional novelist. The story of his life that matters, why he is writing this text, is how he came to invent and then write fiction (Chapter 3, 42), why he forms it in the way he does – stories – because, as he painstakingly shows us, this is in his society the way one goes about being professional, i.e. practicing one's talent or education in such a way as to get paid, and over time, build what is called a career, or recognized reputation, which means for the novelist getting paid for providing acceptable matter (Trollope calls this his "wares") to commercial publishers, and how this process affected him and further influenced his writing as he went along.

He admits up front (Chapter 1, 1) to convey all this necessitates going through many "passages of his life" chronologically to provide for readers "a recognized and intelligible form." Kinkaid thinks Trollope follows the outline of Dickens' *David Copperfield*, a novel we might today call an "autofiction" ("AT's Fictional Autobiography"). The trajectory of boyhood wretchedness into successful manhood is similar, but much of the rest is quite different. For example, as is typical of novels, a love story is central to *David Copperfield*, and Dickens presents the book to be read as a novel, a fiction, while no love story is central to Trollope's book, as it seems no love story was central to his writing gifts or career. Trollope intends us to take his book not as a novel, but as true as a fallible human being can be: "who can endure to own the doing of a mean thing?" (1) He dares tell of matters others would not (how his brother whipped him, how he was left without enough money in school, his humiliations) self-deprecatingly so not to incur hostile reactions, with Rousseau as his example of why there are limits to what you can say in this almost impossible-to-do genre (Chapter 1, 1-2, Chapter 20, 366).

There is a reason for his earnest insistence he is telling truth as far as he can remember without doing research (he mentions this). I could write a paper just on the development of autobiography and biography in 19<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric, and Anglocentric writing. Many have and I recommend A.O.J. Cockshut's two studies of English 19<sup>th</sup> century biography and autobiography especially. Here I have only time to suggest that Trollope wrote this book in order to preclude happening to him what he saw happening to other artists or famous people; I infer this from where he describes Forster's biography of Dickens as more popular than *David Copperfield* (Chapter 13, 247): the biographer's subjects (people like him) had imposed on them the biographer's or someone else's interpretation or assumptions and choices of what to tell, and he saw they had told the life story, whether deliberately or not, in such a

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way as to invite many readers to talk and write about this story according to their own prejudices, and this he did not want. He writes of his awareness he is in danger of becoming guilty of this (as he sees it) in his own biography of Thackeray, a fault he did not escape when it came to talking of Thackeray as a paid writer with obligations.

I measure or understand success the way Trollope does, that is, you look at where someone starts out, what were the many obstacles and “enemies of promise” that lie in the way, which he tells us about in the first searing chapters of his book. He is demonstrating to us he was remarkably successful however modest his tone. And here he succeeded too. He has until now forestalled other or different kinds of stories being told about him, or any of his close friends and family members. Some, like John Sutherland and R.H. Super (more tirelessly) labor to substitute a less admirable or more “balanced” (Super’s word) story than Trollope’s based on discrepancies they find between his text, those of others, and institutional documents. Trollope’s brother, Thomas, Glendinning is careful to remind us (18), was his mother’s favorite, the oldest male, and sent to university. Trollope was No 4, not a good number in a society where inheritance was still ruled by male primogeniture, Thomas said Anthony painted their childhoods as far too “noir [black]”

But it is Trollope’s “burning” words about these past events, of passing remarks thrown at him, and how they led to what happens to his heroes in his books and what he did in life (e.g. he ran for parliament) that we remember and are persuaded to accept as important, real and which we remember when we come, for example, to read his stories of his various heroes, say running for parliamentary office. I challenge anyone here to recite from memory some substitute description by one of Trollope’s more recent biographers for Trollope’s own, for example, “I can remember well the keenness of my anguish when I was treated as though I were unfit for any useful work” (Chapter 3, 44), “All that was fifty years ago, and it burns me now as though it were yesterday” (Chapter 1, 6), but every one of us I dare say carries about in some dim recess of our memories his or her favorite haunting words from Trollope’s *Autobiography*.

I think the various disputed stories matter less than first distinguishing how an autobiography differs from a novel in order that we may come to Trollope’s text with appropriate expectations as we go through what we find in the first half or panel of his book about himself as a successful professional novelist. The traditional format (now it is traditional; it was made so in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) is the same as a novel. Both are prose narratives which tell a story. The ways in which these two kinds of texts link up to people and things of all sorts outside is what makes novels and life-writing different. The novelist aims to reveal imagined characters through the action of the story, his meditations and uses of language. All that we can know of this particular story and its characters is contained in the novel. Trollope, as novelist, can invent all sorts of things about Mr. Harding in those novels of the Barchinensis series in which he appears or is described; even if through Mr. Harding’s character Trollope refers to real events and people outside the book, Mr. Harding is not to be identified with these real people or limited by what really happened to them. Similarly, there is also no hidden

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Mr. Harding who does things we don't know about. I refer of course to Edmund Wilson's famous question put to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" and its implied answer, this is not a legitimate question to ask. From the Barsetshire novels I can know all there is to know about Mr. Harding and know him better than I can ever know Anthony Trollope, the man, either by reading about his life in his letters or his autobiography, or a biography or elsewhere

My point is the autobiographer is not presenting an imagined character but aims to explain himself as a real individual, to explore how he became what he is. The autobiographer has a life outside his book directly connected to the story in it, but not all of that life is relevant. Much of it will not help him to tell the truth about himself as he sees or wants us to grasp it through a book which, like a novel, can begin and end where the autobiographer chooses. Readers understand they are not to ask about what Mr. Harding is doing while the narrator takes us to another part of the novel in question. In *The Warden* we do not worry whether Mr. Harding has gone to retrain himself for another position, has other children or a mistress we don't know about. We do not accuse him (as many have Trollope in *An Autobiography*) of deliberately making mistakes, or not telling us everything about his sex life and finances, or of winning a prize he forgot about. Equally, in *An Autobiography* we should not complain about what Trollope doesn't tell us about his life off-stage, or add details in order to change the emphasis of what Trollope tells us (as Super does): that substitutes our version of his life for his version. We read both genres to encounter a subjective vision that we identify as our storyteller or friend, the author. The living truths both autobiographies and novels communicate are the 'condition of mind and intelligence' (Trollope's phrase in this book, Chapter 3, 40) of the author of the particular book.

Trollope writes his autobiography from the same self-conscious skeptical standpoint that in his novels will not permit him, or us, to forget that we are reading a fictional story and that he is our storyteller. It may be asked whether Anthony Trollope, the man, has the right to keep secrets from us in his *An Autobiography*. The answer is a partial yes. Since the middle-aged Anthony Trollope knew he loved Kate Field (later editors of *An Autobiography* have revealed who she was), and his love for her revealed an important aspect of his life, history and character as he saw it and wanted us to see it, in his book he must tell us at least that such a woman existed and what she meant to him. And he does (Chapter 17, 316) On the other hand, this American women and other real living people Trollope cares about might be hurt by his telling us anymore about her. Trollope, his wife and sons and Kate Field are not characters in a book. They have complicated existences outside the book and could be damaged by details about them which others could use in ways impossible to foresee. Trollope explicitly tells us that he is withholding what he thinks would be a betrayal of himself and these people were he to specify.

So, for example, it's significant for understanding *The Way We Live Now* and therefore justified that Mark Green (among others) demonstrates, probably or persuasively accurately, that Lady Carbury is a (let's admit) ambiguous if not hostile depiction of Trollope's mother Fanny Trollope (The Trollope

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Jupiter, August 25, 2018). I add Lady Carbury's self-destructive and enabling devotion to her son, Sir Felix Carbury, may reflect how Trollope felt about his mother's devotion to his older brother. I suggest Trollope's depiction of Mrs. Neverbend (in the *Fixed Period*) and perhaps Mrs. Baggett, an old, no longer attractive housekeeper for Mr. Whittlestaff (in *An Old Man's Love*), reflects some of the ways Trollope may have, yes, unkindly seen his wife, Rose, late in life. She is homely in the one small photo we have, and he refers to her half-comically as an awkward laboring "biped in petticoats" climbing hills by his side. I think (not sure) it was Julian Hawthorne (Nathaniel's son) who said somewhere that Trollope's "books were his wife." Mrs. Baggett is compared disparagingly to the lovely young girl whom Mr. Whittlestaff lusts after and wants to marry, and whom she treats slightly derisively, but *Trollope* (italics mine) is not obliged to tell us about any of this, if indeed he admitted it to himself. He is not offering us a novel with a novel's pleasures but life-writing justified by whom he has become and with specific purposes.

Trollope's use of his preternaturally lucid explanations of how his imaginative process worked are easy to misunderstand because they are part of a demonstration that the writer is a hard-working worker in a legitimate profession. It's a profession, like a visual artist, musician, or even scientist (the term "natural philosopher" was first dropped in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) for whom there was no recognized or had no fixed certificate to vouch for your merit or capabilities. Trollope tells his worldly success did not originate in university training or academic knowledge, but his intensely active fantasy life. In this diptych's opening chapters, he chooses to tell us of his mortifications, and "unmanly" failures in the schools he went where he felt treated like an outcast. What did an academic prize matter? He was trained in Latin by bodily punishment (Chapters 1 & 2), for early manhood training put in a post office bureaucracy (Chapter 3).

He tells us more than once that removed that from an environment where he was shamed by his father's crazed traumatized behavior, a ruined house, and his mother's flight from husband with a book illustrator with all her children but two in tow, where he no longer faced daily in his Lacanian mind people's disappointment in him, where no one harassed him for money ("Do be punctual") or wished he was not there: "There had clung to me a feeling that I had been looked upon always as an evil, an encumbrance, a useless thing – as a creature of whom those connected with him had to be ashamed;" that is to say, removed to Ireland where he was not pre-placed where he was given an occupation he could take excel in, his boy- and young manhood depression lifted: "It seemed so strange to be in a country where there was not an individual whom I had ever spoken to or ever seen ... I never heard a word of censure, nor had many months passed before I found my services were valued (Chapters 3-4, 57-63), that he was lifted from his long boy- and young manhood depression.. He loved letters because through caring for them, he rose in life. Letters became precious objects entrusted to his care, each and every one of which should arrive unscathed and in a timely fashion to where or to whom it was directed. He understood others saw what he was doing differently: "not unfrequently the angelic nature of my mission was imperfectly understood" (Chapter 5, 87-92)

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The latter part of the first half of the diptych begins his tale of how he worked, travelled, was accepted for responsible diplomatic jobs, even quit the beloved job, losing his right to a pension in old age, partly because he became indignant at being passed over for promotion (Chapter 8, 133-35, Chapter 15, 279-284). The second half of his book begins after Chapter 11, at Chapter 12 after he delineates the special psychological anguishes and possible later deep pleasures of a literary career, its nature if you will) (Chapter 11, 211-214); we move into the present and he (anticipating E. M. Forster) defines what a novel is, tells how he sees the art of writing them, and goes on to explain and evaluate the work of his fellow novelists (remember he intended it to be posthumously published).

The matter of the second half is a direct development of the first and takes the same angle: this is a portrait of him as a novelist. He again refuses mystification at every point. He finds absurd the belief he discerns people wish to hold to about writers that they produce what they know they can't (and whose worth they are suspicious about) because they are overcome by an urge or inspiration – as if the work needs some extraordinary excuse. No one could live like that or produce great works. His friends and colleagues are, like him, people like his readers in many ways; Trollope concentrates on writers who held prestigious jobs beyond writing (were diplomats) or got commissions; who were “responsible members of society” with families, spouses, and children. So his valued friends are John Everett Millais, G. H. Lewes (an atheist) and other editors and writers he worked with, and the much respected William Makepeace Thackeray (Chapters 10 & 11). He presents his mother's work in the same light: a very hard-working woman holding her family together in sickness and health, and then enjoying her life and work in Italy with her eldest son.

I doubt we today regard Trollope's description of his life or his mother's in her older age as people holding down more than one job, working far more than 40 hours a week as abnormal. In the earlier and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern critics regarded Trollope's worksheets and assertions that he counted every word he wrote and tallied the data against the clock as a publicly acceptable way of describing a 'mania' (for example, Walter Kendrick in his *The Novel Machine*).; Susan Humphries, wrote of Trollope as 'an isolated, wounded, abnormal personality obsessed with an essentially absurd pursuit. I don't intend to single her out but assert this was and is perhaps among some who haven't thought about what a professional writing career demands still “a common misapprehension.” In fact, Trollope's days and nights resemble those of the professional American writer and editor of *The Atlantic*, for a while a diplomat, who wrote a campaign biography of Lincoln, who also wrote 47 novels, travel books, essays & short stories, was central support of his family, a socialist, and even had a nervous breakdown. No one has ever thought William Dean Howells “obsessed with an absurd pursuit.” Howells was not as candid about himself or his art as Anthony Trollope can be in his fiction as well as non-fiction. As far as I can tell (I don't know that much about Howells), he felt no need to preclude someone else writing his life. He did not worry he had become a “celebrity” -- as Trollope worries about in the cases of Dickens and Thackeray saying of the wide spread popularity of Forster's biography: “there is no withstanding such testimony as this” (Chapter 13, 247)

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Of course what can one say if the reader is impervious to argument, is bored or declares openly he or she is uninterested in the details of the working life of a writer, and can't see why he or she is not told much more about Trollope and Kate Field, or possibly other women; who feels satisfied by depictions of a lonely boy, loner, identifies with the ignored child, the depressed young man living across the street from a factory, but dissatisfied and irritated to be told for Trollope's later life the actual working life of a novelist and editor, told why Trollope wrote of parliamentary politics after he failed to achieve office at Beverly, served up with the fundamentals art of the storytelling, Trollope's literary criticism of his own novels and his earning power. Can you say to such a reader what you are demanding none of his or her business? This kind of life-as-one's work matter begins in Chapter 9 and carries on throughout the book! If I may insert myself, I've been asked by publishers and editors, could you shorten or skip "the meticulous microanalysis." "Readers grow restless." I feel I know so much more about Trollope from these later chapters of what I want to know and would miss not knowing and wish Margaret Oliphant (and many another writer whose writing I read a lot of) could have brought herself to talk of her books and career as Trollope does in a coherent autobiography.

I'll end with how I believe we should read Trollope's judgements and criticism of his own novels in these somewhat controversial chapters of his book. It's this matter many readers turn to as if to an oracle who should know when they want to defend their feelings about his or that controversial character. It's what critics use in their arguments. Lily Dale will have to stand one case in point for all. Trollope treats Lily roughly, saying he doubts so many readers would have written him "letters concerning her fate" if he had married her to Johnny Eames. He says somewhat irritated what "endears her to these people" is "she could not get over her troubles," and his comment, she is "something of a female prig," is his reply to them (Chapter 10, 178-79). Let me suggest that here and elsewhere his remarks are often addressed to his readers, are reactions to anticipated misreadings, are often defensive and not candid.

Bill Overton's useful distinction of an "official" and "unofficial Trollope" will help us here. The unofficial Trollope is the brilliant highly articulate consciousness that delved with unconventional feelings and thoughts in his novel when deep in his creative reveries; the official Trollope is the conventional moralist also found inside the novels as our moralizing and satirical narrator who will suddenly produce a wholly other unexpected perspective as when he argues that Marie Melmotte (in *The Way We Live Now*) was wrong to defy her father, to try to keep his money over a technicality (he had signed it over to her), after he has harrowed us with dramatizing suggestively a brutal beating of her by her father in the context of a callous and indifferent upbringing and destruction of her biological mother. In the *Autobiography* this official Trollope sometimes takes on a tone totally out of whack with everything else he has said about a particular situation or character. He reminds me in these of what people who met him in life said of him: quick and abrasive in reply, of what N. John Hall explained as Trollope's carapace at the dinner table. I turn to Gaston Bachelard in his books on Reverie and Proust in many places. The writer of subjective and epistolary prose at full length, especially the sort where the character wears his or her heart on a sleeve is the product of our dreaming self who is quite different from the self (or mask) we manifest in society, in drawing rooms, and public places. It's

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telling how few scenes in bedrooms Trollope writes, how rare is the mention of any character's dream. To paraphrase Proust, Trollope waited for such solitudes (or, when, pressed for time on a train, in a ship's cabin) to go back to those numbered papers or disclose (sometimes as a female character) the "real" me, the one for whom Trollope tells us in this book he lived, Trollope as novelist.

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