

INTRODUCTION

[*Readers who are unfamiliar with the plot may prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword*]

A NOVEL, in Trollope's own definition, should be 'a picture of common life, enlivened with humour and sweetened with pathos'.¹ Though *The Prime Minister* depicts the everyday life of nineteenth-century England with its author's customary fidelity, there is not much humour and very little sweetness about it. This is an important but uncomfortable book.

The Russian novelist Tolstoy read it in January 1877 and thought it 'splendid'.² Trollope's English contemporaries, however, failed to appreciate *The Prime Minister*. 'This is not one of Mr Trollope's pleasanter novels,' the *Spectator* observed on 22 July 1876: 'We should, in fact, be half-inclined to believe that Mr. Trollope's power itself had declined, that he was positively unable to give us the sketches in which we have taken such delight.' The *Saturday Review*, in October 1876, was similarly 'forced to the conclusion that *The Prime Minister* represents a decadence in Mr. Trollope's powers'.³ At the age of 61, Trollope began to wonder whether his career as a novelist was over.

This controversial novel was the fifth in a sequence of six 'semi-political tales', published between January 1864 and July 1880, which later became known as the Palliser series. First seen as a backbench MP in the 'Barsetshire' novel *The Small House at Allington* (1862–4), Plantagenet Palliser rises through the political ranks in *Can You Forgive Her?* (where he becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer), *Phineas Finn*, *The Eustace Diamonds*, and *Phineas Redux*, where he inherits his uncle's title, moves to the House of Lords as Duke of Omnium, and drops briefly in cabinet seniority, first to Lord Privy Seal, and then to President of the Board of Trade. Now, in *The Prime Minister* (1875–6), he finally reaches the top of the greasy pole and becomes 'the greatest man in the greatest country in the world' (p. 544) as the leader of a coalition government. Trollope thought that he was depicting an ideal

¹ Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. M. Sadleir and F. Page (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 126.

² See N. J. Hall's review of C. P. Snow's *Trollope in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 31/2 (1976), 215, citing a translation by R. F. Christian and Patrick Waddington from the 90-volume Jubilee edition of Tolstoy, lxii. 302.

³ Donald Smalley (ed.), *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 422, 426.

statesman whose only faults were the personal sensitivity and moral fastidiousness which hampered his ability to cut deals and make compromises. The reviewers, crushingly, found the political scenes 'vulgar'.

But their deepest objection was actually to the love story which Trollope used, in his familiar multiplot structure, to 'sweeten' the parliamentary narrative. 'If I wrote politics for my own sake,' he noted in his *Autobiography*, 'I must put in love and intrigue, social incidents, with perhaps a dash of sport, for the sake of my readers.'⁴ Unfortunately, the relationship between Emily Wharton and Ferdinand Lopez was not something which readers in the 1870s found it easy to enjoy. Even *The Times*, which praised other features of the book, was unhappy with this. 'We doubt', the reviewer declared, 'whether it will ever be numbered among the favourites of those who delight in Mr Trollope for his love stories.'⁵ Trollope himself came quickly to believe that he had made a mistake. In a letter to Mary Holmes in May 1876, he declared that, 'though I myself am prepared to stand up for the character of the Prime Minister, and for all his surroundings, I acknowledge the story of the soi-disant hero, Lopez, and all that has to do with him, to be bad'.⁶

The reason for this distaste is obvious enough. In previous novels, Trollope had often used the plot motif of a young woman's attempts to choose between a glamorous but dangerous suitor and a safer, less exciting man who would make the better husband. Usually, however, he had allowed his heroines to escape from danger. By the end of the story they would reject temptation and move, either into a good match like Alice Vavasor and Glencora M'Cluskie, or into self-sufficient independence like Lily Dale. In *The Prime Minister* he does something more daring. There is no escape for Emily Wharton. She gets her way, marries her dangerous man, and has to live with the consequences.

The result is a perceptive but painful study of an unhappy marriage. Only very belatedly will Trollope be able to turn the romantic narrative of *The Prime Minister* back towards 'sweetness', and by that time the circumstances required for a happy ending are both improbable and uncomfortable. A violent suicide and a dead baby are needed before Emily can embark on a second courtship as a suitably unencumbered widow. And if a second marriage of this kind is less troubling for modern readers than it seems to have been for Trollope's contemporaries, we are likely to be more disturbed than they were by the anti-Semitic quality of the book.

⁴ *Autobiography*, 317.

⁵ *Critical Heritage*, 425.

⁶ *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, ed. N. J. Hall, 2 vols. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1983), ii. 687.

Emily's father, Abel Wharton, does not hesitate to express his dislike of his daughter's unsuitable boyfriend in racial terms. Lopez is a 'swarthy son of Judah' (p. 30) and a 'Jew-boy' (p. 34). He is 'a "nasty foreigner"', and probably of Jewish descent' (p. 97), 'a greasy Jew adventurer out of the gutter' (p. 111). For John Fletcher he is 'a greasy, black foreigner' (p. 125). In the view of John's mother, old Mrs Fletcher, Lopez is 'a black Portuguese nameless Jew', with, 'a bright eye, and a hook nose, and a glib tongue' (p. 120). Even for Lady Glencora, who initially finds him attractive, he is 'half foreigner half Jew' (p. 585).

Though remarks of this kind are disturbingly frequent, they are the reported views of characters within the novel, not the opinions of its author. Trollope shared many of the customary prejudices of his class and era. But it is hard to convict him, specifically, of anti-Semitism. In *Nina Balatka* (1866), he had used a sympathetic account of the courtship and marriage of a Christian woman and a Jewish man as his main plot. Within the Palliser series there are hints that Phineas Finn's delightful wife, Marie Goesler, is Jewish. In *The Prime Minister*, the authorial voice refers directly to Lopez's 'race' only once (p. 167), and in circumstances where it might well be disapproving of him, not as a Jew, but as the Portuguese he acknowledges himself to be ('some inferior Latin race' as Abel Wharton puts it on p. 109). It was foreigners in general, rather than Jews in particular, that Englishmen of Trollope's generation were accustomed to regard as lesser breeds.

In fact, the question of whether Lopez is, or is not, Jewish remains unsettled throughout the book. His comparison of himself with 'the Israelites' who 'despoiled the Egyptians' (p. 404) proves nothing beyond his knowledge of the Bible, and when he likens himself to Shylock (p. 353) his business partner dismisses the idea as ridiculous; earlier in the same chapter Lopez has allusively compared himself to Shakespeare's Christian merchant Antonio, rather than to his Jewish usurer. When Sir Alured Wharton remarks that Lopez is 'a nasty Jew-looking man', Arthur Fletcher replies, 'He's not that, Sir Alured. He's a handsome man, with a fine voice;—dark, and not just like an Englishman' (p. 113). The tendency on the part of those who dislike him to see him as a Jew is a reflection, in other words, less of his actual ethnicity than of the society in which he moves. Trollope's brand of dispassionate realism, with its rejection of preaching and polemic (or what we might nowadays call political correctness), requires him to depict the anti-Semitic temper of English middle-class society in the second half of the nineteenth century accurately and without comment. The result is true to life. But it is also unpleasant, and has the unfortunate

effect of coarsening the presentation of the figure who is, despite the doubts expressed about him by Trollope and his reviewers, much the most interesting character in the novel.

In literal terms, Lopez is a financial speculator. Today he would probably be running a hedge fund, or spread-betting on the performance of the equity, commodity, and currency indices. In the financial industry of the 1870s, he is limited to taking heavily leveraged, long-only positions in the commodities market, buying cargoes of jute, guano, Kauri gum, sulphur, and the African tree bark used to make 'Bios', in the expectation of significant price rises between purchase and delivery. In Chapter 43 he explicitly regrets the fact that derivatives have not yet been invented (though he does not, of course, use that word), since it would be more convenient to trade in what we now call 'futures' than to own actual consignments of raw materials:

If I buy a ton of coffee and keep it six weeks, why do I buy it and keep it, and why does the seller sell it instead of keeping it? The seller sells it because he thinks he can do best by parting with it now at a certain price. I buy it because I think I can make money by keeping it. It is just the same as though we were to back our opinions. He backs the fall. I back the rise. You needn't have coffee and you needn't have guano to do this. Indeed the possession of the coffee or the guano is only a very clumsy addition to the trouble of your profession. (p. 332)

More than a century ahead of his time ('the world was dull and would not learn the tricks of trade as taught by Ferdinand Lopez'), he backs his judgement with borrowed money and seems, initially, to have been doing so with great success.

An intelligent man, he has been educated at an English private school, rather than one of the 'public schools' favoured by the gentry and professional classes, and at a German university. As a consequence, he is a 'thorough linguist' (p. 32), able to operate confidently in the increasingly globalized (as we would now say) world of commerce. After training with a firm of London stockbrokers, he works as a private trader, though with so little capital that he relies on credit to back his deals. His pursuit of Emily Wharton is not, Trollope insists, merely a matter of financial calculation: 'In very truth he loved the girl and revered her' (p. 21). There is affection here, and a strong mutual attraction. But he has, none the less, a perfectly reasonable expectation that a wife from such a background will come with a substantial dowry. This money would give him the capital base he needs to become a more effective player in the commodity markets. His letter to Mr Wharton

about his business affairs in Chapter 46 is (deliberately) far from clear. But it does suggest the relatively small scale on which he has hitherto been operating. At this point he is involved in speculative ventures totalling £26,000, yet it is hard to see how he could possibly make more than twelve or thirteen hundred pounds of profit from them. Half of the investment (£13,000) belongs to his partner, Sextus Parker, who has provided the only capital involved. Lopez's share is entirely borrowed so, even if the cargoes rise in value (as he hopes) to 'more than £30,000' (p. 349), there is not a great deal left once he has both repaid his loans and paid the interest on them. Given the risks involved, this is a modest return, and one can quite see why Lopez wishes to acquire more capital and enlarge the scope of his dealings. In the event—though rather improbably given the way in which the risk has sensibly been spread across a wide range of different commodities—every single one of the cargoes mentioned in this letter appears to fall in value, and Lopez is ruined.

Trollope can rightly be accused of not saying enough about Lopez's commercial failure. At the beginning of the novel he lives in a flat in Westminster, dresses exquisitely, has his own brougham, rides a fine horse, hunts in the winter, belongs to a good, if not quite top-notch, club, and, it seems, actually pays his tailor. By Chapter 58 he is penniless. He had not, of course, received the dowry he had hoped for. But that, in itself, does not explain the collapse of his financial career. In Chapter 54 we are told, rather feebly, that 'everything had gone badly with him since his marriage' (p. 409). A conscientious writer of realist novels needs to say a little more than that about the working life of his protagonist.

At a symbolic rather than realistic level, however, Trollope gives a full and fascinating account of Ferdinand Lopez. He is the orphan child of 'an English lady' (p. 27) and a Portuguese father who was 'little better than a travelling pedlar' (p. 443), both of whom died before he was old enough to know them. Educated at an English school, with the fees paid by 'an old gentleman who was not related to him' (p. 9), he has 'always belonged to the Church of England' (p. 29). But he has no relatives, an unfamiliar profession, and a foreign name. As such, he is an outsider—a man who moves confidently in English upper-middle-class and aristocratic society without ever feeling wholly part of it. Some critics have linked him to the heroic rebels and outsiders of nineteenth-century European fiction: Stendhal's Julien Sorel, Turgenev's Bazarov, or Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov. He can also be seen as an anticipation of the 'hollow men' of T. S. Eliot, alienated from