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Trollope as Mr Kurtz

For Lever, the tower was a regressive icon, returning Ireland to a symbolic order that preceded the establishment of the country house. There might have been other architectural signifiers of the history of the place. Had Wolf Tone in the 1790s become the Washington of the United Irishmen, the Palladian villa might have become the locus that embodied the rational culture of the national aristoi, in the same way as Monticello, Mount Vernon and the White House in the United States. (Castletown, appropriately, is now the headquarters of the nascent Irish Georgian Society.) Alternatively Christian Gothic might have provided an ecumenical architectural symbolism for a vigorous and conservative unionism. Kylemore Abbey, it has been argued, embodies many of the ideals of Lever’s ‘Gwynne’ Abbey, if only in subliminal suggestion, and by appropriate historical mutation Kylemore has become a (Roman Catholic) school, a fountain of culture. But the tower, as icon, takes one back historically beyond even Ormond’s ‘brave mansion’ at Carrick-on-Suir to the Ur place, the fortified site that Ormond, in vain it seems, wished to transform into an open manor house. Ireland is a locus that denies the progress of (that kind of) civilisation.

This is a pessimistic reading that is both allegorical and Platonic. The schema, derived from Lever, is concerned with the literary interrelationship of icons, not the extratextual causes of the pessimistic iconography. All texts have causes of course, but causes do not explain texts. Historically the fiction of Lever, and that of the classic realist Trollope (our present concern), is located between the famine and the Land League, subjects that Trollope specifically addresses. These are causes that self-evidently relate to the pessimism (darker even than Lever’s) with which Trollope’s fictions are invested. But they are causes that are related to other historical mythologies – the fictions of genocide,
for instance, or of nationalism. The historical matter of Trollope’s texts is historically concomitant with these symbolic orderings (ideologically driven), which are merely other stories, not Trollope’s. The story he tells, like that of Lever, is one of regression and, in terms of the dialectic of civilisation and savagery, of a brutal return of atavistic dark powers, or what a familiar formulation would call the ‘return of the repressed’. It is as if Caliban were to be empowered. Allegorically interpreted, is the desire of ‘salvage man’ to kill Prospero and rape his daughter the (justified?) revenge of an oppressed ‘other’, or an expression of that intrinsic heart of darkness which religious mythology has called ‘original sin’? In Shakespearean romance the interpretation of the symbol is multivalent and irreducible to the specificity of one historical story (a postcolonial reading of colonisation, for instance). Even a classic realist such as Trollope may be read in the same open way.

A representative example serves to illustrate. In Trollope’s *The Landleaguers* (1883) the Fenians murder a child, Florian. He is killed because he knows which of the Fenians flooded the meadows that had been brought into productive use by his father, Philip Jones, an improving landlord on the Edgeworthian model who had bought the land under the Encumbered Estates Act. It is a minor act of violence (of Catholic upon Catholic) in the history of the times, but the murder of a child is a potent anti-Fenian symbol.

But in the Platonic order of country house fiction, reclamation of the bog is a fundamental sign of the advance of civilisation. By developing bog into meadow two functions are fulfilled. Originally, by denying ‘salvage man’ the untractable wilderness in which he might find refuge (witness the Spenserian theme as late as *Lord Kilgobbin*) the pacification of Ireland might be more easily secured. Thence, with the rule of law established, the drained and enclosed meadowland becomes the basis for the progressive prosperity that is derived from security and capitalisation. But in *The Landleaguers* the destruction of the meadowlands on the Jones estate (by inundation with salt water, which will render them long useless) is a wilful act of destruction in which newly fertile land is returned to aboriginal wilderness. In Edgeworth’s ‘Connemara’, the bog is a region beyond the frontier of civilisation from which the writer retreats back to the ordered world of wooded demesne, social great house and library. In Trollope the bog reassumes the demesne in an act perpetrated by people who have known the famine but nonetheless wilfully destroy the productivity of the land. In addition the killing of the devout Catholic child is a sign that even the future is cut off. ‘Ireland’ is in the grip of a regressive psychosis.