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Comic George Eliot

George Scott Christian

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George Eliot's famous digression on the nature of literary realism in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* has long been understood as a kind of aesthetic manifesto for the Victorian novel. Much has been written on Eliot's insistence that a faithful narrative representation of reality must take account of low and middle life, much as Dutch genre painting seeks to imitate quotidian life in all its prosaic detail. What has attracted virtually no attention in discussions of Eliot's ideas on realism, however, is the central importance of comic theory to her realist aesthetic. Indeed, Eliot's comic theory deeply informs and shapes her well known positivism and insistent faith in the power of sympathetic intersubjective relations to regenerate individual and social life.

Robert Martin's classic critique of Victorian comic theory briefly discusses Eliot's views on humour and wit, but fails to link them to broader issues of realism and aesthetics. Martin classes Eliot with the 'wit and intellect' wing of Victorian comic theory, epitomized by George Meredith, arguing that she seeks to recover the importance of wit and 'ratiocinative intellect' to true comedy at the expense of boorish, sentimental, uncultured comedy. While he is right to recognize Eliot's contribution to Victorian comic theory, Martin overdetermines Eliot's thesis in terms of his own bias toward the 'triumph of wit' and his dichotomous approach to wit and humour. In fact, a closer study of Eliot's primary treatise on the comic reveals a much more complex understanding of the comic and its formative role in structuring, through the realist narrative, human consciousness for the better.

In her 1856 essay entitled 'German Wit: Heinrich Heine', Eliot boldly analogizes the development of true comedy to the progressive development of human civilization. She opens the essay with a quotation from chapter 4 of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: "'Nothing," says Goethe, 'is more significant of men's character than what they find laughable'":

> The truth of this observation would perhaps have been more apparent if he had said culture instead of character. The last thing in which the cultivated man can have community with the vulgar is their jocularity; and we can hardly exhibit more strikingly the wide gulf which separates him from them, than by comparing the object which shakes the diaphragm of a coal-heaver with the highly complex pleasure derived from a real witticism. That any high order of wit is exceedingly complex, and demands a ripe and strong mental development, has one evidence in the fact that we do not find it in boys at all in proportion to their manifestation of other powers. Clever boys generally aspire to the heroic and poetic rather than the comic, and the crudest of all their efforts are their jokes. Many a witty man will remember how in his school days a practical joke, more or less Rabelaisian, was for him the *ne plus ultra* of the ludicrous. (193)

At first glance, it would seem that Eliot strikes a distinctly different note from other important Victorian comic theorists, primarily Carlyle and Thackeray, who emphasize the sublime warmth of the comic impulse. She makes a sharp class distinction between the 'cultivated'
and the 'vulgar', the former enjoying the mental gymnastics associated with refined wit, the latter the crude 'jocularity' associated with 'Rabelaisian' pranks. She goes on to suggest that earlier cultures, such as the Hebrews, Egyptians, and Britons, lacking sufficient intellectual development, had no concept of wit at all: 'The fun of these early races was, we fancy, of the after-dinner kind – loud-throated laughter over the wine-cup, taken too little account of in sober moments to enter as an element into their Art, and differing as much from the laughter of a Chamfort or Sheridan as the gastronomic enjoyment of an ancient Briton, whose dinner had no other 'removes' than from acorns to beechmast and back again to acorns, differed from the subtle pleasures of the palate experienced by his turtle-eating descendant' (193-94). Wit depends on the evolution of culture, which brings the ability to reflect upon and aestheticize experience, and to incorporate self-consciously that experience into Art.

The idea of 'removes', though used in a joke, is crucial to understanding Eliot's theory of comedy. While ostensibly advocating an evolutionary development of humour into wit, a development that roughly parallels the growth of culture from an early to advanced stage, Eliot rather links the development of comedy to that of consciousness itself. Carlyle says that the 'essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence' (16); Thackeray defines humor as 'wit and love' (270). They associate wit, unmixed with sympathetic humour, with soulless irony or bitter, Swiftian satire. Eliot, however, in keeping with her evolutionary concept of humour and wit, appears to refute these attempts to elevate humour over wit.

Humour is of earlier growth than Wit, and it is in accordance with this earlier growth that it has more affinity with the poetic tendencies, while Wit is more nearly allied with the ratiocinative intellect. [...] Everyone who has had the opportunity of making the comparison will remember that the effect produced on him by some witticisms is closely akin to the effect produced on him by subtle reasoning which lays open a fallacy or absurdity, and there are persons whose delight in such reasoning always manifests itself in laughter. [...] Some of Johnson's most admirable witticisms consist in the suggestion of an analogy which immediately exposes the absurdity of an action or proposition; and it is only their ingenuity, condensation, and instantaneousness which lift them from reasoning into Wit – they are reasoning raised to a higher power. On the other hand, Humour, in its higher forms, and in proportions as it associates itself with the sympathetic emotions, continually passes into poetry; nearly all great modern humourists may be called prose poets. (193-94)

Martin contends that this passage establishes Eliot's preference for wit over humour, but his argument assumes that Eliot privileges a later stage of intellectual development or 'civilization'. But while Eliot contrasts humour and wit in evolutionary terms of lower to higher development, she does not privilege one over the other. Instead, she allies humour with poetry and wit with science, arguing that poetic or aesthetic linguistic development preceded that of science in chronological time. In other words, Eliot adopts a form of Wordsworthian theory of language development to describe comic theory. While earlier cultures developed a richly metaphorical language to imitate a nature they could not readily comprehend in
empirical terms, later cultures evolved a different language to describe emerging scientific discoveries about the natural world. In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth suggests that future poetry might use such language to illuminate empirical truth, just as existing ‘prose poetry’, found in the language of plain men speaking plainly, represents the perception of nature to the common mind. This analogy helps explain Eliot’s argument that the highest form of Wit reveals ‘the essential qualities of things’. Just as Carlyle disdains the ‘superficial distortion or reversal of objects’ (16), Eliot dismisses mere wordplay and ‘superficialities’ as unworthy of wit. Eliot thus moves closer to an Addisonian concept of true wit, one that engages the reader’s imagination and gives pleasure in a surprising affinity of seemingly disparate objects, while at the same time instructing the mind in ‘essential’ truths.

Humour, on the other hand, in its highly developed form, continues to appeal to the sensibility of sympathetic readers. Eliot acknowledges that, in the past, Hobbesian forms of humour could be savage and barbaric: ‘A great deal of humour may co-exist with a great deal of barbarism, as we see in the Middle Ages, but the strongest flavour of the humour in such cases will come, not from sympathy, but more probably from triumphant egoism or intolerance’ (195). Practical jokes, for example, and the humour that arises from a vicious feeling of superiority, are certainly risible, but ‘no sympathetic nature can enjoy them. Strange as the genealogy may seem, the original parentage of that wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy, philosophy, and feeling which constitutes modern humour, was probably the cruel mockery of a savage at the writhings of a suffering enemy – such is the tendency of things towards the good and beautiful on this earth’ (195). Here one might recall the vicious practical joke that Nello, the Florentine barber in *Romola*, plays on the visiting leech in chapter 16.

Eliot’s rejection of Hobbes, while validating the superiority theory as an earlier stage of aesthetic and intellectual development, follows an Addisonian path toward the acculturation of humanity through comedy. Eliot sees ‘modern’ humour in terms of a complex, evolving organism whose ‘parentage’, though lower on the evolutionary scale, is both indispensable to its current stage of development and completely contained within it. The parents live on in the offspring, who nevertheless evolve to a higher state of self-consciousness in which it is possible to identify the ‘ugly’ and cast it off in a process of internal, psychic objectification. Eliot further argues that while wit strikes suddenly with ‘irresistible force’, humour ‘approaches us more deliberately and leaves us masters of ourselves’ (195). This is why ‘coarse and cruel wit abounds’, even while ‘coarse and cruel humour has almost disappeared from contemporary literature.’ Consequently, Eliot sums up, ‘high culture demands more complete harmony with its moral sympathies in humour than in wit’ (195).

Eliot goes on, as most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century comic theorists do, to idealize Shakespeare as the highest example of the unity of wit and humour in art. She criticizes both the humourless wit of Voltaire and, in contrast to Carlyle and De Quincey, the ‘witless’ humour of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter. ‘German comedy’, she mordantly observes, ‘is like a German sentence: you see no reason in its structure why it should ever come to an end, and you accept the conclusion as an arrangement of Providence rather than of the author’ (197). This judgement leads to a discussion of the notable lack of German contributions to European wit and humour and (at great length) links her introductory section on comic theory to the purported subject of the essay, Heine. Heine finds favour with Eliot as both a sympathetic humourist and
an intellectual wit, one who 'sheds his sunny smile on human tears, and makes them a beauteous rainbow on the cloudy background of life' and 'holds in his mighty hand the most scorching lightnings of satire' (200).

Very little more is said in the essay about the nature of wit and humour, and it is evident that Heine for Eliot, like Richter for Carlyle, is to some extent a convenient pretext for expressing more important aesthetic and social concerns. Specifically, those concerns are with comedy as a dominant aspect of highly cultivated individuals and, just as importantly, of 'high culture' – a culture that has transcended cruelty, coarseness, and violence. Eliot makes it clear that comedy, which constitutes a delicate synthesis of humour and wit, is crucial to both individual and collective moral development. In her taxonomy humour is allied with poetic sensibility and aesthetics, wit with reason and science. Each informs and even generates a different system of signification for representing reality. Humour, in its proxility and 'sympathetic presentation of incongruous elements in human nature and life' (195), converts into art life as it is lived in the 'middling' state. As Eliot implores in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, 'do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world [. . .]. Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of life to the faithful representing of commonplace things – men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them' (201).^5

In this context we can see the real implications for Eliot of Goethe's maxim. If we find laughable the 'old women' and 'heavy clowns', we are guilty of Hobbesian exultation over our weaker neighbour and are no further along the evolutionary spectrum than our acorn-munching avatars. Through this kind of primitive comedy we once excised the ugly and low and made them objects of derision. In that phase of individual and moral growth, we were 'cruel', meaning in Eliot's parlance that we were unreflective, that we took 'too little account of [our laughter] in sober moments to enter as an element into [. . .] Art'. As the general moral and intellectual development of civilization progressed, we became conscious of the double operation of self-division and sympathetic self-projection through comedy. Instead of finding the ugly and low 'laughable', we now regard them 'with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness' (*Adam Bede* 201). In Eliot's evolutionary theory of comedy, then, it is as though human consciousness long ago separated itself from its own weaknesses and demonized them, perhaps as a defence against the primitive savagery Eliot identifies with ancient cultures. The aesthetic representation of this process of self-protective self-division was comedy in its early Aristotelian-Hobbesian form. With the general 'enlightenment' of those cultures, and the correlative growth of wit and the 'ratiocinative intellect', self-reflection now permits the self to recognize its division and to reclaim its excised parts. What was once objectified as ugly and savage returns to the self as a sympathetic understanding of our too real egoistic tendencies, a sympathy that is aestheticized through 'realist' art. This self-reclamation and its attendant aesthetic reproduction is the project of comedy, which in its modern progressive form gives narrative reality to the self's divided history and the necessary civilizing process of reintegration.
For Eliot self-reintegration is a moral and ideological mandate because the very real and generally beneficial advances of reason and science have been purchased at a high price: the social and economic dislocation of millions of ‘old women’ and ‘heavy clowns’. Those millions languish in workhouses or in the tenements of industrial cities, take to the streets in riot and agitation, and threaten English liberty with the realization of its deepest fears: the totalitarianism of mob rule. In an important sense, these are the fruits of a primitive conception of comedy, one based on the superiority of one individual – or one class – over another. But in another sense the old comedy is a deeper expression of an unself-consciousness that, when experienced collectively, can result in individual and communal alienation, fragmentation, and tyranny. Comedy is the aesthetic model for the individual and collective process of reintegrating that divided, fragmented, and tyrannical consciousness. It is the careful, self-reflexive, sympathetic confluence of poetic and scientific sensibility, the clear-eyed, disinterested assessment of ‘real life’ in both art and science. That assessment manifests itself in the realist narrative, the comic form itself, which employs the prose poetry of science to trace the complex interactions of the individual and the community. Comedy is the evaluation of consciousness, by and for itself, for the purpose of rationalizing a world that presents radically different faces: the face of the individual, who is locked in a solipsistic, interior universe, and the face of the collective, which imposes, sometimes ruthlessly and arbitrarily, demands on individuality that must somehow be interpreted, comprehended, and assimilated.

Eliot, with the possible exception of Meredith, is the only Victorian novelist who fully and explicitly acknowledges that the project of literary realism is a component of a larger poetics of comedy. Indeed, as Judith Wilt calls her, she is ‘the greatest literary comic matriarch of the nineteenth century’ (178). Eliot figures this poetics as progressive and evolutionary, made possible by the coincidence of poetic sensibility, enlightened reason, and empirical science. The marriage of art, reason, and science operates to open the consciousness to itself, allowing it to comprehend its past development, present moral condition, and potential for future moral ‘progress’. The mandate of self-awareness is sympathy and fellow-feeling, which integrates the self with itself and with the community. For Eliot the comic realist novel is not only the aesthetic expression of the process of reintegration, it provides the necessary language for triggering that process in the first place. The novel thus both represents and enacts nothing less than individual and social salvation; it is a kind of secular scripture for a new comic soteriology. For Eliot, the positivist proponent of a new religion based on the sanctity of human feeling and sympathy, the comic novel is a doctrinal substitute for the Christian comedy of sacred texts.

NOTES

1 Feminist critics, however, have acknowledged Eliot’s use of the comic to express women’s rage and frustration with the constraints of patriarchal rule. See Barreca and Gillooly.

2 See Martin 82-85.

3 See Wordsworth 255-63.

4 As Tave and Paulson have shown, this Addisonian model of disinterestedness refers to the Whig comic aesthetic formulated initially by Addison and others as a civilizing
response to the perceived savagery of Hobbes’s notion that comedy arises from a vicious feeling of superiority over the weak and deformed. See especially Paulson, chapters 1 and 3.

5 U. C. Knoepflmacher notes that ‘George Eliot arranged reality to make it substantiate her moral values’ (1). While this authorial intrusion is undoubtedly true of many novelists, his argument oversimplifies Eliot’s sense of the true mimetic function of the comic realist narrative: to imitate the process of self-consciousness.

6 McGowan argues similarly that the ‘crucial development of Eliot’s realism is the shift from a world of objects inertly perceived to human interaction with that world as the “reality” to which words must “refer’” (135).

Works Cited


