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Advertising and Authorship:
Trollope's *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*

*There are questions, as well as persons,
that only the Comic can fitly touch.*
George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy*, 1877.

Introduction

Discussing the "semiotics of commodity spectacle" synthesized in the Great Exhibition, Thomas Richards argues that in the Crystal Palace "commodities appeared to be at sovereign liberty to do whatever they wished. They seemed to have rights"¹. Richards identifies an interesting connection between the discussion of rights, reignited around 1848, and the creation of an "autonomous iconography for the manufactured object"² that the Great Exhibition contributed to shaping. Objects on display seemed to have acquired the privileges of bourgeois individualism. Commodities had become alive. Trollope's short novel *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* (1861-62) pokes fun at the new symbolic status conferred upon manufactured things through the powerful medium of advertising³. At one

¹ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 59.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson* was rejected twice, by William Longman in 1857 and by Edward Chapman in 1858. Not discouraged by these rebuffs, in 1860 Trollope offered the same proposal to yet another publisher, George Smith, who purchased the copyright for a very generous sum of money. The novel was finally serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* from August 1861 to March 1862. When it came out in book form eight years later it failed to attract interest: "I do not know that it was ever criticized or read," writes Trollope in the autobiography. See Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (1883), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 161.

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point in the narrative, the advertising agent of Magenta House, George Robinson, proposes the launching of a new product: the "KATAKAIRION SHIRT". The advert runs as follows:

MANNED IN A STATE OF BLISS

BROWN, JONES and ROBINSON have sincere pleasure in presenting to the Fashionable World the new KATAKAIRION SHIRT, in which they have thoroughly overcome the difficulties, hitherto found to be insurmountable, of adjusting the bodies of the Nobility and Gentry to an article which shall be at the same time elegant, comfortable, lasting and cheap [...] The KATAKAIRION SHIRT is especially recommended to Officers going to India or elsewhere, while it's at the same time eminently adapted for the Home Consumption⁴.

The special aura conferred upon this object by the exotic-sounding name and the allusions to the imperial context, the nobility and the gentry is one of the many fictional creations issuing from the resourceful mind of George Robinson. In Trollope's satirical account, advertising is the locus of authorship and promotional strategies always involve some kind of fictionalizing. Robinson's advertisements take many shapes: hyperbolic statements ("The renowned Flemish Treble Table Damasks, of argentine brightness", *TS*, p. 173); "pretty little dialogues" between mothers and daughters (*TS*, p. 78); melodramatic and sensational announcements ("Ruin! Ruin! Ruin! Wasteful and Impetuous Sale", *TS*, p. 178); and even a suspense story brimming with surprises, scandals and astonishing revelations (chapter XI). In order to beat competition, Robinson has to hone his literary skills: to him advertisements are works of fiction in which, he claims, "I take leave to think that elegance and originality are combined" (*TS*, p. 76).

Trollope's satirical tale on "the present system of advertising"

⁴ Anthony Trollope, *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* (1861-62), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 76-77, henceforth cited as "TS" with page reference.

focuses on the conjunction between ad-writing and fiction writing, between copywriters and literary authors⁵. Robinson himself is both an advertiser and the 'author' of the memoir we are reading. This double identity allows the narrative simultaneously to acknowledge and to disavow the disturbing similarities between literature and advertising — similarities that are inflated in order to be deflated. Robinson's literary pretensions are an ideal target for a send-up. But they also introduce an element of self-reflexivity that has interesting repercussions on the narrative as a whole. By lampooning the alleged vices of advertising and trade, Trollope reflects indirectly on his own experience as a new author vying for a place in the crowded market for literary goods.

In a letter to his mother dated May 1850, Trollope ironically mentions the idea of displaying his "failures" at the Great Exhibition: "I hope nothing will prevent our all meeting under the shadow of some huge, newly invented machine in the Exhibition of 1851. I mean to exhibit four 3 vol. novels — all failures! — which I look on as a great proof of industry at any rate"⁶. The novels he had already published by that time — *The Macdermonts* (1847) and *The Kelleys and the O'Kelleys* (1848) — had passed into the world of letters without attracting any interest or yielding any profit. Small wonder that the grandiose prospect of the Great Exhibition inspired him with self-irony: his own manufactured goods seemed destined to blush unseen. Trollope's rise to fame

⁵ Presenting his project to William Longman in 1857, Trollope describes the topic of his new novel in the following terms: "It will be intended as a hit at the present system of advertising, but will of course be in the guise of a tale. Publishers' advertisement are not reflected on". See John Hall (ed.), *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983, 2 voll., Vol I, p. 58. On the growth of advertising in the second half of the nineteenth century see Richards, *op. cit.*; T.A. Corley, "Competition and the Growth of Advertising in the US and Britain, 1800-1914", *Business and Economic History*, 17, 2 (1988), pp. 155-167; Roy Church, "Advertising Consumer Goods in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Reinterpretations", *Economic History Review*, 53, 4 (2000), pp. 621-645; Diana and Geoffrey Hindley, *Advertising in Victorian England, 1837-1901*, London, Wayland Publishers, 1972.

⁶ Hall (ed.) *The Letters of A. Trollope*, cit., p. 22. Trollope reiterates the same idea in another letter: "God send that we may all meet in 1851, when I mean to put three or four works into the Exhibition. They will, at any rate, give me as much encouragement as Colburn does!" (*Ibid.*, p. 23).

was slow. It took over twelve years for his literary work to be rewarded in critical and monetary terms. In the autobiography, Trollope adopts a neutral stance vis-à-vis his initial failures — “I do not remember that I felt in any way disappointed or hurt. I am quite sure that no word of complaint passed my lips”⁷ — focusing instead on his sheer determination to succeed. He does however expatiate on one particular topic: the difficult business of beginning. His early resolve to write novels was followed by years in which he couldn’t bring himself “to begin the work”. The constant “putting off of the day of work,” Trollope admits, “was a great sorrow to me”⁸. The issue of beginning is openly presented as problematic: “I don’t think I much doubted my own intellectual sufficiency for the writing of a readable novel. What I did doubt was my own industry and the chances of the market [...] And I had heard of the difficulties of publishing”⁹. The “chances of the market” and the “difficulties of publishing” are the exogenous elements that render the literary profession risky and precarious, especially at the start. In the narrative economy of the autobiography, however, the uncertainties and difficulties of beginning a new career are less relevant than the exemplary narrative of success woven in the text.

In *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*, on the other hand, the question of beginning occupies a prominent position. Structured as an ‘anonymous’ memoir, Robinson’s narrative recounts how Magenta House was established by the joint effort of three partners, how this new firm was marketed in innovative (and ludicrous) ways, and why the project eventually failed. The failure of Magenta House is announced in the preface: Robinson soon admits that his experiment was not successful. Anticipated so adamantly in the very first section, the ending of this commercial adventure does not seem to carry any particular meaning. It is not failure per se that Trollope seems interested in analyzing. Instead, the narrative focuses closely on the prolonged beginning of this new firm, on the strategies adopted to outdo

⁷ Trollope, *Autobiography*, cit., p. 75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹ *Ibid.*

competitors and the difficulties encountered by newcomers in a tough commercial environment.

In other words, Trollope's comic discussion of advertising and "the ways of trade" seems driven by his specific interest in the problematic business of beginning. Like new firms, new authors have to promote their own name, to attract the interest of publishers and to push their works in a market where "novel spinning"¹⁰ is open to all. In 1857, when Trollope first proposed to Longman the publication of this book, his literary career was barely on the rise and his name was still overshadowed by his mother's. Trollope's position in the world of letters was, at that time, structurally akin to the position of a newly established firm which had yet to carve for itself a niche in the market. My contention is that by writing about a specific commercial topic — marketing a new firm and its products — Trollope gave indirect vent to his own concerns, anxieties and frustrations regarding the literary trade he was pursuing. *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* stands out as an odd book in Trollope's canon: it is less polished than the novels which made him famous and deals exclusively with one specific segment of society, the lower middle classes and their commercial interests, in ways that have appeared unpalatable. My essay reconsiders the oddities of this narrative within an interpretative framework that is loosely allegorical: the comic focus on entrepreneurship alludes indirectly to the question of authorship and more specifically to the predicaments of new authors facing competition and the difficulties of publishing. This interpretation is mainly based on circumstantial evidence. However, by relating *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* to the historical sub-text inferred from Trollope's letters and autobiography, one can get a better understanding of his unusual foray into the perilous territory of satire.

¹⁰ In a letter to Trollope, Thackeray uses the expression "novel spinning" to indicate the increasing output of novels at mid century, see Hall (ed.), *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, cit., p. 91.

The romance of commerce

According to Charles A. Knight, satire violates the “conditions of politeness” surrounding literature and discourse in general¹¹. The satirist attacks real (historical) offenders in ways that have often been considered ill-mannered and negative. The good satirist, however, is able to finesse his own arrogance and indignation through various strategies, from self-irony to sympathetic laughter. Trollope’s violation of elements of politeness and propriety, in *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*, was instantly condemned by his contemporaries. The novel was dismissed by the *Saturday Review* as a “dreadful story [...] in which the chief characters, motives and incidents were so odiously vulgar and stupid that the staunchest champions of realism were forced to give up in disgust”¹². For today’s critics, it is the “nasty mockery” of trade and its “fake gentilities” that renders *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* the most “distasteful” novel of the 1860s¹³. Its value is at best documentary: the novel charts the “slow but sure movement toward spectacle in advertising”¹⁴ and, as Wicke argues, it is a “storehouse of commercial references”¹⁵.

What is rather atypical in this narrative is not the emphasis on ‘vulgar’ characters and incidents, but the absence of a redeeming axiological framework hinging on gentry values. Trollope indulges with a certain relish in caricaturing the common lives of shopkeepers, butchers, business partners and their female friends. But there is no appeal to loftier ideals: no Trollopiean gentleman saunters in the purely commercial world inhabited by the likes of Brown, Jones and Robinson¹⁶. The focus is exclusively

¹¹ Charles Knight, “Satire, Speech, and Genre”, *Comparative Literature*, 44, 1 (1992), p. 30.

¹² “Miss Mackenzie”, *Saturday Review*, 19, 4 (March 1862), pp. 625-626, quoted in David Skilton, *Anthony Trollope and His Contemporaries. A Study in the Theory and Conventions of Mid-Victorian Fiction*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1972, p. 90.

¹³ See Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents. Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 68.

¹⁴ See Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Jennifer Wicke, “Commercial” in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999, p. 267.

¹⁶ The choice of these three specific names is in itself meaningful. In 1854 *Punch* published a series of cartoons by Richard Doyle revolving around the adven-

on the business community and on the myths and legends that substantiated the mid-nineteenth century "outburst of bourgeois self-congratulation"¹⁷. Chapter II opens with a tribute to the romance of commerce tinged with parodic overtones:

O Commerce, how wonderful are thy ways, how vast thy power, how invisible thy dominion! Who can restrain thee and forbid thy further progress? [...] Civilization is thy mission, and man's welfare thine appointed charge. The nation that most warmly fosters thee shall ever be the greatest in the earth, [...] Thou art our Alpha and our Omega, our beginning and our end [...] We are built on thee, and for thee, and with thee. To worship thee should be man's chiefest care, to know thy hidden ways his chosen study (*TS*, p. 12).

This accolade introduces the story of how Brown, Jones and Robinson became partners in business. The small enterprise they launch — Magenta House, a haberdashery shop — seems destined to take an active role in the grandiose world of British commerce. However, inflated expectations are soon undermined when the attention shifts to the negotiations between future partners and the specific arrangements they agree upon. Small partnerships and private enterprises were considered at mid-century the backbone of British commerce. Notions of 'character', 'credit' and 'trust' underpinned partnership law, as Taylor has recently demonstrated: "The preference for private over joint-stock enterprise", he adds, "was widespread and in some cases instinctive: it was a commonplace that individual and small partnerships were better at business than companies"¹⁸.

tures, at home and abroad, of three characters, Brown, Jones, and Robinson, who mainly engage in leisure activities: they visit the zoological gardens, go to a ball, take riding lessons and travel in Europe and America. Trollope uses these conventional names, capitalizing on their popularity, but shifts the attention to the work sphere and the grimy activity of selling, emphasising the lower middle-class background of the three partners in business.

¹⁷ Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ James Taylor, *Creating Capitalism: Joint-Stock Enterprise in British Politics and Culture, 1800-1870*, Woodbridge, The Royal Historical Society, The Boydell Press, 2006, pp. 21-22.

Moralized by the individuals working for them, partnerships seemed for a long time a more reliable form of business than joint-stock enterprise. Responding to these popular conceptions, Trollope uses a comic form of realism to undercut the belief in the superior moral standing of private partnerships: Brown, the senior partner, blindly 'trusts' Robinson on the basis of a recently established friendship (*TS*, p. 26); Jones's 'character' is flawed and his underhand stealing determines the final bankruptcy (*TS*, p. 154); Robinson's cavalier understanding of 'credit' brings into the partnership a speculative element that soon gets out of control. Represented in a distorted way, the three most traditional ingredients of correct business behaviour produce negative outcomes. The partnership model of business is no sure guarantee of morality.

Questioning the value of private enterprise is only one of the corollaries of Trollope's critical view of national commerce. The self-help philosophy also receives a caustic treatment in chapter III, which recounts Robinson's rise to independence and his progress from "bill-sticker" to "author", "artist" and "poet" (*TS*, p. 20-21). Similarly, the myth of love that spurs men on in their commercial quests is invoked only to be lampooned, especially through the comic romantic plot involving Robinson and Brown's daughter, Maryanne, who hesitates between two suitors (Robinson and Brisket). Whereas Robinson is prone to idealize the object of his desire, Maryanne (like all the women in this text) has a more down-to-earth, prosaic understanding of marriage and love, based on economic calculation and unashamed self-interest. Through the contrast between Robinson's lofty ideals and Maryanne's mundane demands the narrative derides romantic notions of love as well as the realistic plot of work in which desire is conceived as an incentive to money making.

In Trollope's critical scrutiny of commercial fictions, even the rhetoric of imperial grandeur comes under attack. There is no direct reference to imperial conquests, but the empire is a symbolic presence behind most of the commodities Robinson advertises. It is the empire as emporium that becomes the object of ridicule. The "Eight Thousand African monkey muffs" (*TS*, p. 41), the "Katakairion shirts" (*TS*, p. 76), the "China and pearl silk hose"

(*TS*, p. 74) and other items on sale at Magenta House have well-defined exotic connotations: the added value of these articles is contingent upon their insertion in an imaginary circuit of global, international commerce of which England is the fulcrum:

“Yes,” said [Robinson] to himself, “before we have done, ships shall come to us from all coasts; real ships. From Tyre and Sidon, they shall come; from Ophir and Tarshish, from the East and from the West, and from the balmy southern islands. How sweet will it be to be named among the Merchant Princes of this great commercial nation” (*TS*, p. 66).

In Robinson’s magnified perception, even small enterprises have a grand scope and the role of advertising is to facilitate the acquisition of a global perspective. Trollope easily deflates Robinson’s imperial dreams by setting the local against the global: when customers, mostly women, flock to the shop on the opening day, they leave without purchasing much (*TS*, p. 47). The supply of imaginary goods and the demand for real ones do not meet over the counter of Magenta House.

Considering all the items on Trollope’s satirical agenda — from the belief in the superiority of partnerships to the vision of empire as one vast emporium — one could argue that this narrative is decidedly out of sync with the “ideology of England”¹⁹ that the Great Exhibition helped crystallize. The national mood of self-congratulation, the dream of permanent prosperity, the vision of an abundant society conveyed through the spectacle of commodities are all evoked in a distorted way or de-formed through parodic imitation. Celebrated at mid-century on a grand, national scale, the romance of commerce dwindles to laughable proportions in *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that contemporary readers and reviewers found this text objectionable and disagreeable. As Knight argues, satire usually “demands an audience which either agrees with the propriety of the attack or is willing to do

¹⁹ See Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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so for purposes of entertainment. But since the readers' willing and even conspiratorial cooperation with the satirist implicates them in the guilt of the attack, as perpetrators if not as victims, their position is often uncomfortable²⁰.

The position of the satirist, on the other hand, is often determined by indignation. In Trollope's case, however, the indignant response is intermittent: sympathy intervenes to temper down the most abrasive aspects of satire. George Robinson, the central character in the story, is "presented in typically Trollopian fashion as a very sympathetic character," as John Hall claims: "Robinson... proves to be decent, hard-working, ambitious, clever, generous, and polite"²¹. As the narrative unfolds and approaches the end, satire gives way to the "laughter of comedy" or the "humour of the mind" as Meredith defines it²². Robinson's combative advertising turns out to be more innocent and less fraudulent than Jones's plain stealing and Brown's underhand cheating. The embellished lies and inflated fictions he creates may be considered false and exaggerated but they are not as detrimental to the economic interest of the firm as Jones's sheer incompetence. In fact, it is not extravagant advertising per se that causes the downfall of Magenta House, but old-fashioned stealing and bad management. The real villain of this story is the one who misappropriates money, not words. Trollope seems inclined to absolve Robinson in the end, just as much as he was ready to indict his pretensions at the onset of the story. What does this shift in tone indicate?

The burden of commencement

If the satirist, as Meredith writes, works on a "storage of bile," hitting his targets hard "in the back or the face"²³, Trollope's

²⁰ Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²¹ John Hall, "Introduction" in Trollope, *The Struggles*, cit., p. xiii.

²² George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (1877), available from <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/2/1/1219/1219.txt>, date accessed 5 February 2009.

²³ *Ibid.*

qualifications for this role are defective. It is not “bile” that inspires his mockery of one particular segment of society, but a mixture of irritation, sympathy and self-irony. As an author in search of a business identity, forcefully negotiating the sale of his manuscripts with different publishers, Trollope was not far removed from the world of economic transactions portrayed in *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*. When he started writing this story, his position in the world of letters was still that of a relatively unknown new author, lacking the capital of recognition that would later enable him to compete successfully in an imperfectly regulated marketplace. The “burden of... commencement” (TS, p. 184), as Robinson aptly defines it, had not yet been lifted. It might not be entirely coincidental, therefore, that the focus of *The Struggles* is on initiating a business, launching a new firm, attracting the interest of potential buyers through various spectacular means, and obtaining credit — all elements that might arguably be related to Trollope’s professional concerns as a new author determined to succeed but still facing difficulties.

The evidence provided by the letters and the autobiography indicates that Trollope adopted a combative business modality in his dealing with different publishers straight from the beginning. His strict adherence to the business model, promoted in the autobiography as one of the ingredients of success, is even more pronounced in the letters. As early as 1847, Trollope was already in the habit of bluntly stating his conditions when negotiating the publication of his novels: “I will not part with the Mss on any other terms than that of payment for it” he asserts in a letter to Richard Bentley, “I mean that I will not publish it myself — or have it published on half-profits — or have the payment for it conditional upon the sale. It is, & must be, much more the publishers’ interest to push a work when it is his own property”²⁴. The tone is forceful and business-like: Trollope states his terms and explains the commercial rationale behind his decision not to accept any arrangement that might be detrimental to the self-

²⁴ Hall (ed.), *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, cit. pp. 14-15.

interest of authors and publishers alike. In this letter, the thorny point is the question of promoting new books and new authors. Trollope's first novel was advertised as a new book from the pen of his mother: Thomas Newby, the publisher, opted for false advertising instead of trying his luck with an unknown author²⁵. Understandably, when Trollope undertook negotiations with Richard Bentley for his second novel, the issue of advertising or "[pushing] a work" got addressed openly. However, despite Trollope's forthrightness and frank acceptance of the business mentality, his negotiations were not successful: Bentley declined to publish the novel on Trollope's terms. Colburn published it later at half-profits — a system that Trollope disliked, "as all writers do"²⁶. As the book did not sell well, no fame or profit ensued. Trollope's suspicion, expressed in the autobiography, is that very few efforts were taken to promote his novel²⁷.

In the biographical sub-text provided by the letters and the autobiography, two issues are relevant: 1) publishers' advertisements whether false or simply inadequate have a negative impact on the chances of a new author to make his name known in the literary marketplace: 2) even if the author is willingly business-like, and seems to know the rules of the commercial game inside out, to place his wares in the market remains a difficult process, full of uncertainties and frustrations. The history of Trollope's early dealings with his publishers might help explain why, a few years later, he used the ammunition of laughter to attack advertising and the commercial world. In the letter to Longman where Trollope first mentions his plan to write a "hit at the present system of advertising", he also adds that "publishers' advertisements are not reflected on"²⁸. This disclaimer is interesting especially in light of the fact that books were among the most advertised products in England around mid-century²⁹. As Diana and Geoffrey Hindley argue, publishers

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁷ See Trollope, *Autobiography*, cit., p. 79.

²⁸ Hall (ed.), *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, cit. p. 58.

²⁹ On this score see Church, *op. cit.*, p. 627.

"were among the first to employ advertising on a large scale", and the "book puff" was a distinct feature of mid nineteenth-century advertising³⁰. Trollope avoids open discussion of book ads, but reserves to himself the right to speak of advertising in conjunction with literature and fiction writing.

This conjunction works in two ways. On the one hand, the narrative pokes fun at the literary aspirations of the advertiser-author, Robinson, who considers himself a poet, an artist, a weaver of tales that might have a pragmatic purpose (to attract customers) but are not entirely devoid of literary qualities. He is fond of literary quotations, startling phraseology, "lofty rhymes" and the "poetry of euphemism" (*TS*, p. 120) turned to commercial uses. On the other hand, albeit less explicitly, Robinson's authorial function is linked to Trollope's via the commercial plot. As the businessman of a new generation who believes in Credit rather than Capital and as the partner upon whom the burden of initiating falls, Robinson is the vehicle through which Trollope reflects upon his own uncertain position as economic agent.

Robinson's take on business is distinctly more modern and audacious than the old-fashioned conception typified by Brown, the senior partner who wants to conduct every transaction on "the ready money principle", and by Brisket, the butcher, who has "no other idea of trade than that of selling at so much per pound the beef which he had slaughtered with his own hands" (*TS*, p. 40). Despite his magnified view of the importance of trade, Robinson has a fairly sound understanding of the commercial world, the effects of competition and the role of utility in determining consumers' demand. "Advertisements are profitable", Robinson explains to his partners, "not because they are believed, but because they are attractive. Once understand that, and you will cease to ask for truth" (*TS*, p. 76). His ideas about the fundamental role of advertising and "assuming a virtue" are presented as a curious mixture of mendaciousness and commercial common sense. Some of his observations on the behaviour of consumers, blindly attracted by cheap bargains,

³⁰ Hindley, *op. cit.*, p. 93

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but ultimately able to test for themselves the quality of an article relatively to its price are not unreasonable. Likewise, his view of copywriting as grounded in “romance” rather than reality (*TS*, p. 75) is not far-fetched: “We advertise to attract notice, not to state facts. But it’s a mean thing to pass off a false article over the counter” (*TS*, p. 105). Often compared to literature, the system of belief upon which advertising rests implies a pact with the consumer that is similar to the one stipulated between authors and readers: “Is Hamlet true?” asks Robinson, suggesting that the words used to sell costs belong to the same regime of fictional truth as literary language. Furthermore, Robinson is acutely aware of the vagaries of taste and the fickleness of the public: “There is nothing so fickle as the taste of the public. The most popular author of the day can never count on favour for the next six months” (*TS*, p. 87). Hence the constant pressure to be inventive, innovative and creative in order to capture the attention of consumers, addressing their latent wants in enticing new ways. There is more than one hint in this narrative that Robinson’s traffic with words, for all its parodic modernity, is not to be entirely condemned as dishonest. Furthermore, as the narrative draws to a close, Robinson is allowed to speak in a semi-serious voice of his struggles and the difficulties he is bound to encounter once his decision to engage in literary work is finalised:

[...] but still there was before him the burden of another commencement. Many of us know what it is to have high hopes, and yet to feel from time to time a terrible despondency when the labours come by which those hopes should be realized [...] he knew not how to proceed upon his course (*TS*, p. 184)

Robinson’s predicaments are comparable to the ones experienced by literary authors at the commencement of their career: they negotiate the sale of their books in conditions of uncertainty, do not deal directly with readers, and have to “assume a virtue” in order to trade their words while still lacking public recognition. As Trollope remarks in the autobiography,

even when the book finally gets published, the battle of the unknown author is still not won³¹. Robinson's modern, commercial hero is "the man who can go ahead in trade without capital, who can begin the world with a quick pair of hands, a quick brain to govern them, and can end with capital" (*TS*, p. 9). This description applies equally well to the literary profession: authors need no capital to start with but might end up amassing a fortune. Credit rather than capital is what they need in the beginning — the credit given to their works on the basis of a belief in their marketability. Trollope's humorous discussion of entrepreneurship in *The Struggles* has an interesting flipside: the alleged 'vices' of modern commerce (Robinson's overblown conception of credit) are the 'virtues' authors need in order to gain entry into the literary marketplace. The emphasis of this novel on the problematic issue of beginning provides the link between the explicit, satirical tale of Robinson's "struggles" and the implicit sub-text revolving around questions of authorship and the business of writing.

The figures Trollope is usually fond of evoking when describing the business of writing — the shoemaker in the autobiography, the butcher in the letters — stand for an uncomplicated model of pure market exchange, one in which the process of buying and selling does not seem to involve any degree of uncertainty³². The shoemaker symbolizes an *ideal* model of straight economic dealing based upon the neat coincidence of supply and demand, production and consumption: he knows the value of his wares,

³¹ Trollope, *Autobiography*, cit., p. 70.

³² Trollope's analogy between fiction writing and shoe making, recurrent in the letters and the autobiography, is well-known. Perhaps less renowned but equally interesting is another metaphor revolving around the figure of the butcher that Trollope uses in the letters when discussing the controversial issue of censorship or editorial revision: "Did you ever buy your own meat?" asks Trollope to Longman, "The cutting down of 30 pages to 20 is what you proposed to the butcher when you asked him to take off the bony bits at this end & the skinny bit at the other. You must remember that the butcher told you that nature had produced the joint bone & skin as you saw it, & that it behoved him to sell what nature had thus produced". See Hall, (ed.), *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, cit., p. 117. The butcher, in this case, defends his specific trade by appealing to a natural equilibrium that is best left undisturbed.

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does not take unnecessary risks and has no qualms about the mysterious workings of the market³³. In *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* this model (or fantasy) is problematized: more specifically, it does not seem to function as an ideal that might be of any use to authors entering the commercial arena. Towards the end of the story, Poppins (another exponent of the old school of commerce) gently chides Robinson "for making out all those long stories about things that never existed" (*TS*, p. 158); the world, he claims, is not "the better for it". Not surprisingly, the counterexample Poppins cites is once again the shoemaker: "'When a man makes a pair of shoes — 'And so he went on'" (*TS*, p. 158). Poppins can easily grasp the social utility of making a pair of shoes. The expediency of inventing stories about things that never existed, on the other hand, defies his understanding. However, it is precisely these stories that enable Magenta House to repay its creditors at least partially. It is Robinson's talent for speculation and puffery that renders the ruin of this firm a little less ruinous for the third party involved. Preparing the final sale of Magenta House, Robinson "[plunges] at once into the luxuries of the superlative" (*TS*, p. 172) describing in embellished terms a list of fabulous goods that have almost no relation to the real commodities in stock. Giving free reins to his imagination, Robinson obtains the hoped-for result: "It seemed as though ladies were desirous of having a souvenir from Magenta House, and that goods could be sold at a higher price under the name of sacrifice than they would fetch in the ordinary way of trade" (*TS*, p. 176). Trollope indulges in the description of the creative process that leads to Robinson's final and most elaborate announcement, emphasising the pride of this 'author' in what he writes and his determination to have his words printed without excisions or alterations:

³³ I have discussed at greater length elsewhere the function of this analogy in Trollope's autobiographical discourse. See Silvana Colella, "Sweet Money: Economic and Cultural Value in Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography*", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 28, 1 (2006), pp. 5-20.

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“My only request to you is this, — that if my words be used, they may not be changed or garbled” [...]. They knew the genius of the man, and the notice afterwards appeared exactly in the form in which Robinson had framed it (*TS*, p. 175).

It is difficult to ignore, in this episode, an implicit reference to Trollope’s own experience of censorship. Some of the short stories he wrote for the *Cornhill* in 1860 were declined on the ground of indecency. Trollope, for his part, firmly refused to accept suggested revisions. These negotiations over the moral and ideological limits of fiction, documented in the letters, determined Thackeray’s final decision to serialize *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* in the *Cornhill* without any editorial cut. Trollope won his point, but reserved to himself the right to allude in his satire to the questionable habit of censoring alleged indelicacies. *The Struggles* is indeed a text that tests the limits of delicacy and politeness in many humorous ways.

Conclusion

Brown, Brisket, Poppins and the ideal shoemaker featured in this text represent the traditional norm against which to judge Robinson’s deviation. This deviation is both the catalyst of satire and the occasion for an indirect reflection on the business of writing. If selling novels were like selling meat or shoes, Trollope’s characterization of Robinson might have been a lot less sympathetic. *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* suggests that in his business capacity the author might have a lot more in common with the ‘advertiser’ than he does with the ‘shoemaker’. The unpredictable and capricious market in which Robinson tries to leave his mark resembles quite closely the commercial arena where new authors wish to prove their worth. Unlike the simplified image of market exchange symbolized by the shoemaker, the competitive environment in which the advertiser-author operates has an element of uncertainty that is difficult to contain. In his autobiography, Trollope formulates a business identity for the author-producer based upon a model of

soft control: by standardizing the procedures of writing, authors stand better chances of exerting a degree of control over market transactions. Written at a time when Trollope's position in the literary marketplace was not yet well established, *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* projects a less assertive and more problematic image of the author as businessman, coping with the "burden of [...] commencement" and with the anxious sense that even spectacular beginnings might lead nowhere.

Whether the choice of the satirical mode is motivated by Trollope's sense of frustration at his own repeated and unsuccessful attempts to market his first novels is hard to say. However, there is an element of dissatisfaction and melancholy interwoven in this comic and at times scathing narrative that crops up towards the end in Robinson's musings on the hardships of trade:

They who have struggled and lost all feel only that they have worked hard, and worked in vain; that they have thrown away their money and their energy; and that there is an end, now and for ever, to those sweet hopes of independence with which they embarked their small boats upon the wide ocean of commerce. The fate of such men is very sad (TS, p. 169).

The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson is out of tune with the national mood of bourgeois self-congratulation, as I have argued in the second section. The reality and the dream of commercial prosperity are magnified and hence belittled in Trollope's parodic rendering of the business community. What my reading has tried to highlight is the self-reflexive component of Robinson's account: his role as the textual representative of the authorial persona that writes himself in the narrative, his predicaments that mirror the ones authors face when entering into the literary field for the first time, and the business model he adopts, emphatically modern and brazen, but also more attuned to the realities of an increasingly more complex and challenging commercial field. "All trades are now uphill work," writes Trollope to Catherine Gould in 1860,

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& require a man to suffer much disappointment, and this trade more almost that any other. I was at it for years & wrote ten volumes before I made a shilling —, I say this, which is very much in the guise of a sermon, because I must endeavour to make you understand that a man or a woman must learn the ticks of his trade before it can *make money* by writing³⁴.

The Struggles captures something of the mood of disappointment expressed in this letter. It does so indirectly through the satirical mode or the comic portrait of a struggling businessman who is also a struggling author. Presented in the autobiography as “the hardest bargain I ever sold to a publisher”³⁵, this volume was certainly a project that Trollope did not want to give up, despite two rejections by Chapman and Smith and the bad press it received when the first instalments came out. In fact, in the autobiography Trollope assigns to this book a special value, quantified in economic terms: the price it commanded relatively to the number of pages became the standard measure adopted for the sale of subsequent volumes. “I received £600 for it. From that time to this I have been paid at about that rate for my work — £600 for the quantity contained in an ordinary novel volume”³⁶. For all its oddities, *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* is regarded as a watershed in Trollope’s self-assessment of his canon: it stabilizes the economic value of his output. Ironically, it is the novel about the burden of commencement that marks the beginning of a new phase, one in which the author is finally in a position to claim the right to set the marginal price of his own merchandise. Even if *The Struggles* “passed into the world of letters *sub silencio*”³⁷, Trollope makes sure that future readers appreciate at least its commercial significance.

³⁴ Hall (ed.), *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, cit., p. 91.

³⁵ Trollope, *Autobiography*, cit., p. 161.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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