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Kultura Popularna nr 4 (58), 18-26

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2018

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Justyna Fruzińska

# The Inverted Discourse of Wonder in Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*

British travelers visiting the United States in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were often critical of the young republic. Even those who came to America as enthusiasts of democracy, like Charles Dickens, occasionally left disappointed. Disapproving descriptions of the New World applied not only to society and politics, but even to American landscape. Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* may serve as a good example of such criticism, both because of the immense popularity of her book, and of the bluntness of her opinions. A close look at Trollope's language reveals that the stylistic devices she uses are very similar to those found in Columbus's journal, categorized by Stephen Greenblatt as the "discourse of wonder." However, while Columbus's language aims at conveying a sense of richness and abundance of the New World, Trollope's writing may be seen as its inversion, using similar means to achieve the very opposite effect.

## Frances Milton Trollope

Frances Trollope (1780–1863) was an English writer who visited America in the 1830s, and mother of a much more popular writer Anthony Trollope. Even though she did not belong to the upper class, as Reverend William Milton's daughter she was growing up in a fairly intellectual milieu, meeting many cultured and educated people, who certainly influenced her perceptiveness and character. At the age of thirty she married a barrister, Thomas Anthony Trollope. However, as Thomas Anthony was not a particularly good businessman, the couple soon started facing financial problems, which was one of the reasons for their travel to America. Another reason was the encouragement of Frances's friend, Fanny Wright, who had established a utopian community in Nashoba, Tennessee. Wright's goal was to buy African slaves, educate them and liberate after they could pay back their purchase price. However, as Trollope's book confirms, the venture failed; rumors of sexual improprieties taking place in the community during Wright's absence led to difficulties in finding sponsors for the endeavor, and Nashoba did not manage to be economically self-sufficient.

Given these two incentives for the transatlantic travel, Trollope set out in 1827 with three out of her five children to America, where she stayed for the following four years. She was supposed to examine the potential for establishing a business, and her husband was to join her with the remaining two sons later. However, the business attempt proved to be unsuccessful: Trollope did establish a bazaar in Cincinnati, which was a complete failure and became known among the locals as "Trollope's Folly." It is probable that one of the reasons of Trollope's critical view of America and Americans stemmed partly from her disappointment in that area.

On her return to England, in 1832, she published her first book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, which detailed her observations about the New World. The book became an instant success, although for different reasons: a bestseller in England, in America it provoked an outrage of hurt national pride. Like Captain Basil Hall three years before, because of his *Travels in North America in 1827–28*, she became the public enemy number one for openly (and somewhat blatantly) criticizing every aspect of America and American society. Small wonder that the American audience was not particularly enthusiastic about her work. If there was any positive feedback on the part of Americans, one can say it was in the didactic effect Trollope's book had.

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On numerous occasions in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* she criticized Americans' manners in theatres, as in the following fragment:

It was not the fashionable season for the theatres, which I presume must account for the appearance of the company in the boxes, which was any thing but elegant; nor was there more decorum of demeanour than I had observed elsewhere; I saw one man in the lower tier of boxes deliberately take off his coat that he might enjoy the refreshing coolness of shirt sleeves; all the gentlemen wore their hats, and the spitting was unceasing. (Trollope 211)

As a result, as Jane Louise Mesick reports, after the publication of *Domestic Manners*, whenever a man in the audience "assumed a lounging attitude," the audience would cry out: "A Trollope! A Trollope!" until he corrected his posture (Mesick 232). Thus, if Frances Trollope was not loved in America, she was at least influential in this narrow scope of theatre manners.

Trollope's views on America evolved with time; as Clare Cotugno notices, the writer continued her criticism of America in her fiction until publishing *The Old World and the New*, in which she surprisingly presented America as much more positive, a place where English farmers could recreate a way of life no longer possible to cultivate in England (241). This change of attitude was largely provoked by the fact that "America in 1849 [the time of writing *The Old World and the New* – J.F.] seemed far more stable to Trollope than did either France or Britain" (Cotugno 245).

## Discourse of wonder

Before discussing Trollope's language, it is essential to introduce a category central to further analysis: the discourse of wonder. The notion in travel writing comes from the work of Stephen Greenblatt, mostly from his *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, a book about early modern descriptions of the New World. In it, Greenblatt characterizes wonder as the essential response to the unknown, "the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference" (14). In the case of European discoverers Greenblatt is interested in, wonder precedes and legitimizes their conquest of the New World. It is also their response to what cannot be understood and can hardly be believed (20). What is more, the author provides a historical discussion of the concept of wonder, tracing it back to Socrates, Descartes or Spinoza (the latter two arguing that wonder is an intellectual rather than emotional reaction).

Greenblatt is mostly interested in Christopher Columbus's *Diario* and its discursive strategies. He believes that the discoverer's use of the marvelous confirms the "power and validity of Columbus's claims" (73), drawing the reader's attention away from the emptiness of his legal action of possessing the land. Columbus has no rights to the land he claims as his (and, by extension, the Spanish king's), so he veils this symbolic and ineffective possessive gesture in something that, according to Greenblatt, is more of a calculated rhetorical strategy than a spontaneous response. The writer identifies the use of the unusual, excess, and delight as features typical for Columbus's descriptions of the marvelous.

Kathleen Looock develops Greenblatt's idea of the discourse of wonder, analyzing the following passage from Christopher Columbus's *Diario*:

I saw many trees very different from ours, and among them many which had branches of many kinds, and all of them on one trunk. And one little branch is of one kind, and another of another, and so different that it is the greatest wonder in the world how much diversity there is between one kind and another.... Here the fish are so different from ours that it is a marvel. There are some shaped like dories, of the finest colors in the world: blues, yellows, reds, and of all colors; and others colored in a thousand ways. And the colors are so fine that there is no man who would not marvel and take great delight in seeing them. (Columbus 89)

She points at Columbus's narrative strategies, thus enriching Greenblatt's characterization of the discourse with the following elements: the use of superlatives ("the greatest wonder in the world," "the finest colors in the world"), the tops of indescribability or the unbelievable (as Columbus often remarks that only one who has seen the view with his own eyes is able to believe it), universality ("there is no man who would not marvel..."), and familiarizing the unfamiliar (by comparing the trees or fish to the ones known to the European reader) (Looock 524–25).

## Domestic Manners of the Americans

When analyzing Trollope's descriptions of the American landscape, it is possible to notice a striking similarity of discursive strategies to those employed by Columbus, although working towards the exactly opposite result. Trollope arrives in America by way of what was then called La Balize – a settlement near the mouth of the Mississippi river. Her description of the landscape makes one anachronistically think of Joseph Conrad's Congo, dark, desolate, and gloomy:

I never beheld a scene so *utterly desolate* as this entrance of the Mississippi. Had Dante seen it, he might have drawn images of another Bolgia from its horrors. One only object rears itself above the eddying waters; this is the mast of a vessel long since wrecked in attempting to cross the bar, and it still stands, a dismal witness of the destruction that has been, and a boding prophet of that which is to come [emphasis mine]. (Trollope 16)

Just like Columbus, she uses superlatives; she also familiarizes the unfamiliar through her reference to Dante and his description of hell, well known to her readers. At the same time she creates the feeling of desolateness through the use of specific words and phrases ("one only object," "eddying waters," "mast of a vessel long since wrecked," "dismal," "destruction"); more importantly,

she decides not only to describe but also to interpret what she sees in a very particular way: the shipwreck she sees is not only a “witness of the destruction that has been” but also a “boding prophet of that which is to come,” warning the English passengers about the fate that awaits them in this hostile new land. Trollope continues:

By degrees bulrushes of *enormous* growth become visible, and a few more miles of mud brought us within sight of a cluster of huts called the Balize, by far *the most miserable* station that I ever saw made the dwelling of man, but I was told that many families of pilots and fishermen lived there [emphasis mine]. (Trollope 16–17)

This fragment contains not only superlatives and emotionally charged words chosen to achieve the desired effect (“mud,” “a cluster of huts”), but also makes use of the unbelievable: Trollope stresses how incredible the fact of people dwelling in these huts is by reporting that “she was told” they live there. She could never believe it when looking at those buildings, but this is what is claimed by, supposedly, people who know the area better. By highlighting the fact that “she was told” about it, she manages to strengthen the feeling of improbability and, thus, the wretchedness of these houses.

The following paragraph seems to reveal what kind of vision Trollope has of the Mississippi, and what kind of image she is trying to create:

For several miles above its mouth, the Mississippi presents *no objects more interesting than mud banks, monstrous bulrushes*, and now and then a huge *crocodile* luxuriating in the *slime*. Another circumstance that gives to this *dreary* scene an aspect of *desolation*, is the *incessant* appearance of vast quantities of *drift wood*, which is ever finding its way to the different mouths of the Mississippi. Trees of *enormous* length, sometimes still bearing their branches, and still of *tener* their *uptorn roots* entire, the *victims* of the frequent hurricane, come floating down the stream. Sometimes several of these, entangled together, collect among their boughs a quantity of *floating rubbish*, that gives the mass the appearance of a moving island, bearing a forest, with its *roots mocking the heavens*; while the *dishonoured branches* lash the tide in *idle vengeance*: this, as it approaches the vessel, and glides swiftly past, looks like the fragment of a world in ruins [emphasis mine]. (Trollope 17)

Here, once again one can see the appearance of superlatives and words or phrases chosen to create a negative effect in the reader’s mind, emphasized in the fragment above. The phrase “a world in ruins” seems to be the key to the whole chapter: it is a description of almost going back in time, to the primeval world, chaotic, menacing and infinitely hostile towards human beings. It is a landscape from before civilization – any civilization – appears to tame nature; one of ultimate savagery.

By the end of the chapter, Trollope decides to give some praise to the first view of America she witnesses, but it is doubtful praise: “It is easy to imagine the total want of beauty in such a landscape; but yet the form and hue

of the trees and plants, so new to us, added to the long privation we had endured of all sights and sounds of land, made even these swampy shores seem beautiful" (18). She and her company appreciate the sight of land after the long transatlantic journey, so tedious to the eye. Yet the sentence begins and finishes in an unequivocally negative way. It is only the "long privation" that makes "even these swampy shores seem beautiful"; what is more, Trollope starts her "praise" with "the total want of beauty" being easy to imagine.

This is not the only way the writer describes American landscape; there are other, more positive moments, in which she appreciates the foreign views. As the abovementioned fragments come from the very first chapter of *Domestic Manners* and are concerned with her first impressions of America, they are especially memorable and seem to foreshadow her later disgust with all things American. But they are not all the book has to offer. One of the sights Trollope appreciates is the harbor of New York, "the city that in all America was most European" (Mulvey 149), which soothes her dislike for America with a feeling of familiarity. Still, Trollope's praises seem to have half the power of her criticism:

Sin and shame would it have been, indeed, to have closed our eyes upon the scene which soon opened before us. I have never seen the bay of Naples, I can therefore make no comparison, but *my imagination is incapable of conceiving* any thing of the kind more beautiful than the harbour of New York. Various and lovely are the objects which meet the eye on every side, but the naming them would only be to give a list of words, without conveying the faintest idea of the scene. I doubt if ever the pencil of Turner could do it justice, bright and glorious as it rose upon us. We seemed to enter the harbour of New York upon waves of liquid gold, and as we darted past the green isles which rise from its bosom, like guardian sentinels of the fair city, the setting sun stretched his horizontal beams farther and farther at each moment, as if to point out to us some new glory in the landscape [emphasis mine]. (Trollope 261)

Like in her descriptions of the Mississippi, Trollope makes use of the unbelievable and a few suggestive phrases ("waves of liquid gold," "green isles"). Yet at the same time she uses many general, vague and abstract words ("various," "lovely," "glorious"), which compared with the crocodiles, mud and uprooted trees of the Mississippi passage fail to create an equally vivid image in the reader's imagination. She even resigns from the attempt of describing the landscape, explaining that it "would only be to give a list of words," and that even William Turner would not be able to render the beauty of the scene. Apparently, this strategy is used to stress the inexpressible quality of the landscape. Yet at the same time it results in Trollope's description being no description at all; it is a conventional praise of beauty, far from her specific and almost tangible descriptions of ugliness.

When Trollope enjoys the American landscape, this is because it corresponds to her preconceptions, according to which she may feel "rather sublime and poetical" (Trollope 19). This very Romantic word – "sublime" – shows what kind of experience she looks for in American nature. As Dunlop notices, she does not like the landscape when it fails to be "rustic, pastoral, bucolic," when it is not "picturesque" (Dunlop 30). American scenery needs to correspond

to European beauty canons and established modes of thinking in order to appeal to the author of *Domestic Manners*. This is also why “In her landscape, Fanny Trollope wanted evidence of the past, even the beautiful Ohio had to be improved by ruined castles” (Mulvey 231). Her idea of a beautiful view is a Romantic painting: dramatic nature, ruins, a place to sit and contemplate rather than getting tired after hours of walking.

What is also important is the fact that Trollope has a stake in her negative descriptions of American scenery. Being a Tory (at least at the time of her visit to the New World), she despises democracy and the equality it produces. What is more, political tensions between the USA and Great Britain did not disappear after the war of 1812. For Trollope, America is still Britain’s former colony and one can see a degree of resentment for the new country’s independence, success, and difference. Her book is mostly concerned with “manners,” that is American society, and the descriptions of landscape contribute to her idea of Americans as “savages”; either impertinent brutes or unfortunate creatures who do not know what is good for them. As she travels towards Nashoba, Fanny Wright’s utopian colony, this is how she portrays the views:

With the exception of this sweet spot [i.e. Natches – J.F.], I thought all the little towns and villages we passed, wretched looking, in the extreme. As the distance from New Orleans increased, the air of wealth and comfort exhibited in its immediate neighbourhood disappeared, and but for one or two *clusters of wooden houses*, calling themselves towns, and borrowing some pompous name, generally from Greece or Rome, we might have thought ourselves the first of the human race who had ever penetrated into this territory of *bears and alligators*. But still from time to time appeared the hut of the wood-cutter, who supplies the steam-boats with fuel, at the risk, or rather with the assurance of *early death*, in exchange for dollars and whiskey. These sad dwellings are nearly all of them *inundated* during the winter, and the best of them are constructed on piles, which permit the water to reach its highest level without drowning the wretched inhabitants. These unhappy beings are invariably the victims of *ague*, which they meet recklessly, sustained by the incessant use of ardent spirits. The *squalid* look of the miserable wives and children of these men was dreadful, and often as the spectacle was renewed I could never look at it with indifference. Their complexion is of a blueish white, that suggests the idea of dropsy; this is invariable, and the poor little ones wear exactly the same *ghastly hue*. A *miserable cow* and a few pigs standing knee-deep in water, distinguish the more prosperous of these dwellings, and on the whole I should say that *I never witnessed human nature reduced so low*, as it appeared in the wood-cutters’ huts on the unwholesome banks of the Mississippi [emphasis mine]. (Trollope 28–29)

This description is both a depiction of landscape and a social commentary, combining gloomy natural features and frightful living conditions. Even though



Trollope declares her deep sympathy for the “unhappy beings,” “wretched inhabitants,” and “miserable wives and children,” she is also slightly ironic in her comment about alcohol (“incessant use of ardent spirits”) and especially about the Greek and Roman names given to these unimpressive towns, which seem to disgust her as much as the view itself. Once again she depicts a primeval landscape, with her party feeling “the first of the human race who had ever penetrated into this territory,” which results in a feeling of a travel back in time. America, compared to Europe, is so primitive its landscapes have in them something of the prehistoric. Similarly to her description of the Mississippi from the first chapter, the one quoted above also uses superlatives or the unbelievable (the fragment “we might have thought ourselves the first of the human race who had ever penetrated into this territory” suggests how incredible it is that this terrain should be inhabited by people).

## Conclusions

Throughout her *Domestic Manners*, Trollope uses many of the same tropes and discursive strategies as Christopher Columbus in order to intensify her descriptions. Superlatives, familiarizing the unfamiliar, the unbelievable (but also the easily imaginable – as is the “total want of beauty” in the landscape she presents) – all of these elements, combined with the usage of emotionally charged words and phrases, almost props of desolateness (such as shipwrecks or crocodiles), and her interpretation of the views as signs of a future catastrophe, make for an image equally excessive as in the case of Columbus. If Columbus was trying to create an impression of the marvelous, justifying his conquest and encouraging his investors, Trollope’s “anti-marvelous” sets the stage for her criticism of American manners, society and politics. The writer is hardly alone in her response to the American landscape; similarly charged descriptions of the Mississippi may be found for example in Dickens’s *American Notes for General Circulation*. It is important to stress, however, that such portrayals should not be seen as merely instinctive responses to sights deemed as unattractive for the British eye. Rather, as Thomas Ruys Smith notices, the Mississippi often serves to British travelers as a metonymy of America as a whole (Smith 68). For both Trollope and Dickens, their reactions to the river perfectly embody their dislike of (in case of the former) or disappointment with (in case of the latter) American democracy in general.

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