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THE EIGHTEENTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE - 1989

delivered by

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(Asa Briggs, the distinguished historian)

**NOVELISTS AND THINGS: GEORGE ELIOT
IN A VICTORIAN PERSPECTIVE**

I am privileged as a historian of Victorian England to deliver this Memorial Lecture on the occasion of the 170th anniversary of George Eliot's birth. The future Queen was born on May 24th 1819, described by her father as 'a model of strength and beauty combined': George Eliot was born at five o'clock in the morning on November 22nd. This was the year of the Massacre of Peterloo, when discontent and repression drove the Lancashire radical Samuel Bamford to ask in his poem 'The Lancashire Hymn'

'Have we not heard the infant's cry
And mark'd its mother's tear;
That look, which told us mournfully
That woe and want were there?'

Infants born in 1819 had very different life chances; George Eliot soon became aware of this. And although 'woe and want' were not to be the main themes in Queen Victoria's long reign, which started eighteen years later, they were never to be absent. A more familiar theme was to be 'plenitude'. There were more 'things' around than there ever had been before - and more new things: 'novelty' went with 'plenitude'. At the end of the reign even among socialists the theme was less 'woe and want' than 'poverty in the midst of plenty'.

Queen Victoria was unique amongst monarchs in giving her name both to an adjective 'Victorian' and to a noun 'Victorianism'; and in retrospect we can single out George Eliot as a great Victorian, directing attention to the seriousness of her purpose and to her unrelenting sense of duty, both of which were key elements in Victorianism. Yet she was not an orthodox Victorian. She differed from many of her contemporaries both on religion, then a critical test, and in the unconventional pattern of her private life. She broke away from the restraints of her upbringing and had no respect for double standards. Moreover, she did not live through the last decades of Victoria's reign. She died in 1880, the year of the publication of Henry George's Progress and

Poverty. The Queen died in 1901. George Eliot's reputation declined during these late-Victorian years which were different in mood from the mid-Victorian years when her reputation was at its height. She had survived Dickens, however, by five years - and the Prince Consort by nineteen. Trollope died two years after her in 1882.

It is convenient to divide Queen Victoria's reign into three parts, each with its own attitudes, personalities and problems. George Eliot often looked back, however, to the pre-Victorian period, where she set many of her novels. She had a strong sense of the recent past just as she had a strong sense of place. Her father, Robert Evans, she recalled, uttered 'the word government in a tone that charged it with awe and made it part of any effective religion.' That was one response to 1819. There was no such awe during the mid-Victorian years, however, when governments came and went and Walter Bagehot found it difficult to believe that the famous Six Acts which followed in the wake of Peterloo could ever have gone through Parliament.

In the first of my trilogy of books on Victorian England I focused on the mid-Victorian years between the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Second Reform Bill of 1867 which gave the vote to a section of the working classes. I approached the period through some of its representative personalities, in each case producing a profile, and I showed how the profiles belonged to essentially the same collection. Had I been writing the book now I would have included George Eliot as well as Bagehot and Trollope. I regret that I did not. I would have traced her own attitudes to law and to will, to doubt and to faith, and to art and to science. As Leslie Stephen put it, she was more interested in theories than in the gossip of the day. Capable not only of 'reading the diverse heads of men [and women] but creeping into their skin', as another admirer, the historian Lord Acton observed, the main thrust of her writing was ethical, and 'ephemeral though it never was', it was associated with a specific period that came to an end. 'If ever science or religion reigns over an undivided empire,' Acton also wrote, 'the books of George Eliot might lose their central and unique importance, but as the emblem of a generation distracted between the intense need of believing and the difficulty of belief, they will live to the last syllable of recorded time.'

From the start I thought of Victorian People, written a generation ago, as the first of a trilogy, with Victorian Cities and Victorian Things to follow - and so they have, after a long interlude when our own attitude to most aspects of Victorian England, including the things that it produced, has changed. In

choosing to concentrate in this address on George Eliot and things, I am making up in a sense for not having dealt with her fully as a person in Victorian People. That is not my only purpose, however. I believe that we can learn much about novelists - and poets - by their attitude toward things, particularly in the nineteenth century when, as I have already stressed, there were so many of them.

Thackeray, who was born in 1811, eight years before George Eliot, and who died in 1863, seventeen years before her, loved to linger on things, especially those which carried a 'heavy freight of associations'. So, too, did Dickens - in his journalistic articles even more than in his novels. Later in the century, Thomas Hardy, born in 1840, not only referred frequently to things - according to John Bayley they mattered far more to him than the words that described them - but considered 'the barbaric idea that confuses persons and things' as 'poetic'.

I am interested, as I show in Victorian Things, where I refer frequently to now less well-known writers than these - writers like George Augustus Sala - in how things stirred the imagination. In this book I cover the whole of Queen Victoria's reign and not just the middle years. I am concerned throughout not so much with the things themselves, Victoriana as we now call them - though I am curious about them, sometimes fascinated - as with people's attitudes towards them.

The word 'thing' itself has acquired a peculiarly Victorian sound. 'All things bright and beautiful' was the opening line of a favourite hymn, and in Robert Louis Stevenson's poem written later in the century two of the most famous lines ran:

'The world is so full of such numbers of things
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.'

Lewis Carroll was almost as interested in things as in numbers, recognising just how important things - and their names - were for the secure scaffolding of Victorian life. 'Things flow about so here', Alice complained 'in a plaintive tone' when that scaffolding was absent: she had just spent a minute or so vainly pursuing a large bright thing that looked 'sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a workbox'. 'Reality' required things.

John Ruskin and William Morris had more to say about things than any of their contemporaries, although they thought that there were too many unbeautiful things and that however much they changed with technology or

with fashion, they remained unbeautiful. (Some of these, including those which were originally cheap, now fetch substantial prices.) George Eliot noted as early as 1855 what an important influence Ruskin was on the formation of Victorian tastes and told her publisher to send him a copy of Scenes of Clerical Life; and when she and Lewes went to Germany in 1868 they read aloud to each other Morris's Earthly Paradise. Yet Ruskin viciously attacked her novels - viciously and fallaciously - describing The Mill on the Floss in 1881 as 'the sweepings out of a Pentonville omnibus'. Mixing up his environments, he described her as the leader of an English 'Cockney School of writers', catering for 'the demands of the rows of similar brick houses, which branch in devouring cancer round any manufacturing town'.

On the strength of this passage, George Eliot, who did not refer to things as frequently as most novelists or other writers, some of whom listed them lovingly, could reveal a more sensitive reaction to environment - and particularly to domestic interiors than Ruskin did. Ruskin was inconsistent, and she was not. She certainly wrote one extremely interesting and illuminating passage on the naming of things, a subject of great interest to the Victorians, just as important as counting things. On a visit to Ilfracombe in 1856, one year before Lewes completed Seaside Studies, she noted:

'I never before longed so much to know the names of things as during this visit to Ilfracombe. The desire is part of the tendency that is now constantly growing in me to escape from all vagueness and inaccuracy into the daylight of distinct, vivid ideas. The mere fact of naming an object tends to give definitiveness to our concept of it; we have then a sign that at once calls up in our minds the distinctive qualities which mark out for us that particular object from all others.'

These lines, which related of course to natural objects and not to man-made artefacts, have encouraged me since writing Victorian Things to go into a deeper and still unfinished examination of naming. Many new things were named in Victorian England: what was the role of imagination and of 'system' in the naming of them?

However interested George Eliot was in naming, she was not like many Victorian writers, including novelists, a writer who produced long lists. One of the most striking of such lists appears in a post-Victorian novel about the Victorians, Brian Moore's The Great Victorian Collection (1975), published when a transformation in twentieth-century attitudes towards Victorian

things was complete. His imaginative and impressive accurate list of Victorian artefacts of every kind discovered in a Californian dreamworld can rightly be described as an 'idyll', a term applied to Victorian lists by Peter Conrad. I myself share the preoccupation, and on the very first page of Victorian Things produce my list - in this case consisting not of nouns but of verbs. 'I want to consider,' I said, the things which the Victorians 'designed, named, made, advertised, bought and sold, listed, counted, collected, gave to others, threw away or bequeathed', and I go on to add for good measure enjoyed, displayed, had stolen, insured, and pawned. My own research, I added, had led me from shop to shop and museum to museum as well as from library to library.

When Peter Conrad talked of lists as idylls he also drew attention to Victorian interiors, noting how 'the Dickensian city is made up of interiors, not of public places'. It is equally notable that while George Eliot was relatively uninterested in 'things' she has several striking - brief but perceptive and highly pictorial - presentations of particular interiors. Take the account in Adam Bede of the interior of Hall Farm, which follows a rather rare and if only for that reason interesting - list, or at least half a list, of the things you could see through the window

'a large open fireplace, with rusty dogs in it, and a bare boarded floor; at the far end, fleeces of wool stacked up; in the middle of the floor, some empty corn-bags. That is the furniture of the dining-room. And what through the left hand window? Several clothes-horses, a pillion, a spinning wheel, and an old box wide open, and stuffed full of coloured rags. At the edge of this box there lies a great wooden doll, which, so far as mutilation is concerned, bears a strong resemblance to the finest Greek sculpture, and especially in the total loss of its nose. Near it there is a little chair, and the butt-end of a boy's leather long-lashed whip'.

Thanks to Mrs. Poyser, nearly three hours after a dinner

'the house-floor is perfectly clean again; as clean as everything else in that wonderful house-place, where the only chance of collecting a few grains of dust would be to climb on the salt-coffer, and put your finger on the high mantel-shelf on which the glittering brass candlesticks are enjoying their summer sinecure; for at this time of year, of course, every one goes to bed while it is yet light, or at least light enough to discern the

outline of objects after you have bruised your shins against them. Surely nowhere else could an oak clock-case and an oak table have got such a polish by the hand; genuine “elbow polish,” as Mrs. Poyser called it, for she thanked God she never had any of your varnished rubbish in her house.’

The classic case of varnish in literature was Dickens’s account in Our Mutual Friend of the Veneerings, a name that speaks for itself; and the paragraph which introduces them and their expressions of new wealth in Chapter 2 is unforgettable. ‘Mr. and Mrs. Veneering were bran’-new people in a bran’-new house in a bran’-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new.... If they had set up a great-grandfather he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head’.

There is no Eliot passage of this kind, which has a far more ‘Cockney flavour’, as Ruskin put it, than any passage in her novels. The timber is natural at the beginning of Adam Bede:

‘A scent of pine-wood from a tent-like pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall. On a heap of those soft shavings a rough grey shepherd-dog had made himself a pleasant bed.’

In Daniel Deronda, after a highly characteristic Eliot judgement, pace Ruskin, that ‘a human life should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth’ we turn to Offendene, chosen as Gwendolen’s mamma’s home simply on account of its nearness to Pennicote Rectory.

‘The house was but just large enough to be called a mansion, and was moderately rented, having no manor attached to it, and being rather difficult to let with its sombre furniture and faded upholstery. But inside and outside it was what no beholder could suppose to be inhabited by retired tradespeople; a certainty which was worth many conveniences to tenants who not

only had the taste that shrinks from new finery, but also were in that border-territory of rank where annexation is a burning topic; and to take up her abode in a house which had once sufficed for dowager countesses gave a perceptible tinge to Mrs. Davilow's satisfaction in having an establishment of her own. This, rather mysteriously to Gwendolen, appeared suddenly possible on the death of her step-father Captain Davilow, who had for the last nine years joined his family only in a brief and fitful manner, enough to reconcile them to his long absences; but she cared much more for the fact than for the explanation. All her prospects had become more agreeable in consequence. She had disliked their former way of life, roving from one foreign watering-place or Parisian apartment to another, always feeling new antipathies to new suites of hired furniture, and meeting new people under conditions which made her appear of little importance; and the variation of having passed two years at a showy school.'

There is another passage in Daniel Deronda which describes the very different house belonging to Mrs. Meyrick.

'Mrs. Meyrick's house was not noisy; the front parlour looked on the river, and the back on gardens, so that though she was reading aloud to her daughters, the window could be left open to freshen the air of the small double room where a lamp and two candles were burning. The candles were on a table apart for Kate, who was drawing illustrations for a publisher; the lamp was not only for the reader but for Amy and Mab, who were embroidering satin cushions for "the great world".'

Outside, the house looked very narrow and shabby, the bright light through the holland blind showing the heavy old-fashioned window-frame; but it is pleasant to know that many such grim-walled slices of space in our foggy London have been, and still are the homes of a culture the more spotlessly free from vulgarity, because poverty has rendered everything like display an impersonal question, and all the grand shows of the world simply a spectacle which rouses no petty rivalry or vain effort after possession.

The Meyrick's house was a home of that kind; and they all clung to this particular house in a row because its interior was filled with objects always in the same places, which for the mother held memories of her marriage time, and for the young ones seemed as necessary and uncriticised a part of their world as the stars of the Great Bear seen from the back windows. Mrs. Meyrick had borne much stint of other matters that she might be able to keep some engravings especially cherished by her husband; and the narrow spaces of wall held a world-history in scenes and heads which the children had early learned by heart. The chairs and tables were also old friends preferred to new. But in these two little parlours with no furniture that a broker could have cared to cheapen except the prints and piano, there was space and apparatus for a wide-glancing, nicely-select life, open to the highest things in music, painting and poetry.'

Many similar passages could be quoted from George Eliot's novels, all of them revealing that when she talked of things within interiors she was primarily concerned with people - Mrs. Poyser in the first case, Gwendolen Davilow in the second and Mrs. Meyrick in the third - rather than with 'things in themselves'. The broker would not have been interested in them: the musician, the painter and the poet would. The painter to whom George Eliot would have turned first would have been Dutch, and that for reasons which were directly related to her more general attitude towards things:

'I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloude-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over a flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap and common things which are the precious necessities of life to her.'

Even 'cheap and common things' could be of limited interest to George Eliot. Indeed, it does not seem surprising that when in 1848 Robert Evans left her

£2000 in trust and household goods not already disposed of to the extent of £100, apparently at the suggestion of her lawyer £100 in cash was substituted for the household goods. It was her sister Fanny Evans who got the silver forks when their father died a year later.

Silver, for George Eliot, was a metal associated with inheritance. In Adam Bede when we move into the Rev. Adolphus Irwine's study, 'the crimson cloth over the large dining table is very threadbare', but

'on this cloth there is a massive silver waiter with a decanter of water on it, of the same pattern as two larger ones that are propped up on the sideboard with a coat of arms conspicuous in their centre. You suspect at once that the inhabitants of this room have inherited more blood than wealth, and would not be surprised to find that Mr. Irwine had a finely-cut nostril and upper lip.'

The Victorians loved 'massive silver waiters'. If they were inherited, they were hallmarked silver: if they were new they were as likely to be silver plate, invented in the early Victorian years.

There is no passage in George Eliot comparable with that of Trollope who, while sharing Eliot's dislike of listing, could occasionally introduce things very specifically and go on explicitly to draw general conclusions. 'Why doesn't What's-his-name have real silver forks?' old Mrs. Van Siever asks Mr. Musselboro, a guest at a terrible dinner party given by a *nouveau riche* in The Last Chronicle of Barset. 'What's the use?' responds Musselboro. 'Everybody has these plated things now. What's the use of a lot of capital lying dead?' 'Everybody doesn't', Mrs. Van Siever replies, 'I don't. You know as well as I do, Musselboro, that the appearance of the thing goes for a great deal. Capital isn't lying dead as long as people know that you've got it.'

Trollope himself hated this attitude as much as George Eliot would have done, but he was far more interested than she was in objects as indicators of social status. She sometimes touched, however, as he did not, on the aesthetic. 'Showy, vulgar things' did not appeal to her - as much because they were 'showy' as because they were 'vulgar'. She was also aware of 'utility'. At Munich in 1858, for example, she observed how there had been 'an immense expenditure on wax and china ornaments and the least possible outlay on basins'.

One particular category of things seems to have fascinated George Eliot, possibly despite herself, as a revealing passage near the beginning of Middlemarch suggests. 'Surely there are women in heaven now who wore jewels', Celia tells Dorothea, who gets out her mother's jewel box:

'The casket was soon open before them, and the various jewels spread out, making a bright parterre on the table. It was no great collection, but a few of the ornaments were really of remarkable beauty, the finest that was obvious at first being a necklace of purple amethysts set in exquisite gold work, and a pearl cross with five brilliants in it. Dorothea immediately took up the necklace and fastened it round her sister's neck, where it fitted almost as closely as a bracelet; but the circle suited the Henrietta-Maria style of Celia's head and neck, and she could see that it did, in the pier-glass opposite.

'There, Celia! you can wear that with your Indian muslin. But this cross you must not wear with your dark dresses.'

Celia was trying not to smile with pleasure. 'O Dodo, you must keep the cross yourself.'

'No, no, dear, no,' said Dorothea, putting up her hand with careless deprecation.

'Yes, indeed you must, it would suit you - in your black dress, now' said Celia, insistingly. 'You might wear that.'

'Not for the world, not for the world. A cross is the last thing I would wear as a trinket.' Dorothea shuddered slightly.'

Dorothea goes on to tell her sister that she had 'other things of mamma's... plenty of things', now 'all yours'.

Celia feels that Dorothea is displaying a kind of 'Puritanic toleration' in willingly offering ornaments that she herself did not choose to wear, and her feeling is justified when Dorothea, who knows that the ornaments would not suit her, nonetheless exclaims

'How very beautiful these gems are!.. It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven.'

In fact, Dorothea ends by keeping a ring and a bracelet.

Later in Middlemarch Rosamond is particularly sad to lose her jewels, but she is sad, too, 'accustomed as she is to an extravagant household', about losing her other things also. Lydgate is particularly sensitive on the point of the jewellery.

'Dover says he will take a good deal of the plate back again, and any of the jewellery we like. He really behaves very well.

"Are we to go without spoons and forks, then?" said Rosamond, whose very lips seemed to get thinner with the thinness of her utterance. She was determined to make no further resistance or suggestions.

"Oh no, dear!" said Lydgate. "But look here," he continued, drawing a paper from his pocket and opening it; "here is Dover's account. See, I have marked a number of articles, which if we returned them would reduce the amount by thirty pounds and more. I have not marked any of the jewellery." Lydgate had really felt this point of the jewellery very bitter to himself; but he had overcome the feeling by severe argument.'

Rosamond leaves the room calmly and re-enters carrying 'the leather box containing the amethysts, and a tiny ornamental basket which contained other boxes, and laying them on a chair where she had been sitting, she said, with perfect propriety in her air -

"This is all the jewellery you ever gave me. You can return what you like of it, and of the plate also. You will not, of course, expect me to stay at home tomorrow. I shall go to papa's"

There is an ambiguity about jewels in both Adam Bede and Daniel Deronda. When Hetty's landlords asks themselves why Hetty was in possession of such 'beautiful things'. they suspect the worst.

"Well," said the landlord, when Hetty had spread the precious trifles before him, "we might take 'em to the jeweller's shop, for there's one not far off; but Lord bless you, they wouldn't give you a quarter o' what the things are worth. And you wouldn't like to part with 'em?" he added, looking at her enquiringly.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Hetty hastily, "so as I can get money to go back."

"And they might think the things were stolen, as you wanted to

sell 'em," he went on; "for it isn't usual for a young woman like you to have fine jewellery like that." The blood rushed to Hetty's face with anger. "I belong to respectable folks," she said; "I'm not a thief."

"No, that you aren't, I'll be bound," said the landlady "and you'd no call to say that," looking indignantly at her husband. "The things were gev to her: that's plain enough to be seen."

"I didn't mean as I thought so," said the husband, apologetically, "but I said it was what the jeweller might think, and so he wouldn't be offering much money for em."

The ambiguity in Daniel Deronda is different, but it too has a moral dimension. Gwendolen loves 'luxury'. In a very different position from Hetty, she too is driven to pawn Rex's necklace after a bout of gambling. Daniel Deronda is a novel that opened up new territories in George Eliot's universe. In Silas Marner, however, written years before, the 'foreignness' of the pedlar in the kind of setting which was familiar to her and which she made familiar to her readers, is brought out in the fact that he might have worn ear-rings:

"Did he wear ear-rings?" Mr. Crackenthorp wished to know, having some acquaintance with foreign customs. "Well - stay - let me see," said Mr. Snell, like a docile clairvoyante, who would really not make a mistake if she could help it. After stretching the corners of his mouth and contracting his eyes, as if he were trying to see the ear-rings, he appeared to give up the effort, and said, "Well, he'd got ear-rings in his box to sell, so it's nat'ral to suppose he might wear 'em. But he called at every house, a'most in the village; there's somebody else, mayhap, saw 'em in his ears, though I can't take upon me rightly to say." 'Mr. Snell was correct in his surmise, that somebody else would remember the pedlar's ear-rings. For on the spread of inquiry among the villagers it was stated with gathering emphasis that the parson had wanted to know whether the pedlar wore ear-rings in his ears, and an impression was created that a great deal depended on eliciting of this fact. Of course, every one who heard the question, not having any distinct image of the pedlar as without ear-rings, immediately had an image of him with ear-rings, larger or smaller, as the case might be; and the image was presently taken for a vivid recollection.'

There was no ambiguity in George Eliot's attitude towards a very different category of things - books - which figure prominently in many of her novels as they did in her own life. In Adam Bede Adam's Bible is a very precious possession.

'You would have liked to see Adam reading his Bible; he never opened it on a week-day, and so he came to it as a holiday book, serving him for history, biography and poetry. He held one hand thrust between his waistcoat buttons, and the other ready to turn the pages.'

In The Mill on the Floss Maggie's complaint to Tom after the sale is over is that the books have gone.

"O Tom," she burst out, clasping her hands, "where are the books? I thought my uncle Glegg said he would buy them - didn't he? are those all they've left us?" "I suppose so," said Tom, with a sort of desperate indifference. "Why should they buy many books when they bought so little furniture?"

"Oh but, Tom," said Maggie, her eyes filling with tears, as she rushed up to the table to see what books had been rescued. "Our dear old Pilgrim's Progress that you coloured with your little paints: and that picture of Pilgrim with a mantle on, looking just like a turtle - oh dear!" Maggie went on, half sobbing as she turned over the few books. "I thought we should never part with that while we lived - everything is going away from us - the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!"

'We know not whether George Eliot has more power over tears or laughter,' wrote a reviewer of Scenes of Clerical Life, 'but as humour is a rarer quality than pathos, we are disposed to admire his [sic] humour most. It is very genuine, and not only plays like lambent flame amid the descriptions, but animates the dialogue with dramatic life.'

The comment might have been made of the sale in Middlemarch, which in a serious situation plays on jokes, not least the auctioneer's:

'Surely among all men whose vocation requires them to exhibit their powers of speech, the happiest is a prosperous provincial

auctioneer keenly alive to his own jokes and sensible of his encyclopaedic knowledge. Some saturnine, sour-blooded persons might object to be constantly insisting on the merits of all articles from bootjacks to "Berghems;" but Mr. Borthrop Trumbull had a kindly liquid in his veins; he was an admirer by nature, and would have liked to have the universe under his hammer, feeling that it would go at a higher figure for his recommendation.

'Meanwhile Mrs. Larcher's drawing-room furniture was enough for him. When Will Ladislav had come in, a second fender, said to have been forgotten in the right place, suddenly claimed the auctioneer's enthusiasm, which he distributed on the equitable principle of praising those things most which were most in need of praise. The fender was of polished steel, with much lancet-shaped open-work and a sharp edge.

"Now ladies," he said, "I shall appeal to you. Here is a fender which at any other sale would hardly be offered without reserve, being, as I may say, for quality of steel and quaintness of design, a kind of thing" - here Mr. Trumbull dropped his voice and became slightly nasal, trimming his outlines with his left finger - "that might not fall in with ordinary tastes. Allow me to tell you that by-and by this style of workmanship will be the only one in vogue - half-a-crown, you said? thank you - going for half-a-crown, this characteristic fender; and I have particular information that the antique style is very much sought after in high quarters. Three shillings - three-and-sixpence - hold it well up, Joseph! Look, ladies, at the chastity of the design - I have no doubt myself that it was turned out in the last century! Four shillings, Mr. Mawmsey? - four shillings."

"It's not the thing I would put in my drawing-room," said Mrs. Mawmsey, audibly, for the warning of the rash husband. "I wonder at Mrs. Larcher. Every blessed child's head that fell against it would be cut in two. The edge is like a knife."

"Quite true," rejoined Mr. Trumbull, quickly, "and most uncommonly useful to have a fender at hand that will cut, if you have a leather shoetie or a bit of string that needs cutting and no knife to hand: many a man has been left hanging because there was no knife to cut him down. Gentlemen, here's a fender that if you had the misfortune to hang yourselves would cut you

down in no time - with astonishing celerity - four-and-sixpence - five - five-and-sixpence - an appropriate thing for a spare bedroom where there was a four-poster and a guest a little out of his mind - six shillings - thank you, Mr. Clintup - going at six shillings - going - gone!" The auctioneer's glance, which had been searching round him with a preternatural susceptibility to all signs of bidding, here dropped on the paper before him, and his voice too dropped into a tone of indifferent despatch as he said, "Mr. Clintup. Be handy, Joseph."

"It was worth six shillings to have a fender you could always tell that joke on," said Mr. Clintup, laughing low and apologetically to his next neighbour. He was a diffident though distinguished nurseryman, and feared that the audience might regard his bid as a foolish one.'

There is more humour in this long passage from Middlemarch that I have had to quote in full than there is in the account of the auction in the chapter called 'Mrs. Tulliver's Teraphim on Household Goods' in The Mill on the Floss.

It was in the storeroom that Mrs. Tulliver kept her 'laid-up treasurers', 'the best things that were only unwrapped and brought out on special occasions'. One of her concerns is loss of status: another is the attitude of the different members of her family. Yet there is a compulsive personal element too. 'To think o' these cloths as I spun myself' going 'into strange people's houses'.

Mrs. Tulliver's possessions were very much personal possessions: even her husband had had nothing to do, for example with her silver tea pot and her sugar tongs, 'the first things I ever bought.' She entreats her family, therefore, to bid for them, and the family does not respond well:

"Well, I've no objection to buying some of the best things," said Mrs. Deane, rather loftily; "we can do with extra things in our house."

"Best things!" exclaimed Mrs. Glegg with severity, which had gathered intensity from her long silence. "It drives me past patience to hear you all talking o' best things, and buying in this, that, and the other, such as silver and chany. You must bring your mind to your circumstances, Bessy, and not be thinking o' silver and chany; but whether you shall get so much as a flock-bed to lie on, and a blanket to cover you, and a stool to sit on."

‘Mrs. Tulliver, always borne down by the family predominance of sister Jane, who had made her wear the yoke of younger sister in very tender years, said pleadingly -

‘‘I’m sure, sister, I’ve never asked anybody to do anything, only buy things as it ‘ud be a pleasure to ‘em to have, so as they mightn’t go and be spoiled i’ strange houses. I never asked anybody to buy the things in for me and my children; though there’s the linen I spun, and I thought when Tom was born - I thought one o’ the first things when he was lying i’ the cradle, as all the things I’d bought wi’ my own money, and been so careful of, ‘ud go to him.’’’

Naming came into the account here also. After Mrs. Tulliver had talked of the distress of having to sell to a stranger her teapot with the initials E.D. on it, Aunt Pullet replies:

‘‘But what’s the use o’ buying the teapot, when there’s the linen and spoons and everything else to go, and some of ‘em with your full name - and when it’s got that straight spout, too.’’

‘‘As to disgrace o’ the family,’’ said Mrs. Glegg, ‘‘that can’t be helped wi’ buying teapots. The disgrace is, for one o’ the family to ha’ married a man as has brought her to beggary. The disgrace is, as they’re to be sold up. We can’t hinder the country from knowing that.’’’

This is a very different approach to penury from that revealed in Dickens’s Dombey and Son, although in both novels appearances matter as they did profoundly in Victorian England. There is a special Eliot touch, too, to the description of the ‘new strange bareness’ after the sale when ‘folks as came ‘to buy up other folks’s things.’ Yet there is no general discussion of money, the key to most things in the narrative, as there is in Dickens.

As a historian I have never believed in ‘using’ literature to illustrate or to underline more generally accepted forms of historical evidence. I believe that it is essential to get inside novels as ‘wholes’ - Middlemarch or The Mill on the Floss or Daniel Deronda, for example - exploring the universe of the author even more fully than any other accessible universe just because it is a universe both of fact and of fantasy.

There are not many references to ‘things’ in Gordon Haight’s biography of her, but he does mention a new Broadwood piano, acquired for the drawing-

room at the Priory in 1872, 'on which the best musician could be asked to play without apology'. That year, a year of good fortune, there was also a new mirror, a newly acquired Persian rug and a new dinner service, and Lewes gave George Eliot a necklace and a brooch as New Year's gifts. In 1873 they purchased their own carriage, a beautiful new landau by Morgan, 'the ultimate badge of Victorian status.'

In all these respects George Eliot was completely 'Victorian' even down to a fur rug in the landau - and to her wish to be buried in Westminster Abbey. Haight also notes her emendation of the text of Lewes's Problems of Life and Mind which she received after his death. Where his manuscript in the section on remorse read: 'He forever sees the Eumenides in pursuit', she substituted 'Wordsworth has depicted remorse of this kind' - and quoted five good lines from The Excursion. That was a thoroughly Victorian emendation too.