

“CAN YOU FORGIVE HER”? : An Analysis related Political system

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The plot of ‘Can you Forgive Her?’ by **Anthony Trollope** follows a comic pattern, but it is so deeply shadowed as to lend to the whole the disturbing effect the narrator attributes to winter light : ‘It is the light of the afternoon, and gives a token of the speedy coming of the early twilight. It tells of the shortness of the day, and contains even in its clearness a promise of the gloom of night. It is an absolute light. But it seems to contain the darkness which is to follow it’. Nothing is exactly what it appears to be in this novel, nor can anyone give a voice to what he is. Plant agent Palliser is ‘very careful in his language’, labouring after ‘accuracy’ at all costs, and consequently ‘he rather prided himself on being dull’. Such language suggests an accuracy that is lifeless because it is emotionless.¹ It accurately reflects nothing. On the other hand, poetic characters like Burgo Fitzgerald or especially George Vavasor employ language as a weapon. George’s electioneering slogan – ‘Vavasor and the ‘River Bank’ – like all his words, asserts a meaning, or seems to assert a meaning, that is not there. Private and romantic language is therefore so suspect that public men disdain it altogether. Parliamentary etiquette for public speech puts eloquence first on the list of faults, ahead of being ‘inaccurate’, long-winded’, illtempered’. One sort of meaninglessness is substituted for another. Such a split is a desperate one, and it finally guarantees the uselessness of communication, even between such honest man as Plantagenet Palliser and John Grey : ‘We all know that neither of them

¹ David, C., “Unity and Irony in Trollope’s Can you Forgive Her ? SEL, 8 (1968), pp. 566-7

would put the matter altogether in a true light. Men never can do so in words, let the light within themselves be ever so clear.’

In a way, the only language that is truly expressive is the language of attack, the language of wit. Glencora is the true wit, and her language is both more effective and more hostile than that of anyone else.² When her husband stuffily rebukes her for using such vulgar expressions as ‘the long and the short of it,’ she sharply defends herself by claiming that the phrase is ‘good English’. Glencora is the true conservative here and throughout, imagining that the coherence implied by ‘good English’ can be maintained. She fights to bring back into being another language, one in which words have a direct connection with reality. For her and for Alice Vavasor, the key word and the key illusion is ‘freedom’. The novel is, in fact, very largely an ironic exploration of this term.

‘Can You Forgive Her?’ Opens on an image of the trapped man, old Mr. Vavasor, whose function in this world, endlessly singing forms he does not read, suggest the futility of all energy. He tries to maintain a grumbling sort of dignity, but he can really express no substance. He truly is nothing and thus defines the essential starting – point for the problems involving the major characters, all of whom are women. Three women, Alice Vavasor, Lady Glencora, and Mrs. Arabelle Greenow, are each asked to choose between two lovers, each pair consisting of one prudent and one romantic man. Alice and Glencora reject the poetic choice (George Vavasor and Burgo Fitzgerald) and marry into a public life (with John Grey and Plantagenet Palliser respectively). The minor plot involving the widow Greenow, however, reverses the major plots on this, as on every other, point, Mrs. Greenow chooses ‘the rocks and valley’ over the substantial dungheaps.

² Ibid., p 569

All three provide answers to the pointed question, ‘what should a woman do with her life?’ It appears that as soon such a question is asked, as soon as a woman obtain any self-consciousness about her situation, all the easy answers disappear. Wealth and rank are no protection against nothingness, as the Palliser girls, Iphigeneia and Phoebe, illustrate. Jeffrey explains that they are not political, being ‘too clever to give themselves up to anything in which they can do nothing.’³ Being women they live a depressed life, devoting themselves to literature, fine arts, social economy, and the abstract sciences. They write wonderful letters’. Not all content to write wonderful letters, however, and try for something more – for wonderful lives. The novel traces three such attempts, two of which are anything but successful, despite the wit and strength of the women involved. The third attempt, made by the widow Greenow, succeeds with such ridiculous ease as to emphasize the central irony. This is how problems should be swept aside. This subplot has the effect of making the dilemmas of the two major characters more apparent and more tantalizing.

None is more tantalizing than the dilemma of Alice Vavasor. ‘What are we to forgive?’ asked James. Where is the moral question? Why does she marry in the end, if there was such a major issue at stake? Isn’t ‘the tragedy but a simple postponement of the wedding-day’? Is it not, finally, a maddeningly contradictory novel’ with this ‘hard-hearted, boring prude’ at its centre? Though the book does not appear to have been ‘the pioneer of the problem novel,’ as Escott claimed, since so few have noticed that it was working anywhere close to the frontier, there is certainly a problem presented, a major moral and psychological problem. James, who wrote about the same dilemma exactly in ‘The Portrait of a Lady’, should have known better. Perhaps he did. In any case,

³ Hoyt, Norris D., “Can You Forgive Her? : A Commentary,” *Trollopian*, 2, (1947-8), pp. 57-70

Alice, like Isabel Archer, is out test the condition and extent of her freedom : ‘People always do seem to think it as so terrible that a girl should have her own way in anything’. She resists persuasion for the same reasons a rabbit shuns a trap – ‘I haven’t much of my own way at present, but you see, when I’m married I shalln’t have it all’. As a result, to the imperious lady Midlothian she seems ‘the most self willed young woman I ever met in my life’. Very likely she is, Alice is, or wants to be, literally self-willed. But the assertion of independence, she feels, is an assertion of isolation, she can find no way out of this dilemms. ‘All her trouble and sorrows in life’, the narrator says, ‘had come from an over-fed craving for independence. Alice’s notions of what she wants are altogether unclear, she ‘had by degrees filled herself with a vague idea that there was something to be done, something over and beyond, or perhaps altogether beside that marrying and having two children, if she only knew that it was’. She cannot find ‘what it was’ because ‘it is nowhere objectified or available in her surroundings. What she feels more sure of is that neither of the two choices offered to her, George and Grey, leads to much of anything, different as they appear to be. She flits between the two, each grasping at her and trying to cage her as she retrains from the other. But she hears the chains clanking on both sides thus tries to fly free. She originally resists Grey, partly to thwart her among guardians and persuaders, partly because he is too obviously perfect, but mostly because he assumes total common in every smooth, untroubled gesture. He is as secure as a hunter in a duck preserve : ‘He shook his head still smiled. There was something in the imperturbed security of his manner which almost made her angry with him. It seemed as though he assumes so great a superiority that he felt himself able to treat any resolve of her as the petulance of a child’. Grey is a man of pure surface and public language. He looks, Kate says, ‘as though he was

always bethinking himself that he wouldn't wear out his clothes', a characterization not altogether unfair in its suggestion of his self-absorbed prudence. But though superficial, he is not weak, the surface is almost overpowering : 'he always spoke and acted as though there could be no question that his manner of life was to be adopted, without a word or thought of doubting, by his wife'. His ignorant insensitivity is thus a source of strength.⁴ Even Lady Macleod, who has been pushing Alice toward a marriage with Grey with all her might, is no longer surprised at Alice's reluctance after she actually meets Grey and sees what his perfection amounts to. The theme of Grey's subtly repulsive, masterful perfection is so brilliantly handled that the narrator pretends not quite to understand it himself : 'I do not know how to explain that it was so, but it was this perfect command of himself at all seasons which had in part made Alice afraid of him'. By this means we are made to see how deep and how intuitive are the causes for Alice's revolt against him.⁵ Grey himself can comprehend nothing of this, of course, attributing Alice's aversion to him to the effects of a mental hallucination,' ' a disease'. The truth is that Alice regards what the narrator terms Grey's 'immobility' as a kind of death. She tries to explain telling him that while their marriage would add some minor diversification to his old life, she would have to pass 'through a grave she needs from his some recognition of her humanity, at least the chance to be overcome by persuasion rather than smug assumption she could not become unambitious, tranquil, fond of retirement, and philosophic, without an argument on the matter, - without being allowed even the poor grace of owing herself to be convinced. If a man takes a dog with him from the country upto town, the dog must live a town life without knowing the reason

⁴ Ibid., P. 76

⁵ David, C., "Unity and Irony in Trollope's Can you Forgive Her ? SEL, 8 (1968), pp. 584

why, - must live a town life or die a town death. But a woman should not be treated like a dog.'

Why does Alice feel such urgent need for forgiveness and, at the same time, fiercely resists the forgiveness she receives? Why, more especially, does the narrator keep punching at us : 'But can you forgive her, delicate reader?'. Alice surely would not desire our forgiveness, she is furious when Lady Midlothian offers her. Though she cannot exactly stop Grey from forgiving her, she can hang on her own deep guilt : 'I am not fit to be your wife. I am not good enough. As long as she can maintain her grip on this guilt, she can, of course, elude Grey. But there are, I think, other less rational reasons, her sincerity is almost fierce in these passages of self-abasement. The suggestion is that the guilt derives from a secret 'fault', not her love for George, which in truth she never felt, but the independent exercise of will. Forgiving herself for that fault would mean, in effect, renouncing that independent will.⁶ As long as she can hold on to her guilt, she can, ironically, protect the shreds of her freedom. Masochism, then for her as for Isabel Archer, is the last defence of independence, the last pathetic proof that they were and are free.

Conclusion:

Grey perhaps senses just a little of this, seeing that his forgiveness of her will be worth nothing until he can induce her to forgive herself. He tries therefore to obliterate the protection she has in memory : 'Come to me, dear, and ... the past shall be only as a dream'. But it is the past that supports her and she tries very hard to block his attacks on it : 'I am dreaming it always', she cries. Finally she is crushed : 'she had taken seen what had come of it'. She has tried to unite her private being with a public self and has made a fool of herself. She therefore

⁶ Morris, E. Speare, *The Political Novels*, New York, 1924, p. 254

gives up, accepts forgiveness and grants it to herself, and accepts marriage as the appropriate sentences on her. There is little question that Grey will be on the alert against any further outbreaks of spirit : ‘He seldom allowed outspoken enthusiasm to pass by him without some amount of hostility’. We are asked to participate in a very ironic forgiveness, asked, in other words, to assist in the suppression of her will.

