Studies in English, New Series

Volume 11 *Volumes 11-12* Article 11

1993

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Kevin Floyd
University of Iowa

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Septimus Harding, *The Worden*'s meek little protagonist who has the habit of playing an imaginary cello whenever he gets nervous (and he gets nervous frequently), is one of Anthony Trollope's more endearing characters. The amount of critical commentary written about him indicates that he is also one of the more fascinating. Critics have collectively identified two primary dilemmas which face Harding, two possible motives for his resignation of the wardenship, which constitutes the novel's climax. One is the questioning that awakens in him of whether he has a right to the income he receives, and the other is the simple desire for peace, for an end to the argument and turmoil. Harding is questioning the justice of his position for the first time in his life, but he is also drowning in unpleasantness, the existence of which traumatizes his nervous soul. Commentary on *The Warden* has emphasized the former of these motives almost exclusively. Harding has been interpreted primarily as an ethical character, a character whose conscience drives him to do what is just, and this in the face of much hostile opposition. He has been called "the purest of Trollope's clergymen" (Letwin 232), a character of "steadfast belief in what is right" who "refus[es] to subscribe to what is wrong" (Smith 132). More than one critic has considered him nothing short of heroic, and many, including A. O. J. Cockshut, author of the influential *Anthony Trollope: A Critical Study*, have considered this heroism self-evident.

If we were to discover, however, that Harding's primary desire is simply for an end to the unpleasantness, and that the ethical delimma is secondary, Harding would begin to seem less the man of integrity that he has previously been considered. And this is in fact what I will argue: Harding's motive is less the agitating drive of his conscience than a simple longing for the quiet that an end to the controversy will bring about.

Cockshut's attitude is typical; the majority of critics have considered Harding's motivation to be so unquestionably ethical that they have neglected to examine it. But a few who share this opinion have taken a less careless look. Such critics as Ruth apRoberts, Sherman Hawkins, and Dayton Haskin have argued that Harding is more morally just, or at least more human, than Grantly and Bold (who are the representative figures of the opposing factions and characters with whom Harding is clearly contrasted); Grantly and Bold, they argue,

base their judgments on rigid, scientific systems of principle, whereas Harding, on the other hand, "is a man of feeling" (Hawkins 210). apRoberts points out, in fact, that Harding embodies situation ethics in that he succeeds in deciding for himself what is just rather than allowing scientific, inflexible systems to decide for him (19). (This obvious conflict with Grantly and Bold is certainly part of the reason Harding is so widely considered heroic.) apRoberts believes that Harding's motivation is, for the course of the novel, "disinterested virtue" (21) and calls Harding "as beneficient a man as we can imagine" (17). Unlike apRoberts, Hawkins admits that Harding's motivation begins as a desire for simple tranquility; however he still maintains that this attitude evolves into a desire to do what is just. Harding's "moral strength begins in weakness: he cannot bear to be misjudged and at first conceives his resignation as an escape from an uncomfortable position" (211). However, when he actually takes that step at the end, "he does what he has long desired, but does it now because it is right. The evolution through uneasiness and mental anguish to moral recognition is slow, but it is an evolution and not a reversal" (212). If, as Hawkins implies, Harding's embodiment of situation ethics is a very *result* of his lack of a system of principle, perhaps that is why it takes negative press to start him contemplating the justice of his income—a decade after he begins receiving it.

Haskin also asserts Harding's concern with justice, but his assertion is a more qualified one. Instead of truly examining the situation for himself, Harding sees only the two possible alternatives pointed out to him by Grantly and by the *Jupiter*: remaining in the position as before, or unequivocally resigning the position and sentencing himself to a life of comparative poverty. Haskin argues that Harding fails to give enough thought to ways in which he could give up the post and still avoid poverty, such as exchanging positions with Quiverful or living with the Bishop. Haskin interprets this attitude as resulting from a "somewhat masochistic desire to expiate his guilt" (50); i.e., Harding is harder on himself than the situation calls for. But sentencing himself to poverty will also end the controversy unequivocally; what Haskin calls "masochistic desire" is actually a desire on Harding's part to put an end to the media attention that torments him by taking an action that outside forces such as the *Jupiter* cannot help being satisfied with. This action is as little an attempt to "expiate his guilt" and as much an attempt to appease, to put an end to the negative light in which he is seen, as is giving to the beadsmen out of his own pocket an extra twopence a day when the controversy originated (12). At any rate, Haskin appears also to consider Harding

heroic, although he is the only one of these scholars never to actually use the word "hero" and to acknowledge the possibility of flaws in Harding.

But an opinion that takes a radically different view of Trollope's meek little hero is the one expressed in an article that has become one of the most quoted pieces of *Warden* criticism, M. A. Goldberg's discussion of the novel as "A Commentary on the Age of Equipoise." Goldberg's article is one of the earliest—and still one of the few—to state that questions of justice have little to do with Harding's decision to resign the wardenship: "True, [Harding] speaks of an awakened conscience, but this is a conscience more nudged than aroused, for his resignation is aimed at removing himself from attack, not at alleviating wrongs" (384). Many, if not most, critics who refer to this article make little mention of Goldberg's obvious suspicion of Harding. Haskin is one of these. Goldberg and the other critics I have cited are in fact at poles—Goldberg calls Harding *non*-heroic (386). And more recently, Thomas Langford has said, with regard to Chapter Eleven, in which Eleanor is referred to as "Iphigenia" and Harding as "Agamemnon," that Harding actually bears little similarity to the Achaean ruler. "He is, in fact, the opposite of the old Greek Warrior king. Indecisive and lacking courage, he wishes only to enjoy peace and quiet ....He simply resigns the battlefield and gives over his post in favor of peace" (439). Langford is, along with Goldberg, one of the few critics to suggest, at least, that Harding may be something less than a "hero."

All of these critics should be commended for engaging in some kind of examination of Harding's motives, a task most critics of the novel have neglected, a task essential to our understanding of it. Yet all of these generalizations are lopsided. I will admit that Goldberg in particular is excessively critical, not even allowing that ethical issues are one of Harding's concerns (383). Harding is neither the hero that the former group makes him out to be nor the villain that the latter group tries to make him. No one will deny that Harding dislikes turmoil; and neither will I accept the claim Goldberg makes, that Harding is unconcerned about ethical issues. The difficult question, again, is which of these two principal sentiments—the desire for justice or the desire for tranquility—is the more powerful part of his motivation. None of the above-mentioned critics attempt what I will attempt here: a close examination of the forces that cause Harding to act.

Both concerns are strong in Harding, and in fact, if we simply examine the degree of voice he gives to each of these concerns, it is

almost impossible to tell which one of them is dominant. We are told that Harding asks himself, "Was John Hiram's will fairly carried out? That was the true question," and that "he was not so anxious to prove himself right as to be so" (32). But we are also told that "he felt that he would give almost anything—much more than he knew he ought to—to relieve himself from the storm which he feared was coming" (54), that he would have done so "from the sheer love of quiet" (55). We are told that "what [Harding] could not endure was that he should be accused by others, *and not acquitted by himself* " (91, my italics). But we are also told that he is terrified of being "dragged forth into the glaring day and gibbeted before ferocious multitudes" (9). After examining such evidence, it is far from clear which of these two concerns of Harding is the dominant one. He seems, in fact, to make little or no distinction between these two motives in his own mind. But even if one of them did seem dominant in the amount of voice Harding gives to it, this kind of "evidence" would not really be evidence at all—it is fallacious, for reasons I will emphasize below.

In order to discern, then, which motive is dominant in Harding, we must attempt as best we can to look at the actions Harding takes, to follow the path of his thinking, and to analyze the fluctuations of his attitudes throughout his ordeal. We must look at those forces which are acting on him at critical points in the path leading to his decision.

Harding first appears to move toward a resolution of some sort (instead of simply moping) in Chapter Nine, "The Conference." At first, he *primarily* seems to want to escape turmoil and *secondarily* to figure out the justice, or lack thereof, of his position. During the interview with Grantly he broods over the *Jupiter* article: "Was he to be looked on as the unjust griping priest he had been there described?" And he complains to the archdeacon, "Could you tell me to sit there at ease, indifferent, and satisfied while such things as these are said of me loudly in the world?" (88) He makes Grantly see that what he wants is to escape the pain, but his perceptive son-in-law convinces him that he must endure. So now, the unpleasantness-question taken care of for the (very brief) time being, Harding is left asking himself the ethical question. He is extremely depressed until he is attracted to Eleanor's scheme to escape altogether (98-99). But he changes his mind again and tells Eleanor he must stand firm in the face of criticism and bear the misery (100). Here he is telling his daughter just what Grantly told him. He admits that he does not exactly believe Grantly's statements, but he is, nevertheless, controlled by them, "by a sense of duty, which, though he could not understand it, he was fain to acknowledge" (100). But then in Chapter Thirteen, when he sees the article in the Jupiter, he

once again decides that he wants to give up his position because he believes that every word of the article is true (124-125).

It would appear from this information that Harding is unable to resist any persuasion he comes in contact with, that if he has any free will, he certainly does not exercise it—a conclusion that would contradict arguments for his heroism. However, before we draw such a conclusion, we should look closely at the final scene between Harding and Grantly in London, in which Harding *appears* to be resisting, finally, the will of others and asserting his own. To begin with, Harding is still not willing to admit to his son-in-law that he "gave him the slip" (173). If Harding is less intimidated by his son-in-law and is for the first time in the dominant position, it is only because Grantly's *relative* position has changed; he is now the one doing the asking.

"Come, warden, promise me this," he begs. Grantly is not as threatening as he has been earlier in the novel because he is more distressed and less confident than at any point previously. The only reason to believe that the warden would be as adamant if Grantly were in better control of his emotions is the distinct possibility that after wavering, Harding realizes that the act he has been driven to signals the end of his torment. The warden does not have the self-assurance of one who has confidently, heroically made a disinterested ethical decision; instead he simply answers "very, very meekly" the questions that are put to him (174).

However, the next morning Harding is, admittedly, more adamant, more determined. "The tamest animal will turn when driven too hard, and even Mr. Harding was beginning to fight for his own way" (178). But we must remember that he has the previous evening gone the distance, as it were, with his son-in-law, if "very, very meekly," and this, presumably, for the first time in his life. Therefore, it seems that if Harding is a dynamic character, he has *not* learned to make an ethical decision but only to stand up to his son-in-law; when mention is made of the "triumph in his heart," we are told that what he is proud of is not the substance of the decision itself but rather the fact that he had "held his own purpose against that of his son-in-law, and manfully combatted against great odds" (183). Arthur Pollard, another of the "hero"-critics, himself refers to the resignation as "Mr. Harding's single and ultimate act of *independence*" (56, my emphasis). And even in this sense the argument that Harding is a dynamic character is questionable: when asked by his daughter, Grantly's wife, to delay his resignation, he admits that "if I waited till I got to Barchester, I might perhaps be prevented" (180).

In Chapter Thirteen, Harding decides to go to London and resign before Grantly has a chance to stop him. This is a very significant detail. He realizes that the archdeacon can easily sway him, that he does not have an answer for the arguments he knows Grantly will wield. "There is a great deal of truth in all he says," he tells Eleanor. "He argues very well, and I can't always answer him; but there is an old saying, Nelly: 'Everyone knows where his own shoe pinches!' " (126) But not only can Harding never answer Grantly's arguments; he can never answer anyone's arguments; his opinion is always that of whoever did the persuading most recently. And the pain of being persuaded in different directions has finally become too much to bear. His shoe has pinched long enough. So Harding escapes from Grantly in order to alleviate his own pain, which is caused by not only the public criticism, but also the pressure from Grantly himself. "But what will Dr. Grantly say?" asks Eleanor, and Harding answers, "Well, my dear, it can't be helped. *We shall be out at Crabtree then*" (128, my emphasis). Not only will resigning end the public ridicule, but the move to Crabtree will conveniently remove the *visibility* of Grantly's ridicule as well.

(And at this point we can see why, as I mentioned above, the relative amounts of voice Harding gives to the two different motives identified by previous critics would not even be reliable evidence of Harding's motivation if we saw clear dominance of one priority over the other. The unpleasantness Harding complains of is only the distress caused him by the *Jupiter*. But Grantly is just as much a source of the pain Harding wants to alleviate. And why Harding does relatively little complaining of the stress the archdeacon causes him is obvious. The two kinds of concerns Harding *verbalizes* are in fact not evidence of anything.)

So Harding is anything but a "hero." What most of these critics maintain is that Harding grows and finally reaches a moral decision by himself, independent of the abundant opinions of others. "The fact that strong pressures come from opposing directions," says Haskin, "forces the warden to make a free choice. Nothing, ultimately, decides for him" (50). But to say that the existence of pressures "forces" Harding to make a "free choice" sounds like a contradiction in terms—primarily because it is. He really has no will of his own; he says, "I'm sure I ought not to remain here if I have nothing better to put forward than a quibble" (127), but the fact is that he never puts forth any argument at all. Nor, as I have already pointed out, does he answer the arguments made by others. His own meditations on his dilemma yield pain and little else. He does not think for himself or stand up for himself but

rather wavers, though perhaps a better word might be "bounds," because "wavers" implies that the force acting on the object (Harding) is within itself.

Harding's "wavering" is rather the result of external forces; he is an inert old man who is torn between sophists, until he sees the chance to give his son-in-law the slip and escape in the only way possible. The *Jupiter* finally decides for him, only because something external finally has to. In this sense the plot of the novel is, as it were, faithful to the laws of physics; the pressure, the turmoil, the bounding back and forth steadily grows more intense until somehow the tension has to be relieved. Harding finally resigns as the only way to escape the pressures from the public and from Grantly. Escape is what motivates him. There is no moral growth and, therefore, there can be no final moral judgment.

A telling clue to Harding's motivation is his reaction to the apparent regret of his resignation on the part of the beadsmen. Harding takes little responsibility for the new situation the beadsmen find themselves in; he expresses a kind of helpless regret, as though the negative results of his resignation are lamentable, but something he had little control over. His attitude is not that of a man who has made a moral decision that, although it has had some negative side effects, he is willing to take responsibility for, but of a man who, as a result of circumstances, has simply felt it best to give up. When he sits down with the beadsmen, he tells them, "I am sure you did not wish to turn me out, but I thought it best to leave you. I am not a very good hand at a lawsuit ..." (194). So although he does not verbally blame them for what has happened, neither does he break the connection between their actions and the occupation he has lost.

And inconsistent with Harding's alleged heroism is the novel's symmetry, the fact that Trollope satirizes both sides of the novel's controversy with equal relish, refraining from a show of favor for either side, as is made clear by, for one example of many, the Pessimist Anticant-Popular Sentiment section. Ross Murfin, one of many to make this argument, has said what is surely true, that the prevailing pattern of the novel is one of nonresolution, noncompromise, that "the novel's central dilemma [goes] utterly unresolved" (22). And if the warden is caught in the middle, if he represents what Murfin calls the "gap" between these two sides, surely that gap has to be neutral, and a decision on the part of Harding even slightly in favor of the *Jupiter*'s side of the issue detracts from the novel's symmetry. If, however, Harding's move is interpreted as motivated only by a desire for peace, he remains neutral and the symmetry of the novel remains intact. I

alluded to this theory earlier with apRoberts, who has herself not only admitted, but eagerly declared, interestingly enough, that such symmetrical structure is not *part* of the novel but *is* the novel (17). And Haskin, whose argument in this light appears to be the more consistent one, bases his argument that Harding *does* make an ethical decision on his unique opinion that Trollope slightly favors Bold's side of the issue (45).

Trollope creates in the reader a desire to excuse Harding. He depicts an ethically weak, if likeable character, and tests our discerning abilities. Critics have tried for years to emphasize an ethical resolution in Harding because he is more than endearing enough to receive the benefit of our doubts. He has been made into a "hero" when in fact he has only a limited, ultimately outweighed amount of ethical concern. What Trollope does with Harding is similar to but much less pronounced than what Shakespeare does with Jack Falstaff; he creates a character whose bad points ultimately outweigh his good ones, and then makes that character so likeable that the reader attempts to *seek out* redeeming qualities. While Falstaff is simply a very entertaining scoundrel, Trollope gives Harding a degree of moral concern, if an insufficient one, and makes the temptation to call him a "hero" almost irresistible.

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