Expressive Things in Adam Bede

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EXPRESSIVE THINGS IN \textit{ADAM BEDE}\textsuperscript{1}

By Barbara Hardy

A drop of ink is the first thing in the first sentence of George Eliot’s first novel: ‘With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past.’ Like many objects in \textit{Adam Bede}, this one is more complicated than first appears. In its generalized imaging of magical creation, ritual and prophesy, it is an invocation, introducing and solemnizing the other object with which it is twinned and compared, the real drop of ink at the end of the author’s pen which has actually written this sorcerer’s ink-drop into existence: ‘This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge …’.

Two ink-drops, one impersonal and ‘single’, the other particular and the first of many, compound an elaborate creative fiat, and the movement from the first drop to the second forms a suggestive and apt paradigm of the ordinary magic of fictional transformation, as it creates an imaginative expansion from the small convex drop of ink on the pen, the tool of this author’s trade, via the sorcerer’s apparatus of ink-drop-mirror, to the large interior space of Jonathan Burge’s workshop, which contains the carpenters and the unobtrusively introduced tools of their trade – plane, hammer, screwdriver, chisel – with the objects they are making. The first drop of ink starts a move from the brilliantly self-conscious introduction of the artist to the actual work of writing the first scene, set in a workroom. The whole exercise makes a quiet, cunning, democratic and wonderfully unsentimental link between three acts of making, the sorcerer’s, the novelist’s and the carpenter’s – apparently but not actually in that order, because in this narrative conjuring trick the writer’s ink-drop precedes but also succeeds the sorcerer’s. That significant ‘single’ shows the artist’s playful awareness of what she is doing, and ‘roomy’ describes the ink-drop on her pen as well as the workshop. George Eliot’s creativity is self-delighting, as it embodies knowledge and thought in dynamic, affective and sensuous forms.

The things in the narrative introduction and in the workshop, the tools (pen, plane, hammer, screw, and others unnamed) and the objects being made (novel, carved shield, door, and others undesignated), are part of a formal but discreet presentation of narrator and workmen. The fictional characters are variously and sufficiently introduced through their making: Adam’s skilled carving of a shield, Seth’s forgetfulness about door-panels, and the plane, screwdriver and hammer thrown down by the three other men on the first stroke of six. The writer’s ink-drop is a powerful nonce object (though with links beyond this novel to Marian Evans’s actual pens and several fictional ones),\textsuperscript{2} but the carpenter’s tools and work turn up in later scenes: Adam makes two coffins and a firescreen, and promises to mend a spinning-wheel; Arthur remembers making superfluous thread-reels and round boxes when he was a boy being taught carpentry by Adam; in a second moment of absent-mindedness, Seth forgets a basket of tools which is picked up by Adam and dropped before he attacks Arthur in the wood; Seth is making a workbox for Dinah, just before Lisbeth mentions her attachment to Adam, but we never see him finishing or giving it. The metaphor of carpentry flows into idiolect and sociolect: ‘You don’ see such women turned off the wheel every day’ (ch. 14).

My next object is a key, a common domestic object used unobtrusively and familiarized: it is introduced when trustworthy Adam shuts the workshop and hands its key to his employer’s
housekeeper, and appears when Hetty Sorrel takes a key from her pocket to open a drawer, first said to contain wax candles, matches, a shilling mirror with a red frame and cheap gilt earrings, and later on, expensive jewellery. A key is part of Hetty’s secret ego-ritual, and performs an even more emphatic function when used by Lisbeth Bede to lock the revered and cleansed chamber where her husband’s corpse is laid out. Her large bedchamber key, opening chapter 10, and mentioned three times, plays a part in a ritual in which common articles are sacred objects, even household gods: a long-reserved ‘little store of bleached linen’ is put to a ‘supreme use’, a small window is ‘darkened with a fair white sheet’, and a chequered bed-curtain is mended, to respect the deathbed. The ritual is reinforced as it is reversed in Lisbeth’s kitchen, where unusual dirt and disorder are negatively significant, and may remind us that the novel’s epigraph is from Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, where Margaret’s ‘Ruined Cottage’, after the desertion of her husband, ‘bespake the sleepy hand of negligence’, and whose kitchen ‘floor […] neither dry nor neat’, ‘comfortless’ hearth, ‘dim windows and scattered books’, George Eliot recalled. The key is an object mutedly present on the surface of the novel, once or twice rising into a significance which in memory or re-reading activates less conspicuous members of the object-set.

Lisbeth’s rituals of bereavement also activate different objects. The shelves Thias Bede has made and put up, and the plates Lisbeth fears a future daughter-in-law will break, are sacred objects in rites of bereavement, marriage, family, housekeeping, souvenir and donation. They are individuated, appropriate to their fictional environments and experiences, but part of an anthropology which is probably both conscious and unconscious. Like the tools of Adam’s trade, they are reinforced by the domestic imagery of Lisbeth’s idiolect, also drawn from experience and environment, part proverb, part invention: an old coat fit only to patch another one, ‘one side o’ the scissors’ without the other, a knife-haft without a blade, a bridge broken at one end, crowded together in lamentation, metaphors of marvellously affective substance.

Clocks and watches, like keys, sustain meanings across time. In Chapter 13 Arthur tells Hetty his watch is ‘too fast’, in one of many instances of subdued but cumulative significance, and it is one of many timepieces – like day-clocks, eight-day clocks and the church clock – in a novel where time is important and often conspicuous in the representation of the agricultural year, and of class-time. It is a sign of Hetty’s class-innocence and carelessness that she forgets the difference between gentry time and farmer’s time, as Mrs Poyser, the farmer’s wife, does not. And of course the constant reminders of clock and calendar are also important for the reader’s realisation and expectant countdown of processes and progressions in seduction and pregnancy.

Arthur’s watch plays its role in the drama, social psychology and morality of donation: he gives it to Adam for Dinah, and it is a good present, unlike most of his patronizing, seductive, compensatory, transactional and self-congratulatory gifts: the penknife he gives, as insensitive but repentant boy, to compensate the old gardener whose dinner he has deliberately knocked over, the silver coins archly given for Totty to put in her pocket, the locket and earrings he gives Hetty, all gifts which look for gifts again; an ironic redeeming exception is the ruler he gives Adam, as an admiring grateful boy, which Adam treasures. The watch is a paradigm of the perfect present, given in pure generous gratitude that asks for no return, and like the ruler, something of real use to the recipient: Arthur tells Adam, whom he sensitively chooses as surrogate donor, that he knows Dinah will use it, and we know why, and in the end see her do
so, when it has become a good souvenir, not a mere souvenir. Other objects in George Eliot’s suggestively assimilated *Essai sur le don* are a chest of drawers which Adam makes for Hetty but never gives her, and the workbox, assembled from pieces of turned wood, which Seth never gives Dinah, and perhaps never finishes. The watch is another item in the apparently or temporarily superficial record of ordinary things, one of a series, not always asserting significance, but coming to make a mark.

My last object belongs to the large and necessary class of clothing, important for all the characters, and plays a subtle part in the anthropology of souvenirs, and a vital one in the tragic action. It is Hetty’s little pink silk neckerchief. This article is mentioned three times. It first appears in the Hermitage, Arthur’s ironically named Gothic retreat, where expecting Adam’s return after the discovery and the fight, he looks for it, or some other give-away sign of his tryst, in the room furnished with a chair, a desk, candles, a wastepaper basket (into which Arthur thrusts the neckerchief, hiding a clue in a cruelly ironic and synecdochic action), an ottoman (twice mentioned and never emphasized), and a hunting flask (Arthur is flushed with drink when Adam finds him in the wood with Hetty), a kit of economical, basic and expressive properties for a theatre of seduction (Chapter 28). Hetty’s neckerchief is a plot indicator, a characteristic adornment, a muted but unmistakable clue to seduction, and a bitter personal souvenir. Like the keys and watches it is assimilated to the surface of ordinary things as it is accompanied by similar though different and distinct articles of dress, the red kerchief of Dolly, Mr Burge’s housekeeper, Lisbeth’s buff neckerchief, and three other kerchiefs worn by Hetty, the pink and white neckerchief tucked into her bodice in the dairy scene with Arthur, registered through his eyes as they take in her ‘lovely contour’, the white kerchief taken off before her dressing-up private performance before her mirror in stays, earrings and black scarf, and the white gauze kerchief worn to cover neck and bosom for day-wear at the Coming of Age celebration. In every case, the size, colour and material are socially significant, but in the last, the object is more complexly expressive.

On its last appearance, ‘Another Meeting in the Wood’ (Chapter 48), when Arthur retrieves it from the waste-paper basket, the erotically charged article changes its name, and (twice) becomes ‘a little pink silk handkerchief’, the author having removed the word ‘neck’, which often includes or implies the breasts, as in that ‘lovely contour’. The revision almost but not quite transforms the handkerchief into what Henry James, in chapter 22 of *The Spoils of Poynton*, calls a ‘little melancholy, tender tell-tale’ thing. George Eliot almost but not quite romanticizes memory in deference to a repentant Arthur, and perhaps to cool the erotic excitement a little – to cool but not to censor. In Chapter 28 she has aroused our attention, with a brilliant example of the sexual charge that can be an advantage of Victorian reticence. No need to remove Hetty’s neckerchief lingeringly or rip it off; no need to bed the lovers on the ottoman. The things are very expressive, because George Eliot has thoroughly imagined the scenes and acts for which they provide the necessary furniture. She has represented an extreme of human animation by isolating the inanimate, in eloquent metonymy. She makes us imagine, and remember. The erotic charge has put us in touch with brute reality, and even at the end, still bluntly curbs romantic suggestion.

The objects in this novel populate the realistic surface of social life; they classify and analyse, implicitly and often unconsciously, features and functions of art, consumption, luxury, souvenir
and donation; and they are indicators of character and environment, forming the social shell which shapes whatever we mean by the self. Character is inseparable from the physical and cultural objects which register class, wealth, education, taste, and values. There is the Rector’s study with the large glass goldfish bowl on a scagliola pillar, silver coffee-pot, and volume of Aeschylus, where collocation, as well as each separate item, is expressive, and Arthur’s fine linen, hunting-flask, whip, silk sling, and books he admires (Thomas Moore’s *Zeluco*), does not admire (Wordsworth’s share in *The Lyrical Ballads*), finds exciting but does not fully understand (‘The Ancient Mariner’) and neglects (Greek tragedy). Mrs Poyser has the perfect dairy, good food scrupulously and proudly served, homespun linen, ironing board, bluebag, spinning wheel, and jugs which will not last forever. Creative Adam has actual and virtual carpentry, like the screen for the Squire’s daughter which the Squire thinks over-priced and a projected kitchen cabinet with gadgets. Hetty has her clothes and ornaments. Dinah’s austere garments and her bible lay bare her attempt to be free of luxuries, and as far as possible, of commodities and commodification.

The plot importance of objects in this novel is minimal: the handkerchief is not important like Desdemona’s in *Othello*, and does not give away the lovers’ secret to Adam or the reader, and though the expensive locket that falls from Hetty’s broken rustic beads is scrutinized by Adam, whose social ignorance of commodity is touching, it is not what gives away Hetty’s clandestine love. The exceptions are Dinah’s name in Hetty’s pocket book, which establishes Hetty’s identity to investigators of the infanticide, and the bible Lisbeth cannot read, with its pictured angel like Dinah, which she can read, as an image of human love, which it promotes.

Links with other novels and with George Eliot’s life are the pen and the key, both important in *Middlemarch*, a kindly offered but rejected phial of smelling salts, first appearing in similar circumstances for ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’, and later, more grandly and movingly, as a vinaigrette in *Felix Holt*; the quaker-like garb worn by Dinah and assumed by Hetty, anticipating the ritual clothing deliberated by Dorothea Casaubon and Mrs Bulstrode; the two broken jugs in the Poyser kitchen, socially generalized in a reference to brown jugs in Dutch painting, and humble ancestors of Silas Marner’s beloved brown jug, which is serviceable, companionable, broken, lamented, mended and preserved as a sacred object. (It may have played a part in the genesis of Henry James’s less benign golden bowl.) Objects make the surfaces and the symbolism, casually present, suggestive, or teeming with signification.

Thackeray’s worldly woman Lady Kew tells cynical Edith Newcome, beginning to know herself, the world, and herself in the world, that ‘you belong to your belongings’ (*The Newcomes*, ch. 32). Madame Merle, the worldly woman in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*, asks innocent Isobel Archer, beginning to know herself, the world, and herself in the world, ‘Where does the self begin, where does it end?’ Madame Merle answers her own question when, like Lady Kew, she insists that the individual self does not exist in isolation but flows into surrounding objects and then flows back again: ‘we’re each of us a cluster of appurtenances’ and ‘these things are all expressive’ (ch. 19). Like Thackeray, James and all novelists who reflect and reflect on psychological and social life, George Eliot shows the two-way animating and reifying flow as enabling, enlarging, constricting, repressing, polluting, cleansing, destructive, creative, and inevitable.

33
The humanity in her novels is inextricable from the environment of objects. Humanity and objects are analysed and generalized, but because they are imagined and written by an artist, not a sociologist or an anthropologist, they are particularized and endowed with sensuous and affective power.

Notes

1. The essay is a revised and expanded version of a talk given at the *Adam Bede* conference at the Institute of English studies, University of London, in November 2009.


4. For further discussion see Barbara Hardy ‘Objects in Novels’, *Genre* (Winter 1977); republished in *Narrators and Novelists*, Harvester, 1987.