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Trollope’s politics have been the subject of much scholarly and critical debate since the early days of his writing career. Master chronicler of the landed gentry, aristocracy, and clergy, of London politics and society, and of those who found themselves (willingly or unwillingly) within the ambit of one of these groups—was Trollope a conservative or a liberal? Or maybe a little bit of both? Was he content with the present state of affairs, or did he advocate for reform? Perhaps he was a reformist against his better judgment? Or was it the other way around?

Considering that Trollope’s career spanned almost five decades and produced more than 47 novels and many other works of shorter fiction and non-fiction, coming up with a definitive answer for this question might seem impossible. Surely one can find several different versions of Trollope and his politics within such a prodigious *oeuvre*, and surely every bottom line about his politics can be refuted with another, contradictory example from another novel. And yet, the debates have persisted, generating an impressive amount of scholarship.

The latest iteration of these debates comes from one of the most dedicated and knowledgeable Trollopians working today, Deborah Denenholz Morse. *Reforming Trollope* takes up this subject—and the entire corpus of criticism it has generated—with fervor and erudition, arguing with great clarity that Trollope was a reformist not only in his political world view, but also in his practice as a writer. While Morse does not define what she means by
reformist—at times it seems to be akin to liberal, at others, to modern—she uses it consistently to describe Trollope’s thinking and Trollope’s fiction as “experimental and innovative” (1). In other words, Morse argues that Trollope is an innovator both in his understanding of race and gender in Victorian Britain and in his form, rewriting the pastoral and the marriage plot.

Morse’s writing on these questions is passionate and urgent, perhaps, because another concern altogether seems to be at stake—that of Trollope’s value as a writer, and especially as a writer worthy of scholarly attention and reflection. Indeed, questions regarding Trollope’s politics have consistently been tied up with his somewhat tenuous place in the canon of the Great Victorian Novelists. In this Trollope is hardly alone; many other writers have gone in and out of critical fashion because of their politics. And yet Trollope’s focus on the well-off, well-born, and well-connected, and the relative dearth of lower-class characters (or concern for them) in his fiction, have sometimes seemed especially problematic to critics because these themes are expressed in what they (unfavorably) regard as the conservative form of his realist fiction. In other words, the question of innovation in his work is tied both to his politics and to his assessment as a great writer. Morse thus takes up her project with two implicit interventions in mind: to establish Trollope’s rightful place on the political map, and in so doing, to ensure his place on the literary map.

The book addresses the three arenas of reform—genre, gender, race—in its three parts, ultimately establishing a clear trajectory in Trollope’s writing, which, Morse argues, moves from conservative to increasingly liberal. Each one of the book’s three parts consists of two chapters that provide a thorough reading of one of Trollope’s later novels, showing the ways in which Trollope extends and reforms contemporary discourse on each of these three concerns. But the book excels precisely because it refuses to separate out these categories: Trollope’s ability to
rewrite the pastoral form in *The Small House in Allington* (1864), as shown in the book’s first chapter on “Reforming Genre,” is predicated on his reconsideration of gender, as is his surprisingly liberal marriage plot, the subject of the second chapter on *Lady Anna* (1874).

Similarly, Morse’s chapters on “Reforming Race” show how an awareness of the expanding possibilities of female sexuality underwrite Trollope’s ability to rethink race. Thus, his examination of mastery (and, by extension, slavery) in *He Knew He Was Right* (1869) juxtaposes sexual and racial oppression, much as bigamy in *Dr. Wortle’s School* (1881) codes miscegenation. Throughout the book, Morse performs a sustained examination of sexuality (and especially female sexuality) in Trollope, providing an important and thought-provoking leit-motif to her inquiry.

Morse’s greatest strength is in the varied methodologies she brings to bear on each of these novels. She combines rigorous close readings with extensive biographical knowledge of Trollope’s intellectual and personal history, as well as his family, social and professional ties. The novels’ intertextual allusions, and especially the Shakespearean ones, are carefully teased out and discussed and all of these are meticulously historicized within specific historical events and debates. Moreover, Morse is keenly aware of the fact that she is participating in an ongoing scholarly dialogue. Indeed she seems to revel in it: in addition to addressing Trollope’s early reviewers, she engages as thoughtfully with criticism of, say, the 1920s or 1960s as with essays published as late as 2012. This wealth of scholarship thus becomes a reason in itself to read this book, a veritable research compendium of political Trollope scholarship of the past century, written in lively and captivating prose.

As a result of her broad methodological approach, Morse’s readings not only establish Trollope’s reformist views but also venture to explain how they came to be this way. Each novel
is analyzed for its reformist content but also explained in terms of the intellectual, intertextual, historical, and biographical influences that could have prompted his changing views. Similarly, each novel is grounded in specific, local occurrences and preoccupations, ranging from the personal to the national, which constituted the contextual causes of Trollope’s reformist writing. All of these individual instances of change or reform join together to trace what Morse recognizes as the overall trajectory of liberalization in Trollope’s thought.

Morse thus asks us to view Trollope’s novels as dynamic, evolving over his lifetime in response to historical and social change. “As he traveled the world, lived in Ireland, and then in London, and experienced a rich and sometimes frenetic life,” Morse argues, “he changed his ideas on gender and race, becoming increasingly more liberal in his thinking. In contrast to the complacent Englishman identified by so many Trollope scholars and historians of the Victorian period, Trollope was strongly influenced by the reformist currents of the 1860s and 1870s, and his novels reflect that influence in their willingness to engage the most controversial social and political issues of those turbulent decades” (168). Indeed, labeling Trollope as “complacent” requires turning a blind eye not only to the subject matter of many of his novels but also to the complexity of his social acumen. One might ask how a writer like Trollope, so observant and so perspicacious as to social behavior, mores and structures, could avoid engaging with the burning social questions of gender, race and Empire that were at the center of the world he so assiduously studied.

But note that this quotation evinces a constant correlation between Trollope and his novels, the latter representing—somewhat unproblematically—his thinking and his concerns. Moreover, for Morse the very “willingness to engage” with these social and political issues already denotes a reformist or liberal impulse. This is where I remain somewhat unconvinced by
her argument. While she makes a strong case for Trollope’s engagement with the “controversial social and political issues of those turbulent decades” she does not, in my mind, succeed quite as well in establishing his unequivocal reformist stand on each of these concerns. By its very nature, a debate or a concern generates more than one political position; a willingness to think about race and gender does not in itself reflect a reformist mindset.

However, while I disagree with some of Morse’s conclusions (especially when it seems to me that she over-states the case of Trollope’s liberal politics) I think this disagreement to be immaterial to the study’s many strengths. After all, standing judgment on Trollope as author seems to me beside the point. The reason to continue debating politics in Trollope is that, as a writer of outstanding observation and social acumen, he affords those paying attention to the complexities of his fiction an unparalleled understanding of the political forces at work in mid-Victorian culture. And Morse does nothing if not pay close attention to Trollope and the study of his work. Contending with her readings and with the impressive amount and variety of evidence that she brings to support her claims thus promises to yield more thoughtful analyses and learned readings of Trollope and his world. The pleasure of this kind of sustained engagement is the real pay-off of this book.

Biographical Notice:
Ayelet Ben-Yishai teaches Victorian and postcolonial literature at the English Department of the University of Haifa, Israel. She is the author of Common Precedents: The Presentness of the Past in Victorian Fiction and Law (Oxford UP, 2013), and is currently writing about realism in the Indian novel in English.