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## ANTHONY TROLLOPE'S LATE STYLE: VICTORIAN LIBERALISM AND LITERARY FORM



By **Frederik Van Dam**  
(Edinburgh, 2016) 256 pp.  
Reviewed by **Deborah Denenholz Morse** on 2018-07-30.

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Anthony Trollope has only recently been discovered to *have* a style, which was for many decades considered to be non-existent or entirely transparent. Frederik van Dam's provocative book joins a plethora of new essays on Trollope's style. This innovative work ranges from Jonathan Farina on the cumulative significance of phrases like "as a matter of course" in constructing "ordinary realism," later included in *Everyday Words*, ([reviewed elsewhere on this site](#)); Helena Michie on internal revision in *Can You Forgive Her?*; Suzanne Keen on "affective Trollope" in *Orley Farm*; Helen Blythe on "forms of storytelling, repetition, and voice" in *Kept in the Dark*; Margaret Markwick on narrative innovations in Trollope's literary biographies and *An Autobiography* ("Trollope Writes Trollope," in which Trollope is compared to Jose Borges); James Kincaid on reading Trollope as tragedy; and Lauren Cameron on reading the Palliser novels in relation to Darwin, including analysis of Darwin's and Trollope's "narratorial voices." All of these essays were published in *The Routledge Research Companion to Anthony Trollope* in 2016, the same year as Van Dam's book. Although only Blythe and Markwick deeply explore late Trollope, all of these compelling essays help to fill the lacuna of scholarship on Trollope's style. A bit perplexingly, however, Van Dam overlooks not only these recent essays (available too late for him to use) but also earlier scholarship on this topic: by Margaret Markwick in *Trollope and Women* (1997) and *New Men in Trollope's Novels* (2007); by Mary Poovey and Victoria Glendinning in *The Cambridge Companion to Anthony Trollope* (2010); by Jonathan Farina in the fall 2015 bicentenary issue of *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*; and by me in both *Women in Trollope's Palliser Novels* (1987) and *Reforming Trollope* (2013).

Nevertheless, Van Dam's study is diverse and eclectic in its compass of the elements of style. Though readers of this erudite book will find nothing reminiscent of E.B. White, they will discover instead an original explication of linguistic and rhetorical forms set against Trollope's own intellectual pursuits during his mature years. These interests ranged widely, from his passion for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, through his love of Latin (which he essentially taught himself, having not learned it at Harrow and Winchester), to his well-known immersion in the political world of High Victorian London and his less recognized identity as the bibliophile (as well as generous friend who bought Robert Bell's entire library upon the latter's untimely death in order to aid Bell's widow, as John Hall tells us in his biography of Trollope). Perhaps Trollope's only intense passion not related to some aspect of his style is fox-hunting. But Van Dam might also link that communal activity to his central thesis: that in his later works Trollope shifted away from a liberal belief in individualism, and that he expressed this new political and philosophical stance in an innovative and distinctive style.

In exploring Trollope's late style, Van Dam aims "to disassemble and inspect the formal laws which sustain the late novels' mechanical movement," a "centrality of conventions" that "was part of a new aesthetic" (2). He defines this aesthetic as the expression of "Trollope's changed perception of modernity," a term he defines "for the purposes of this book's argument . . . as the historical emergence and growth of free will and individual agency" (2). Citing the Frankfurt School of Adorno and Horkheimer, Van Dam analyzes the style of Trollope's final decade as "a reaction against modernity or, more precisely, an intervention within it" that questioned the reach of subjectivity, challenged "the assumption that subjects can really penetrate the remotest corners of their inner minds" (3). Van Dam examines the ideological implications of this "challenge to individualism" as a critique of the political philosophy of liberalism. His work thus joins that of Regenia Gagnier, Mary Jean Corbett, Lauren Goodlad, Amanda Anderson, and other scholars who have read Trollope in the light of Victorian liberalism.

Van Dam's commentary upon Trollope's style is expansive. Besides more conventionally analyzing parody in *The American Senator* and irony in *The Fixed Period*, he is strikingly original on what he terms "poignancy" in Trollope's last unfinished novel, *The Landleaguers*, and "allegorical temporality" as a stylistic mode of critique in Trollope's colonial novels, particularly *An Old Man's Love*, *John Caldigate*, and *The Way We Live Now*. According to Van Dam, "Trollope suggests . . . one should cultivate a disposition that would recognize and accept the ultimate unknowability of others" (114). Developing this point in one of his most intricately argued chapters, he applies David Russell's writing on "tact" to a complex reading of Trollope's late novel *Marion Fay*, wherein he traces "formal innovation, the depiction of 'perfect' love, with which Trollope represents a tactful form of sociability" (114).

Although I admire Van Dam's original interpretation of Trollope's late work, I find some of his specific choices puzzling. The first comes right at the outset. After quoting from James's vexed obituary on Trollope, Van Dam remarks that "James's discernment of a 'stale' quality and 'dryness of texture' in Trollope's novels from *Phineas Redux* onward touches on

the essence of Trollope's late style" (1). Does it? As noted by several Trollope scholars including Elsie Michie, whose work is cited in the Notes, one should always be wary of James's comments on Trollope. Likewise questionable is Van Dam's curious decision to omit the last three Palliser novels, all notably eloquent masterpieces. He also gives short shrift even to the novels that remain a part of his study, other than the lower-tier *Marion Fay*, which gets a surprising amount of interpretive attention in both of the final two chapters of the book.

Since Van Dam chooses his texts for cultural interest rather than literary merit, he largely foregrounds stylistic paradigms that "take these elements in his art to new heights" (3) in Trollope's less accomplished work. He excludes *Phineas Redux*, *The Prime Minister*, and *The Duke's Children* because they "are more canonical texts" that have received greater "critical attention" (14, n12.). Yet these three superb novels might have illustrated Trollope's critique of liberal political philosophy in rich and intricate ways. One might also posit related but alternative readings of the late fiction, such as my own argument that Trollope's magisterial novel *The Way We Live Now* expresses both a hiatus in his Liberal sympathy with political reform and a concomitant belief in the refuge of the personal (BRANCH, July 2014). Likewise, what Van Dam calls "tact as love" might well be represented by Robert Polhemus's beautiful analysis of the late scene in *Phineas Redux* when Phineas spontaneously kisses Madame Max: the brave, generous woman whose heroic journeys in Eastern Europe have saved his life (*The Changing World of Anthony Trollope*, 185).

I am wholly impressed by Van Dam's erudition and deep intelligence, which are both manifestly evident in this book. His Continental perspective brings us literary comparisons to Heine and Goethe, and a familiarity with theorists from Bakhtin to Benjamin. The Notes alone are compelling reading and a tremendous source of historical and theoretical contexts, as well as offering more commentary from previous Trollope scholars. Van Dam acknowledges great Trollopian of generations past like Geoffrey Harvey, Robert Polhemus, Juliet McMaster, James Kincaid, and R. C. Terry. However, Van Dam tends continually to cite--and parse at length--more theorists than literary scholars and more often to recognize recent scholars who write upon liberalism, such as the superb Lauren Goodlad. On the other hand, there are a few significant lacunae, particularly of scholarship on colonial Trollope: most prominently Helen Lucy Blythe's work in *The Politics of Gender* (2009) on *John Caldigate* and "Catherine Carmichael" and in *The Victorian Colonial Romance with the Antipodes* (2014), which concludes with a first-rate discussion of *The Fixed Period*. Van Dam's explication of *Ayala's Angel* also misses relevant scholarship. While he considers Hillis Miller's excellent and influential chapter on that little-discussed great comic novel in *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1967), Van Dam makes only passing reference to Christopher Herbert's chapter on *Ayala's Angel* in *Trollope and Comic Pleasure* (1986), and none at all to my own chapter in *Reforming Trollope*.

In spite of these drawbacks, Van Dam is already so deeply steeped in Trollope's oeuvre at this early stage of his career that I await his future explications of Trollope's work with eager anticipation. He is an important new voice in the current wave of Trollope scholars. I would like to hear that voice tell us more about first-rate Trollope novels like *Orley Farm*, *He Knew He Was Right*, the Barsetshire and Palliser novels, and some of the more intriguing short novels, such as *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* and *An Eye for An Eye*. We need his profound thinking in the continuing struggle fully to recognize Trollope's genius.

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