Seriality

LAUREN M. E. GOODLAD

TO a greater extent than any short-form medium, serialized narratives create a real-life experience of inhabiting uncertain worlds whose storylines thwart our longings for knowledge and plenitude. That is partly because serial narratives tend to generate multiple plots that "divide the fictional world" and "disperse the reader's attention."[1] In place of formal unity as it is typically conceived, multiplot narratives generalize by crossing discrete storyworlds to ramify particular thematic, stylistic, and spatial perceptions. Nonetheless, serialization also entails the capacity to choreograph "what bodies do in time and space," producing shared aesthetic, affective, and intellectual engagements.[2] The Victorian practice of publishing new part issues on "Magazine Day," for example, created "large communities of readers."[3] As Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund have observed, "We need to see the serial taking place amidst many different texts, and many different voices."[4]

With decades of research into print cultures to build on, today's scholars increasingly study serialization from transtemporal, transnational, and transmedia perspectives. Their inspiration is partly that new TV "golden age" that HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) helped to usher in.[5] In the decade since, serial television has become a global phenomenon. As scholars take up seriality as a lens on past and present, comparisons between Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53) and David Simon's *The Wire* (2002–08) have crossed from classrooms and conferences to watercoolers and *The Atlantic Monthly*.[6] We are reminded that the format of twenty monthly parts which came into being when Dickens persuaded Chapman and Hall to expand a series of sketches into what became *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), was not only a formidable profit-making machine. It was also a means of turning periodicals into vehicles for "quality fiction."[7] Boz's publishers, succeeded by such aspirants to prestige as *The Cornhill* and *Fortnightly Review*, thus anticipated HBO in garnering acclaim for the wares of a platform long thought to purvey mass entertainments lacking cultural capital or artistic éclat.

That said, it is not Dickens, but Anthony Trollope who, according to the *New Yorker*, is the "trending" Victorian whose works most befit the way we live now.[8] Trollope's ascent in the heyday of serial television prompts us to consider the author's status as the English-speaking world's foremost progenitor of the nineteenth-century *roman fleuve*. Of course, the

most famous "novel river" is Honoré de Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, which, at more than ninety works, far exceeds the seven or eight seasons of the longest-running television serials. By contrast, Trollope's Barsetshire and Palliser sequences, each composed of six novels over twelve- or fifteen-year spans respectively, offer stronger parallels to *The Sopranos*' six seasons in seven years, or *The Wire*'s five seasons in six years.

If Trollope stands out as the ideal nineteenth-century novelist for comparing then and now, it is worth noting that the author had not yet serialized *any* novel before he was invited to write for the *Cornhill*'s inaugural issue. *Framley Parsonage* (1860–61)—the work that elevated George Smith's new magazine into an industry leader and Trollope to a first-tier novelist—was the fourth Barsetshire chronicle, but it was only the first to be serialized. Perhaps as Smith and his editor, William Makepeace Thackeray, sought the right novel for their debut, they gravitated toward the only British writer at the time who was extending stories and characters across works as well as parts. What we know for certain is that Smith's request for "an English tale" with "a clerical flavour" called for another Barsetshire novel in spirit if not in letter.[9]

To be sure, when Trollope first seized on the idea for *The Warden* (1855), he did not anticipate writing six novels set in the same imaginary county. Yet, by the time critics reviewed *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1866–67), they found Josiah Crawley's narrative ordeal woven into such ongoing storylines as Mr. Harding's life after his wardenship, Mrs. Proudie's rule of her husband's diocese, Lily Dale's refusal to accept John Eames, and Archdeacon Grantly's ever-strenuous attempts to rein in the forces of modernity. Trollope's return to Barsetshire after a four-year hiatus, produced a warm meditation on series form. The Barchester novels, wrote *The Literary Examiner*, are both "the best set of 'sequels' in our literature" and a new phenomenon; whereas Homer's epics and Aeschylus's tragedies were "complete stories," Trollope's "chain of novels" is "essentially a birth of our own time."[10] The advantage of this mode of seriality, wrote *The Athenaeum*, is a "remarkable substance and vitality."[11]

If such comments tell against Henry James's still-influential critique of Trollope's supposed lack of formal interest,[12] they also open pathways for transtemporal and transmedia comparison. The "last news from the Cathedral-close . . . has now reached us" declared the *British Quarterly Review*, as though beckoning aficionados to join the discussion of a popular finale.[13] By populating the "homogeneous" and "empty" time-space of modernity with "endeared" scenes, situations, and characters,[14] such

serials, in the words of the *London Review* "inspire . . . gentle melancholy" on their closing.[15] Long-form serials (even if we consume them rapidly) mark time's passage through purposeful pauses between chapters and installments while staging dialectical movement between parts and wholes. The sync between narrative time and the lived time of audiences which they accentuate, invites communities of conversation around shared temporal, affective, and aesthetic experience.

As the *London Review* put it, "If this really be . . . the last chronicle of Barset," "we cannot but feel grieved . . . to say farewell." "Barset has long been a real country": the "voices of the people . . . known to our ears, and the pavements . . . familiar to our footsteps."[16] For comparative nineteenth-centuryists working across the longue durée,[17] the study of seriality invites continued exploration of untapped archives and new ways of understanding familiar works in light of dialogues with our own fast-transforming material culture.

Notes

1. Peter Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 2.
2. Robyn R. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), 72.
3. Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850–1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 11.
4. Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 11.
5. Mohsin Hamid, "Are the New 'Golden Age' TV Shows the New Novels?" with Adam Kirsch, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, February 25, 2014.
6. On Dickens and serial television, see, Sean O'Sullivan, "Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: *Deadwood* and Serial Fiction," in *Reading "Deadwood,"* ed. David Lavery, (London: Tauris, 2006), 115–29; for a thoroughgoing study of *The Wire*'s seriality, see Frank Kelleter, *Serial Agencies:* The Wire *and its Readers* (Arlesford: Zero Books, 2013); and, for a popular spoof suggesting *The Wire*'s Victorian provenance, see Joy DeLyria and Michael Sean Robinson, "'When It's Not Your Turn': The Quintessentially Victorian Vision of Ogden's *The Wire*," part of an online roundtable on *The Wire* on the weblog, *The Hooded Utilitarian*, March 23, 2011, http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2011/03/when-its-not-your-turn-the-quintessentially-victorian-vision-of-ogdens-the-wire/, as well as

Noah Berlasky, "Was *The Wire* Really a Victorian Novel?," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 10, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-wire-was-really-a-victorian-novel/261164/.

7. Mary Hamer, *Writing by Numbers: Trollope's Serial Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 9. On Dickens's innovation, see Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) as well as N. N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1–15. On the problematic of quality television so-called, see Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), especially chapter 6.
8. Adam Gopnik, "Trollope Trending," *The New Yorker*, May 4, 2014.
9. Quoted in Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. David Skilton (New York: Penguin, 1996), 94. I develop these ideas in Goodlad, "Bigger Love," *New Literary History* 48 no. 4, (2017): 701–27, as well as "Trollope, Genre, and Seriality," a contribution to the *Edinburgh Companion to Anthony Trollope*, forthcoming. Important studies on Trollope and serialization include Hamer as well Mark W. Turner, *Trollope and the Magazines: Gendered Issues in Mid-Victorian Britain* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000). Thackeray himself had experimented with sequels in the 1850s, while Margaret Oliphant's *Chronicles of Carlingford* (1861–75) deliberately engage and revise the Trollopian clerical series.
10. Anonymous, *The London Examiner* (20 July 1867): 452–53, 452.
11. Anonymous, *The Athenaeum* (3 August 1867): 141.
12. On James and Trollope, see, for example, Elsie B. Michie, "The Odd Couple: Anthony Trollope and Henry James," *The Henry James Review* 27, no. 1 (2006): 10–23.
13. Anonymous, *British Quarterly Review* 92 (October 1867): 557–60, 557.
14. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1978), 253–64, 264.
15. [Anonymous], *The London Review* (20 July 1867): 81.
16. *The London Review*, 81.
17. For this comparatist case for *longue durée* study see Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), especially Coda.