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## The Twenty-Fourth George Eliot Memorial Lecture: George Eliot and The Furniture of the House of Fiction

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## THE TWENTY-FOURTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE, 1995

Delivered by Dr John Rignall, University of Warwick

### GEORGE ELIOT AND THE FURNITURE OF THE HOUSE OF FICTION

In a letter to Martha Jackson of March 1841 the young Marian Evans, at the age of twenty-one, reflects on the way that a person's immediate surroundings help determine the impression that he or she makes on others:

I suppose we are all loved (or despised) a little for the sake of our circumstances as well as for our qualities . . . . What extrinsic charm have *I*, to make people care for me a little more than my qualities might deserve? Certainly none from the landscape about me, and as little from the carpets and curtains and other recommendations of an elegant interior which have often helped to fix a man's choice of his partner for life - (for who will pretend that a woman who is reached through a spacious entrance hall with Indian matting can appear as utterly commonplace as Miss Jackson seen through the open parlour-door as you enter the passage?).<sup>1</sup>

That she should be thinking of herself in relation to carpets and curtains at this point in her life is hardly surprising, since she and her father were undergoing what she defines later in the same letter as 'one of the chief among the minor disagreeables of life, that of moving'. As she goes on to describe it, the move from Griff House to Coventry seems to be more than just a minor inconvenience:

To me it is a deeply painful incident - it is like dying to one stage of existence, henceforth nothing will have the charm of old use and wont which makes the days pass so easily - at least until novelty has merged once again into habit.

The traumatic nature of the upheaval suggests that it is not only other people's perceptions of her that are determined by her immediate surroundings, but also her understanding of her own life and her own self. There is no further mention of furniture in this letter, but we know that a week or two earlier she and her father attended a sale to buy furniture for their new house at Foleshill. So in seeing to its close one stage of her existence she was saying goodbye not only to Griff House but also to its familiar furnishings, to 'chairs and tables' which, like those of the Meyrick family in *Daniel Deronda*, 'were also old friends preferred to new', and to objects which, like theirs, were 'always in the same places . . . [and] seemed as necessary and uncriticised a part of their world as the stars of the Great Bear seen from the back windows' (Ch. 18). As that last novel reveals, she knows how the familiar objects and furniture of home can be as steady and reliable as the constellations in giving bearings to a life, and that knowledge has its likely origins in the first great upheaval of her adult life, the removal from Griff to Foleshill.

That our assessment of a character may be shaped by its surroundings, that our sense of ourselves may be partly dependent on the familiar objects about us, and that chairs and tables may be considered old friends whom it is painful to lose, all these are by now commonplace notions – commonplace because of the kind of materialist world we live in, but also perhaps because these ideas have been made familiar to us by our reading of nineteenth-century fiction. To be more precise I should probably say Victorian fiction, since it is in the middle and later decades of the century that the novel comes to pay significant attention to the material environment of individual lives, to such ordinary things as carpets and curtains, tables, chairs and sofas. Before then the house, or houses, of fiction were remarkably sparsely furnished. In Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, for example, we learn that Mr Allworthy's house is a grand building in the Gothic style and that it is 'as commodious within as venerable without' (Bk 1, Ch. 4), but what exactly is within, beyond the bed in which the foundling Tom is discovered as a baby and in which Mr Allworthy later lies ill, we are never told. Human behaviour is the principal focus of Fielding's attention and he examines it with only the barest reference to human artefacts. Sixty or so years later Jane Austen still retains Fielding's eighteenth-century taste for the abstract. When in *Persuasion* Sir Water Elliot has to rent out his family seat Kellynch Hall because he has been living beyond his means, his agent observes that 'a house was never taken good care of without a lady' and that 'a lady, without a family, was the very best preserver of furniture' (Ch. 3); but that furniture is never specified or described. All we learn is that the 'house and grounds and furniture' are soon approved by the tenants, Admiral and Mrs Croft, as they in turn are approved by Sir Walter. The idle and conceited Sir Walter's sense of himself is determined not by the familiar objects around him, nor even by his possession of a country house and estate, but pre-eminently by his title and his own good looks: 'He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy: and the Sir Walter Elliot who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion' (Ch. 1). His vanity attaches itself to physical appearance, rank and title rather than to material possessions.

*Persuasion* was published in 1818. Nearly fifty years later when Trollope presents a character who is similarly pleased with himself in *Can You Forgive Her* (1864-5), the prosperous Norfolk farmer Mr Cheesacre, he does it rather differently. Cheesacre's sense of his own worth depends on the fact that he owns his own farm, pays no rent, and does not owe sixpence to anyone. It is in these terms that he sets out his stall when he proposes to the wealthy widow Mrs Greenow: 'I'm Samuel Cheesacre of Oileymead and it's all my own, Mrs Greenow, and the half of it shall be yours if you'll take it . . . Come now, say the word.' And then he produces the final weapon in his armoury, the clinching argument: 'There ain't a bedroom in my house - not one of the front ones - that isn't mahogany furnished'. The reply is not quite what he has hoped: "'What's furniture to me?" said Mrs Greenow, with her handkerchief to her eyes' (Bk 1, Ch. 9). But of course it would have meant something to her if she had not been left a handsome fortune by her first husband, an elderly manufacturer.

Between 1818 and 1864, then, furniture does come to play a part in the world of the novel.

From its beginnings in the eighteenth century the English novel was centrally concerned with money and class in expressing and exploring the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, but it is in the nineteenth century that it comes increasingly to present individual lives in relation to the material possessions that money can buy. The house of fiction acquires its furniture in a development that seems to mimic an historical change, the process by which the sparer furnishing of the eighteenth-century house gives way to the richly cluttered Victorian interior with its profusion of plush and accumulations of bric-à-brac.

But the Victorian novel is not simply mirroring an historical shift of fashion; nor are its descriptions of furniture and interiors simply pieces of local colour or background detail to fill out the fictional canvas. Rather, what the novel is doing is exploring the changing relationship of men and women to material objects in the period in which a modern industrial and commercial society is developing. If there is a general pattern to that changing relationship in the course of the century, it is – to judge from a reading of fiction – a pattern of the increasing subordination of human lives to the material world, of the growing power exercised over men and women by the products of human labour and ingenuity. To take an extreme example – a French one – in a late nineteenth-century Naturalist novel like Zola's *Germinal* (1885), the material world is master, the man-made mine rules the lives of the mining community like an implacable deity whom no amount of human sacrifice can mollify. There may be no such dramatic examples of the dominance of the material world in English fiction, but I would like to argue that even in the work of George Eliot, a writer whose principal emphasis is moral rather than material, we may discern something of the pattern I have sketched out if we attend to the role of furniture and familiar objects in her novels. The insight advanced in that early letter with which I began is developed in interesting ways by the novelist she was to become.

Of course it is not to George Eliot that we would immediately turn if we wished to observe the increasing importance of objects and furnishing in nineteenth-century fiction, but rather to Dickens. Open any Dickens novel at random and you will soon find a passage in which a human life is conveyed through the weirdly dynamic objects that surround it, as in this scene from *Bleak House* in which the wretched life of Captain Hawdon, alias Nemo, Esther Summerson's lost father, is eloquently expressed by the furnishing of his room:

It is a small room, nearly black with soot, and grease, and dirt. In the rusty skeleton of a grate, pinched at the middle as if Poverty had gripped it, a red coke fire burns low. In the corner by the chimney, stand a deal table and a broken desk: a wilderness marked with a rain of ink. In another corner, a ragged old portmanteau on one of two chairs, serves for cabinet or wardrobe; no larger one is needed, for it collapses like the cheeks of a starved man. The floor is bare; except that one old mat, trodden to shreds of rope-yarn, lies perishing upon the hearth. (Ch. 10)

The furniture defines the man before he is seen, and with the portmanteau collapsed like

the cheeks of a starving man and the mat perishing upon the hearth. it not only describes his condition but also predicts his imminent end. The man amounts to no more than his pitiful possessions, and even they may be rented.

The way that objects and articles of furniture seem in Dickens to take on a dynamic life of their own has often been commented upon. The effect is often comic, as when Pip in *Great Expectations* is ushered into an hotel room in Covent Garden:

It was a sort of vault on the ground floor at the back, with a despotic monster of a four-post bedstead in it, straddling over the whole place. putting one of its arbitrary-legs into the fire-place and another into the doorway. and squeezing the wretched little washing stand in quite a Divinely Righteous manner. (Ch. 15)

As Dorothy van Ghent observes in a well-known article, 'the animation of inanimate objects [in Dickens] suggests both the quaint gaiety of a forbidden life and an aggressiveness that has got out of control'.<sup>2</sup> Comic, but also aggressive, these objects are no longer merely the inert servants of mankind. It is interesting and instructive to note that when Karl Marx starts to analyse the role of objects as commodities in the first volume of *Capital*, he, too, has recourse to the metaphor of animation:

The form of wood is altered when we make a table out of it. Nevertheless a wooden table remains an ordinary material thing. But as soon as it becomes a commodity it becomes a more than material thing [ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding – a material supernatural thing]. It does not simply stand with its feet on the ground, but in relation to other commodities it stands on its head and spins whimsical fantasies out of that wooden head in a more fantastical fashion than if it had begun to dance of its own accord.<sup>3</sup>

Dickens's aggressively pushy bedstead and Marx's gymnastic and fanciful table are, I would suggest, close relations. The title of the chapter in which the Marx passage occurs is 'The Fetish-Character of the Commodity and its Secret', and commodity fetishism is one aspect of the growing empire of things, a phenomenon that may be implied in some of Dickens's comically animated objects and which, as we shall see, is understood by George Eliot, although she never calls it by that name.

It is customary to distinguish between George Eliot's presentation of objects and Dickens's. Barbara Hardy, in an important essay on 'Objects and Environments in George Eliot', states that, unlike Dickens, she does not animate objects 'but presents them with full attention to the physical differences between human beings and the world of things'.<sup>4</sup> That is certainly the case, but what George Eliot also does is show how the world of things impinges on human lives, and my contention is that it does so with ever greater insistence as her work develops. The examples I am going to examine are taken from *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*. But I want to begin with that

celebrated passage from the beginning of Book Two of *Adam Bede* in which the narrator refers to the 'precious quality of truthfulness' to be found in Dutch paintings and implies that it is the same quality that is being attempted in this novel:

I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sybils, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her 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 common things which are the precious necessities of life to her. (Ch. 17)

This woman is seen in relation to objects, the spinning-wheel and the jug, and 'those cheap common things' are necessities; they are there for their usefulness not for their market-value or for the impression that they may make on an onlooker. They are certainly not commodities in the sense of Marx's table, and they have their equivalent in *Adam Bede* in the wooden vessels, red earthenware, and rust-tinged weights of Mrs Poyser's dairy.

The French critic Roland Barthes in an essay called 'The World as Object' has written pertinently about the role of objects in Dutch paintings, in a way which amplifies the point that George Eliot's narrator makes in *Adam Bede* and also has a bearing on the role of certain objects in her fiction:

Consider the Dutch still life: the object is never alone and never privileged: it is merely there, among many others, painted between one function and another, participating in the disorder of the movements which have picked it up, put it down – in a word utilized it. There are objects wherever you look . . . pots, pitchers overturned, a clutter of baskets, a bunch of vegetables . . . All this is man's space, in it he measures himself and determines his humanity . . . there is no other authority in his life but the one he imprints upon the inert by shaping and manipulating it . . . This universe of fabrication obviously excludes terror, as it excludes style. [And then he goes on to note how such paintings coat objects with a kind of glaze, a sheen, and emphasize surfaces rather than forms or ideas. From this he draws his conclusion] .... What can be the justification of such an assemblage if not to lubricate man's gaze amid his domain, to facilitate his daily business among objects whose riddle is dissolved and which are no longer anything but easy surfaces?<sup>5</sup>

There are objects which have this status in George Eliot's novels: not only the dairy in *Adam Bede*, but also, and in particular, Silas Marner's brown earthenware pot with which he fetches water from the well. This is 'his most precious utensil among the very few conveniences he had granted himself' (Ch. 2), a useful object like those in Dutch paintings, but one so precious that it seems to be the nearest thing he has to a human companion. When he accidentally stumbles and breaks it, he is grief-stricken as though he has lost a

friend or relation, and he 'stuck the bits together and propped the ruin in its old place for a memorial'. Later in the novel the narrator refers to a 'fetishism' of the hearth in relation to Silas's attitude to things (Ch. 16), but despite his fetishistic attachment to his accumulating hoard of money, he is not prey to any fetishism of the commodity. A straightforward law of emotional compensation appears to be at work in his behaviour: money and objects are only invested with emotion as long as he has no human object for his affections, and when Eppie enters his life, he becomes again someone like the woman in the Dutch painting, a person surrounded by the precious necessities of life in a world from which terror is excluded.

But terror, or at least fear and misery in relation to objects and articles of furniture, does enter George Eliot's fictional world even in the earlier novels. The painful process of moving house referred to in that early letter reappears in the fiction in a dramatically intensified form when the Tullivers are forced to sell the furniture that has made the Mill on the Floss a home. The narrator reflects with a combination of clinical insight, compassion and irony on what it means to be thus stripped bare: there is a chill air surrounding those who are down in the world and people are glad to get away from them, as from a cold room: human beings, mere men and women, without furniture, without anything to offer you' (Bk 4, Ch. 2). The person who is most affected, whose humanity, and even identity, are defined by the objects she has owned and worked on and stored for the future, is Mrs Tulliver. That 'stout, lymphatic woman . . . usually so passive' is reduced to quivering misery by the prospect of losing her linen and household effects:

Mrs Tulliver was seated there with all her laid-up treasures. One of the linen chests was open: the silver tea-pot was unwrapped from its many folds of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves; and the poor woman was shaking her head and weeping with a bitter tension of the mouth, over the mark 'Elizabeth Dodson' on the corner of some table cloths she held in her lap. (Bk 3, Ch. 2)

It is only through contemplating the loss of these articles that she can comprehend what has happened to the family, and, although a person of little imagination, she is moved to a poignant flight of fancy not by the fate of herself, her husband, or her children but by the likely fate of her linen: 'And they're all to be sold – and go into strange people's houses, and perhaps be cut with knives, and wore out before I'm dead'. The emotions would seem more appropriate to her offspring than to her possessions, but it is only through those artefacts that she has been able to understand her life and her world, and their loss leaves her completely adrift without anchor, ballast, or compass.

In *The Mill on the Floss* the emphasis is on the pain caused by the loss of the familiar furnishings of home; by the time of *Middlemarch* it is the acquisition and accumulation of such possessions that has become problematic. Of course the Lydgates, particularly Rosamond, are deeply distressed by the prospect of the enforced sale of their furniture, but

the origins of the problem go back to the debts incurred in acquiring it without much heed to the expense. Lydgate, capable of buying the most expensive dinner service on impulse, has been guilty of making a fetish of commodities: his famous 'spots of commonness' involve precisely this, a thoughtless infection by the materialism of the age. Despite his intellect and ability, he shares ordinary prejudices: 'that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling or judgement about furniture, or women . . . He did not mean to think of furniture at present: but whenever he did so, it was to be feared that neither biology nor schemes of reform would lift him above the vulgarity of feeling that there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best' (Ch. 15). That casual conflation of furniture and women is one of George Eliot's ironic thrusts at masculine superiority; and the irony of its working out in the plot lies in the fact that, although he imagines that he can select both of them with lordly control, experience will show that he can control neither. The story of the Lydgates' marriage is the story of the growing, subtle domination of the man by the woman, but also, and at the same time, of the increasing domination of the man by the material possessions to which his wife is so attached. Lydgate falls victim to his furniture, one might say, to the expanding empire of things. It is worth noting that the morally admirable Garths are unaffected by contemporary materialism, and we are told that from their house, which has an attractive 'physiognomy' of its own, 'all the best furniture had long been sold' (Ch. 24). Incidentally that same term physiognomy is used also of the Farebrothers' house, which is distinguished by not being furnished in the best modern style but rather in the old-fashioned manner of the eighteenth century (Ch. 17). Only such houses, the term physiognomy suggests, bear a positive human imprint; and the morally most admirable figures in Middlemarch society are defined by the fact that they are not bothered whether their furniture be of the best or not.

It is in *Daniel Deronda*, of course, the only novel to be set close to the author's present, that George Eliot presents her most comprehensive indictment of contemporary materialism, of the world of the affluent English upper and upper-middle class in which Gwendolen is to suffer as a prisoner and from which Deronda finally decides to escape. In his essay on 'The Philosophy of Furniture' Poe claims that in the internal decoration of their residences the English are supreme and goes on to castigate his fellow-Americans for the way in which their interiors are mere displays of wealth: 'the cost of an article of furniture has at length come to be with us, nearly the sole test of its merit in a decorative point of view'.<sup>6</sup> And he singles out two errors in particular in American interior decoration, 'glare' (too bright a light), and 'glitter' (too many mirrors). That was in 1840. By the mid 1870s when George Eliot is writing *Daniel Deronda* it seems that similar charges could be levelled against the interior decoration of the English upper class. The splendid interiors in which Gwendolen finds herself trapped in her marriage to Grandcourt are full of glare and glitter: 'then she went down, and walked about the large drawing room like an imprisoned dumb creature, not recognizing herself in the glass panels, not noting any object around her in the painted, gilded prison' (Ch. 48). She is estranged from her material surroundings, and yet at the same time their victim. It is for them, for the 'scenery of her life' which she first enjoys, that she has married Grandcourt. Here we see the human loss



of control over the world of things not from the man's point of view as with Lydgate, but from the woman's, the woman who herself is chosen to be no more than a splendid piece of furniture for Grandcourt's life. We have come a long way from Mrs Poyser's dairy and the innocent world of Dutch painting, a universe of fabrication from which terror and style were both excluded. Here there is both terror and grand style: or terror that stems from the pursuit of style. And it is significant, I think, that Gwendolen's secret terror is curiously connected to furniture and interiors. It is the panelling at Offendene that springs open to reveal the picture of the dead face and fleeing figure which strikes her with terror. And it is in the cabinet in her boudoir that she finds the small, sharp dagger, like a long willow leaf in a silver sheath, which she then locks in a drawer of her dressing case and carries about with her as a haunting emblem of her secret feelings and barely conscious intentions towards her husband. It is in her furniture that her secret terrors lie hidden.

I want to suggest, finally, that there is a larger metaphorical significance in the connection between Gwendolen's terror and the furnishings around her. Although even in *Daniel Deronda* it is still possible to lead an unmaterialistic existence like the Meyricks', 'open to the highest things in music, painting, and poetry' (Ch. 18) and anchored by pieces of furniture that are old friends, their kind of unworldliness appears both marginal and rather cloyingly precious. The real dramas of contemporary existence are lived out in a world where money and material possessions hold sway, where even *Deronda's* idealism is 'sustained by three or five per cent on capital which somebody else has battled for' (Ch. 17). In this last, challenging novel George Eliot not only connects her characters' lives with the growing British Empire overseas, but also reveals an empire that lies closer to home, the expanding empire of things.

#### Notes

1. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), I, 86.
2. Dorothy van Ghent, 'The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's', *Sewanee Review*, 58 (1950), 419-38 (419).
3. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1952), p. 83 (my translation).
4. Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (London: Peter Owen, 1982), pp. 147-73 (147).
5. *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Cape, 1982), pp. 62-73 (64).
6. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1965), XV, 101-9.