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The Comic in 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton': 'Continuity' from Jane Austen to George Eliot

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Why was it that George Eliot's maiden work was not *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) but *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857)? Virginia Woolf provides an answer while raising a question herself. Woolf points out that even though George Eliot felt happy and liberated while writing 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' (hereafter referred to as 'Amos') through her cohabitation with George Henry Lewes at the time, it also forced her simultaneously into isolation from society. Eliot was (to borrow her own words), 'cut off from what is called the world' because of her cohabitation, behaviour that was considered socially deviant at the time. Woolf believed that under those situations Eliot secured some intentional distance from 'what is called the world' by returning to the 'innocence of childhood' (Woolf, 165-166).

Is such an interpretation possible in regard to Eliot's characters as well? That is, why was it that the first section of what is considered Eliot's long-awaited first novel, or certainly, the first character that made her a novelist, was not Dorothea Brooke; at the same time, although the character was a minister, it wasn't even Tyran in the final story of the *Scenes of Clerical Life* trilogy, who literally tended to become a saviour of souls even at the risk of his own life? Why was it that Eliot's first character was the humorous Amos Barton? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in Eliot's return to 'the innocence of childhood'.

It is difficult to make a determination, but in terms of being a starting point as an author, there is no doubt that what began to become lodged in Eliot's mind was this caricaturesque figure. The comedy elicited by this eccentric (although it is necessary to add that this was 'eccentricity' to Eliot) protagonist minister, for example, to put it briefly, even reminds the reader of the philistine minister William Collins in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

In this paper, I will examine the comic aspects of Amos via the continuity between Austen and Eliot along the lines of F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* of the English novel.

In a serious novelist such as Eliot there is something similar to Austen's comedy of manners (though seemingly an unexpected viewpoint), as here Leavis's 'prophecy' already exists. Leavis presumes the existence of a 'great tradition' in British fiction and declares that Austen was one of its ancestors. On the other hand, he indicates that the continuity that originates in Austen at the time was inherited by Eliot without missing a beat (18-19).

Yet this 'continuity' has not been concretely developed; even Leavis only focuses on one example each (19), citing

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examples from Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch*. It is clear, however—at least from the two examples that he cites—that elements of irony and humour latent in the characters' daily lives form a major part of the continuity from Austen that Leavis points out.[1]

To elaborate on Leavis's argument, even if Amos is a descendent of Collins, it matters not at all. Certainly, Collins's genetic legacy can be discerned intact in Amos. First I shall discuss Amos's mediocrity and then his caricaturesque (comic) aspects. Austen is of course, the master of the commonplace and slightly fatuitous. This is a small matter, but certainly not simply a small matter. Actually, Austen indeed expanded her own territory through this mastery. In terms of Eliot (to put the conclusion first), Austen's successor used this mastery as a springboard from which to launch her own new creativity.

When it comes to depicting mediocrity and mundaneness, Eliot is truly the successor to Austen; Leavis's 'continuity' can also be discerned here. Speaking of mediocrity, the character Amos is more than accustomed to the mundane. But we must first note what the author is foreshadowing here:

> The Rev. Amos Barton, whose sad fortunes I have undertaken to relate, was, you perceive, in no respect an ideal or exceptional character, and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable. (43)

According to the author herself, this protagonist of 'sad fortunes' was 'in no respect an ideal or exceptional character', but a man 'so very far from remarkable', and 'palpably and unmistakably commonplace'. However, ultimately the author attempts to elicit sympathy from the reader for this character, and confesses her 'bold' plan ahead of time. Her confession is perhaps also a declaration of enthusiasm for the challenge or 'experiment'. The 'comedy' does not end with the 'adventures of some personage who is quite a 'character'. Further, 'tragedy' does not mean 'ermine tippets [worn by an aristocratic lady], adultery, and murder' (43). The author's ulterior motive is to impart comedy to this 'commonplace' man. Amos single-mindedly degenerates into mediocrity.

> . . . a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace; who was not even in love, but had had that complaint favourably many years ago. (43)

It is as if the author has created multiples of herself, yet with one voice says what she pleases about the 'unmistakably commonplace' attributes with which the protagonist is imbued. Even Amos's faults are deemed 'commonplace' (47); he is repellent. This man for whom the author has scathing tautological contempt, regardless of the bluntness of expression,

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has sufficient qualification to inhabit the world depicted by Austen.

Moreover, Amos, thusly depicted, does not end up with a flatness that tautologies are likely at times to fall into when producing characters, but actually evinces a heavy realism. In short, it is that overabundance of realism that is the main driving force informing his caricaturization. In that sense too, it could be said that Amos is unmistakably a neighbour of Collins.

The existences of these two ministers are rooted together in firm reality. Further, the two authors are remarkably in concert in using 'economics' to impart that sense of realism. Not only Collins, but other characters in Austen's works are given price tags based on each one's income or real estate. Similarly, Amos is given the label of earning eighty pounds per annum. Amos must support a family of six children and a wife on that income. For Amos, who was 'not at all an ascetic; he thought the benefits of fasting were entirely confined to the Old Testament dispensation' (47), his trials of the moment are the immediate demands for payment by the butcher as well as the perennial lack of butter.

How true that man does not live by bread alone. At the same time, man cannot live without it; further, even a lack of butter can prove an extreme inconvenience. What a difficult creature man is! Ministers are no exception.

Northrop Frye introduces the words of Don Quixote in 'The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire': 'No one in a romance . . . ever asks who pays for the hero's accommodation' (223). In 'Amos', the romance of the idolized image of the good wife and mother Milly Barton, through embrace of the ironic myth as a parody of romance, that is, through the intentional introduction of 'economizing' measures that envelope Amos the breadwinner, attains a sudden sense of reality. Nevertheless, the extreme nature of that economizing produces the opposite effect. That is, Amos is made into a first-rate caricature through the process.

Both Amos and Collins are unmistakably masterpieces of philistine caricature. However, they are not simply caricatures. They resemble each other also in the sense that they have a tremendous impact on the female protagonists. In her letter, Austen does not conceal her own feelings that Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is 'as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print' (*Letters*, January 29, 1813; 297). Collins is, to borrow a technical term from E. M. Forster, a boorish 'flat character' (65), but through his action of seeking the hand of Elizabeth in marriage, has the power to force even her (a 'round character') into a corner.

Amos is not to be outdone in this regard. His very existence is a threat to his model wife, Milly, that angel of the house. Milly makes possible the feminist reading (Gribble) of the nuance of a martyr who sacrifices herself for the home. Amos is indeed what should be termed the 'commonplace male'. Milly is a stark contrast to Collin's wife Charlotte.[2] Milly is such a perfect wife and mother that she makes the reader think even Charlotte a

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superficially formidable wife. However, the effect of contrast between the husband and wife brings into sharp relief the foolishness of the husband. Ironically, the self-sacrificing wife has the power subconsciously (or perhaps due to its very subconsciousness) to make even Austen's formidable Charlotte appear insignificant.

This farcical nature of Amos is not limited to Amos himself; it is reinforced by the caricature of a supporting character: Countess Czerlaski. Eliot does not loosen her control over comic technique one whit in her handling of this supporting character. David Lodge points out that Eliot clearly learned the technique from Austen of 'the art of exposing without explicit emphasis' egoism and affectation. He cites the countess for his example (21). Though Lodge himself doesn't expand his observation about the countess beyond citing her name, perhaps the scene that best epitomizes the 'art' that Lodge notes is the one cited below. The scene represents a 'triple sentence'; that is, it is constructed of what should be termed three layers of rhetoric, which is indeed reminiscent of another aspect of Austen's characteristic 'art' as well.

Mr and Mrs Amos Barton have been invited to the Countess's house, and are dining with her and Bridmain when the servant comes in and spills gravy on the one and only nice dress Milly owns:

> 'O, horror! Tell Alice to come directly and rub Mrs Barton's dress,' said the Countess to the trembling John, carefully abstaining from approaching the gravy-sprinkled spot on the floor with her own lilac silk. (35)

Surprised, Countess Czerlaski exclaims, and orders the maid to wipe off Milly's dress immediately, but at the same time is careful of her own lilac silk dress and studiously avoids the gravy-sprinkled floor.

Although a supporting character, the Countess is just as superb a caricature as is Amos. It has been noted, however, that unlike the other characters in the story, the Countess Czerlaski was not based on an actual person. The flowering of Eliot's unparalleled skill in creative caricature can be perceived here. At the same time, it is apparent that caricaturization is, so to speak, unmistakably one of the essential aspects of the author's sheer talent.

'Affectation' and 'egoism' are exquisitely exhibited without great exaggeration here, but in this case what deserves our attention is the intriguing addition of that reinforcement to Eliot's 'art': Bridmain.

> But Mr Bridmain, who had a strictly private interest in silks, good-naturedly jumped up and applied his napkin at once to Mrs Barton's gown. (35)

The Countess's concern over someone else's problem, that is, Milly's dress, and parallel success in being even more concerned about her own dress, creates a gap in surface level and deep structure, if you will. Then instantly the third wedge is driven in: the 'strictly private interest in silks' of Mr Bridmain, who 'had won a partnership in a silk-manufactory, and

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thereby a moderate fortune'(40), provides the finale.

This type of 'triple sentence' was a form to which Austen devoted herself. Norman Page says of Austen that this '*oratio trimembris* or three-part structure' was one of the author's literary features (93) and was an 'art' that could be found throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. In order to develop his discussion I will give a straightforward example here. When the protagonist, Elizabeth, goes to visit her sick sister, Jane, who was staying at Netherfield, Elizabeth walks the entire distance alone, appearing at Netherfield quite muddied and damp. This is presented to the reader as a representative virtue, but judged by the conventions of the time, it deviated greatly from ideal ladylike deportment. Her drastic behaviour elicits different reactions from each of the men gathered there:

> . . . in their brother's [Bingley's] manners there was something better than politeness; there was good humour and kindness.—Mr Darcy said very little, and Mr Hurst said nothing at all. (33)

First there were affectionate words of admiration from Bingley, followed by Darcy's 'reticence', and lastly by Mr Hurst's 'complete silence'. This should have settled the matter, but the 'triple sentence' does not end here. It diverges further:

> The former [Darcy] was divided between admiration of the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion, and doubt as to the occasion's justifying her coming so far alone. The latter thinking only of his breakfast. (33)

Mr Darcy wishes to extol Elizabeth for her healthily ruddy complexion after her trek, but wonders about the appropriateness of her rash behaviour, thus placing him literally in a dilemma. Mr Darcy's 'reticence' calls into question his 'pride'; and in a sense, is a symbol of binary tension. This reticence is, however, at a stroke thrown into disarray by the 'silence' of the third party, Mr Hurst, and his sole interest: breakfast.

In Eliot's case, too, the binarism created by the Countess dissolves at once in the face of a third party: Mr Bridmain. If we employ the terminology of Page here, the binarism ends in 'abrupt dislocation' (108).

The comic nature of Amos reviewed so far is thought to reveal to a large degree the inner being of the author. The return to 'the innocence of childhood' and 'distance' that Eliot experienced while writing this piece, as pointed out by Woolf, creates rather, the phenomenon of the author's approaching and adhering to her own primitive elements. Eliot started down the path of writing during the process of securing for herself her own inner being. In the last half of 'Amos', however, Eliot suddenly turns away from the world of Austen and tries her own 'experiments'.

While thoroughly acquiring a comic look resembling that of Austen's characters, 'Amos' ultimately succeeds in becoming the 'tragedy' implied in the title (that is, as the author assures us, or rather, as she intends). She discovers her own rich lode of

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talent. Through the tragedy, Amos, to borrow the phrase from Forster here again, achieves a transformation from being a 'flat character' to a 'round' one via caricaturization (65).

Eliot's shift from comedy to tragedy (which is, ultimately, a metamorphosis from a flat to a round character) makes this possible. Yet the author's magic wand seems to have had this purpose from the beginning. For example, at the time *Scenes of Clerical Life* was published, Eliot said in a letter dated June 6, 1857:

> I am very happy—happy in the highest blessing life can give us, the perfect love and sympathy of a nature that stimulates my own to healthful activity. (Letters II, 343)

It isn't difficult to imagine that the author's strong sense of trust in love and sympathy in real life had a great influence on her constructing a fictional world. Indeed, Eliot professes the following in the last chapter of 'Amos':

> . . . his [Amos's] recent troubles had called out their [the parishioners'] better sympathies, and that is always a source of love. Amos failed to touch the spring of goodness by his sermons, but he touched it effectually by his sorrow; and there was now a real bond between him and his flock. (74)

The truly 'sad fortunes' of Amos elicit the 'sympathy' and 'love' of his parishioners, and in the last chapter, the reader voluntarily takes on the role of 'Amos's parishioners'. Through Eliot's techniques, the magic of transforming comedy into tragedy is effectually realized. I have already discussed this phenomenon (Soya, 'Eliot' 149) and will not dwell upon it here.

The shift from comedy to tragedy via the fulcrum of such reader sympathy testifies greatly to Eliot's talents as a writer. What makes this work dramatic is precisely the amazing feat of transforming the two dramatic modes of comedy and tragedy.

Yet naturally, what makes this dramatic turn possible must be first and foremost 'comedy' ('comedy' with an ancient and honourable lineage, so to speak). As we have seen, Amos himself is a character deeply tinged with the comic. But what raises him to high caricature is not only his characterization but his 'habitat', which makes possible the essential element of deep farce. Here the author painstakingly and fully labours at cultivating the soil of comedy, beginning with characterization of the Countess. As a result, 'Amos' is not simply faced with the choice of casting off comedy for tragedy, but matures into a work filled with a dualism in which comedy is connoted in tragedy, and vice versa.

Richard B. Sewall states, for example, that it is necessary to have a sense of the tragic in comedy and conversely, of the comic in tragedy. The implication is that each breathes life into the other, supporting each other:

> Without a sense of the tragic, comedy loses heart; it becomes brittle, it has animation but no life. Without a recognition of the truths of comedy, tragedy becomes bleak and intolerable. (1)

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This is what makes high comedy and high tragedy possible in 'Amos'.

After 'Amos,' Eliot's works take on the trait of profundity over levity, but even in those 'serious' novels, the comic elements germinated in 'Amos' are not abandoned. Far from it. As Leavis points out, it is tied even more closely to the author's morals, preserving at the essential core the continuity from Austen. T. S. Eliot closes his famous essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' with 'practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry' as follows.

> . . . he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living. (33)

Adapting this proposal of Eliot's to another Eliot who is actually 'the responsible person interested in poetry', George Eliot lives not simply in her own 'present', but she lives 'the present moment of the past'. Perhaps by being keenly conscious of not 'of what is dead', but of 'what is already living', she achieves becoming Austen's successor.

After Eliot became a highly successful writer with her *Adam Bede* (1859), she described her affection for her maiden work, writing that '. . . there are ideas presented in these stories [*Scenes of Clerical Life*] about which I care a good deal, and am not sure that I can ever embody again'. (*Letters*, III 240). Unsurprisingly, a protagonist like Amos never reappeared in her later stories. Yet the Amos character conceived in this work has never betrayed Eliot. It would continue to be the unshakeable essence of the author's serious works, pouring life into them from the periphery and sometimes even from the core itself.

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Notes

1. Leavis also refers to the relationship between humour and essential moral interest, but owing to lack of space and to avoid diffusion of my main argument, I have left discussion of morality to another occasion.

2. Charlotte marries in order to secure a 'home' for herself, but to take measures to make possible 'coexistence' with her vulgar husband, for example, she allocates the best room in the house to him, and by choosing an uncomfortable room for a parlour, cleverly drives her husband into his own room. She thus succeeds in securing for herself a safe space.

As Lawrence Stone points out, wives were their husbands' 'property' (7, 13). Yet the brave and resolute act of the 'property', Charlotte, who, rather than boldly 'turn[ing] the table on [her] husband', manipulates her husband at will through 'pacifying and domesticating' him, thereby adopting a labour-saving and efficient

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strategy. In this sense, she is in no way inferior to Austen's other 'wives'. (Soya, *Web Eigo Seinen*, 9).

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