

Household Clearances in Victorian Fiction

David Trotter

The deathbed apart, there are few more scenes more profoundly disturbing in nineteenth-century fiction than household clearance, or the process of ‘selling up’: the identification of domestic material goods for sale at auction, either *in situ*, or elsewhere. Of course, we shouldn’t be surprised by this, if the Victorians took the idea of home anything like as seriously as they made out. How could such a violation or wilful sacrifice of domesticity *not* be profoundly disturbing? But I want to argue that scenes of household clearance in nineteenth-century fiction possess a density and an edge which exceeds any shock they might have administered to the sensibilities of the house-proud. Such scenes expose to critical view an aspect of existence otherwise generally understood, then as now, not to require or to benefit from illumination. My aim here is firstly to demonstrate their pervasiveness in the work of some very well known writers; and secondly, to put forward an explanation for the imaginative charge they carry which runs counter to a strong emphasis in the current understanding of nineteenth-century fiction’s perspective on a newly abundant material culture.

I

Some Household Clearances

Robert Braithwaite Martineau’s *The Last Day in the Old Home* (1862) shows a feckless young blood and his son and heir raising a glass of champagne in a final toast to better times, while his wife and daughter stare gloomily into space and his mother (the only member of the family prepared to face facts) hands the butler a five-pound note (see fig. 1). There is a Christie’s catalogue on the floor, and lot numbers on the furniture. In the hallway visible through the open door, an auctioneer’s clerk examines a suit of armour. The miniature case in the rake’s left hand and the picture of a racehorse propped against the wall indicate that



Fig. 1 Robert Braithwaite Martineau (1862), *The Last Day at the Old Home* (<http://www.tate.org.uk>)

the turf has been his undoing. The literary representation of such eventualities was by no means restricted to the households of the minor aristocracy. Even more striking, by contrast, as we shall see, was its lack of moralism.

In Chapter 17 of *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), Thackeray describes the sale by auction of the possessions of John Sedley, a City of London merchant who has gone bankrupt. The chapter begins with Thackeray, in Bunyanesque mood, contemplating the moral to be drawn from the advertisements for sale by auction which at that time covered the entire back page of *The Times*. Here is an example, from *The Times* of 10 March 1847 (the part of the novel containing Chapter 17 appeared in *Punch* in May 1847):

Bedford row.

MESSRS. DEBENHAM and STORR will SELL by AUCTION, upon the Premises, 11, Chapel-street, Bedford row. To morrow, March 11. at 12. by order of the Executors of the late Miss Burrows, all the capital HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, a handsome rosewood drawing room suite in blue damask, comprising chairs, sofa, card, loo, and occasional tables, what-nots, and Davenport, Brussels carpets, or-moulu suspending lamp, noble chimney and pier glasses, two superior Spanish mahogany pedestal sideboards, (one of them with plate-glass door and back,) a set of mahogany extending dining tables, an eight-feet Spanish mahogany winged wardrobe, handsome toilet and wash stands with marble top, four-post and French bedsteads, and suitable bedding, numerous kitchen requisites, cut glass, china, &c. may be viewed on the day previous to and on the morning of sale, when catalogues may be obtained upon the premises; of Mr. Handisyde, 55. Lamb's Conduit-street; and of Messrs. Debenham and Storr, auctioneers and valuers, King-street, Covent-garden.¹

All that remains of Miss Burrows is the faint trace of the meaning these objects might once vividly have held for her, and the auctioneer's insinuating prose (a *handsome* rosewood drawing-room suite, two *superior* Spanish mahogany pedestal sideboards) does its level best to rub that out. Even so, who, Thackeray asks, witnessing 'this sordid part of the obsequies of a departed friend', could fail to feel 'some sympathies and regrets'?²

Still, pathos (or moral enquiry) was by no means all he was after. The melancholic rumination on advertisements gives way to a much spikier account of the goings-on in a house which could be any house whose owner has died recently, or lost a lot of money, including the Sedley mansion in Russell Square:

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How changed the house is, though! The front is patched over with bills, setting forth the particulars of the furniture in staring capitals. They have hung a shred of carpet out of an upstairs window – a half dozen of porters are lounging on the dirty steps – the hall swarms with dingy guests of Oriental countenance, who thrust printed cards into your hand and offer to bid. Old women and amateurs have invaded the upper apartments, pinching the bed-curtains, poking into the feathers, shampooing the mattresses, and clapping the wardrobe drawers to and fro (VF 201).

There is a new energy in the writing here. Something has stirred within Thackeray's elegiac tone, so that he expands abruptly into vicious contempt: 'the hall swarms with dingy guests of oriental countenance, who thrust printed cards into your hand and offer to bid'. That the contempt so palpably feeds off racial hatred might indicate that its source is not readily identifiable. Two years after this instalment of the novel was published, Thackeray's friend Lady Blessington had to sell up, ignominiously. He couldn't resist taking a look:

I have just come away from a dismal sight – Gore House full of Snobs looking at the furniture – foul Jews, odious bombazeen women who drove up in mysterious flies wh. they had hired, the wretches, to be fine as to come in state to a fashionable lounge – Brutes keeping their hats on in the kind old drawing-rooms – I longed to knock some of 'em off: and say Sir be civil in a lady's room.³

The contempt, sharpened by personal allegiance, is now all-embracing. Indeed, it barely stops short of fury. What exactly has provoked it?

In the novel, if not the letter, Thackeray's description of what happens when a person's worldly goods are prepared for auction is unrelentingly particular. This is a household turned inside out for inspection, laid bare in its material being; indeed, understood as matter. And it's hard not to sense, at the same time as the fierce moral indignation, a certain relish. Thackeray may not like the invasive bargain-hunters, who pinch bed-curtains, poke pillows, prod ('shampoo') mattresses, and clap wardrobe drawers to and fro; but he likes describing their penetration into the very substance of objects customarily rendered to all intents and purposes invisible by habitual use. He enjoys as a writer the brutality he deplores as a moralist. Whatever may have motivated it, the description seems utterly unforgiving. It is hard to see how there could be any redemption for those who pinch and prod, or keep their hats on in kind old drawing-rooms. Indeed, so intense is the feeling produced in him by the spectacle that Thackeray, in the novel at any rate, draws back a little from it. For

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the resumption of the narrative, in a lengthy account of the sale of the Sedley family's possessions, cherished and uncherished, does at least hold out the hope that something may yet be saved from the wreckage. Chapter 17 of *Vanity Fair* is entitled 'How Captain Dobbin Bought a Piano'. Buy he does: Amelia Sedley's, which he will restore to her, without advantage to himself, as soon as he gets the chance (VF 221-3). We could even say that narrative itself, by resuming and getting purposefully forward, and thus demonstrating that purpose is conceivable (in literature if not always in life), gets the novel out of the hole into which too bleak a description has dug it.

II

Some Theories

How might we explain what is revealed in and through scenes of household clearance? It would seem to be a topic tailor-made for object studies, or 'thing-theory'. In such scenes, objects predominate. But I am not convinced that thing-theory can help us here. What troubles me about that mode of enquiry is its ineradicable preoccupation with subjectivity.

Object studies could be said to take its bearings from Max Weber's claim, in an essay of 1916, that 'culture will come when every man knows how to address himself to the inanimate simple things of life. A pot, a cup, a piece of calico, a chair [...]'. To address oneself to the simple things of life, Weber goes on, is at once to touch them lovingly and to see them with a 'penetrating' eye; in seeing them, we see ourselves. 'What first reads like the effort to accept things in their physical quiddity', Bill Brown has observed of Weber's thesis, 'becomes the effort to penetrate them, to see through them, and to find [...] within an object [...] the subject'. For Brown, it would seem that the subject is all there is to find 'within' objects. The texts he discusses in his study of the 'object matter' of American literature are texts which 'ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies'.⁴

Object studies, thus conceived, has both an historical and a phenomenological or psychoanalytic dimension. Among the theorists Brown has in mind as discoverers of the subject in objects are Heidegger, Lacan, and Bachelard.

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Peter Schwenger, in his book about melancholy and physical objects in literature and painting, adds Sartre, Blanchot, and Baudrillard to the list. Schwenger's topic is the distinctive feeling generated in and by the subject's perception of an object. 'This perception, always falling short of full possession, gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately *for* the subject'. Failing to grasp the object fully, even as we perceive it, we fail to grasp ourselves as fully perceiving subjects. The subject's 'embodiedness in the world' will never achieve even that 'degree of focus' which perception grants the object. Out of that failure, Schwenger concludes, arises the melancholy which has proved the stimulus to so much still-life art and literature, as well as to the activities of collecting, classification, and connoisseurship.⁵

Thackeray, contemplating the back page of *The Times*, with its serried catalogues of objects in limbo, grows melancholic. But at the moment when he begins to imagine a particular household turned inside out by the prospect of auction, his mood alters. What arouses him now are the consequences of a ferocious pinching and poking. The attention he devotes to the pinching and poking is as little melancholic as the activity itself. We could say that he has held melancholy back, for Dobbin's subsequent purchase of the piano. Melancholy belongs to narrative. The description of household clearance yields some other feeling altogether.

By contrast to the phenomenological or psychoanalytic approach, the historicist approach emphasises the reader's attribution of social and political meaning to objects the literary text invites her or him at once to look at (by describing them in detail) and to overlook (by doing no more than describe them). Elaine Freedgood has recently argued that many of these objects, although inconsequential in the text's 'rhetorical hierarchy', turn out to have been 'highly consequential in the world in which the text was produced'. Her primary example is the 'old mahogany' furniture which Jane Eyre installs in Moor House, the home of the Rivers siblings, who have taken her in after her departure from Thornfield. Understood in historical context, Freedgood claims, the mahogany tells a story of 'imperial domination' strikingly at odds with the novel's 'manifest narrative', from which empire is expunged by Bertha Mason's suicide.⁶ Jane Eyre's furniture, then, which the novel's 'manifest narrative' at once looks at and overlooks, had a hidden social and political meaning. But for whom? What subject, melancholy or otherwise,

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what set of anxieties about empire, is to be found ‘within’ the old mahogany? To that question, which her own argument everywhere raises, Freedgood has no answer. It’s a shame, perhaps, that Miss Burrows, proud possessor of ‘two superior Spanish mahogany pedestal sideboards (one of them with plate-glass door and back)’ and an ‘eight-feet Spanish mahogany winged wardrobe’, did not quite live long enough to read *Jane Eyre*. Thackeray, a connoisseur of the back page of *The Times*, could easily have incorporated such specification, and with it a hint of social and political meaning, into the account he gave of household clearance in *Vanity Fair*. He chose instead to think about mattresses and wardrobes in general, and what might happen to them when inspected vigorously. No more than melancholy do the histories of deforestation and slavery appear to be the point of the account.

III

Genre as Context

Freedgood is right, I think, to conceive of a ‘rhetorical hierarchy’ which largely determines what the reader can or cannot make out of the objects a novel both looks at and overlooks. But rather than use an historical knowledge of the production of an object or substance in order to unsettle the hierarchy which has (in theory) hitherto obscured its significance, we should investigate the history of the formation of that hierarchy: that is, the history of the development of the novel as a genre. Under what generic conditions have objects appeared as objects in the literary text? And did that appearance, at its most complete, depend upon a fundamental re-ordering of the elements of fiction?

‘Narrate or Describe?’ Georg Lukács asked, in an essay of 1936 which charts the novel’s sorry decline into Naturalism, from Scott and Balzac to Flaubert, Zola, and beyond. Lukács understood that decline as a re-ordering of the elements of fiction, to the point where description predominated over narrative. Revising this account slightly, we could say that Naturalist doctrine encouraged a particular kind of description, of a more or less de-populated environment, of objects without (or so it might seem) a subject. A predominance of description of that kind could be thought to affect adversely the novel’s capacity to articulate meaning and value. ‘Narration establishes proportions,’ Lukács observed, ‘description merely levels’.⁷

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Where there is proportion — one person understood in relation to another, person and environment conceived as foreground and background — there can be meaning. Where there is meaning, there can be value (moral, social, political). I want to retain Lukács's distinction, even though the tendency among theorists now is to insist that description too narrates.⁸

Lukács, as we have seen, located the fall into description somewhere between Balzac and Flaubert. But Henry James was surely not the first, and has not been the last, to marvel at Balzac's passion for things, for 'bric-à-brac'. For Balzac, James wrote, 'mise-en-scène' mattered as much as 'event'.⁹ Mise-en-scène, or description, was the mode in which objects without a subject began to appear, on a grand scale, in the literary text. It is not that there are no things in eighteenth-century fiction. It is rather that the things there are there lack physical or sensuous texture.¹⁰ They are not described in the sort of detail which would enable them to emerge as objects (relatively speaking) without a subject.

In eighteenth-century fiction, objects emerge as objects in and through the temporary suspension of narrative. Narrative's failure to establish proportion, for whatever reason, creates an opportunity for a performance of levelling. Heroes and heroines who have been brought low by misfortune or miscalculation, who are at an impasse, about whom there is for the moment nothing further to say, often find themselves in the company of objects whose existence does not depend on whether or not they have attracted that young person's attention. As the protagonists sink, so the novel sinks with them, from narrative to description. And those objects — described in detail, with full regard for physical, sensuous texture — are, more often than not, objects in a state of disrepair or decay: they have themselves been levelled. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, contemplating the shipwreck which he alone has survived, remarks that the only sign he ever saw of his dead comrades was 'three of their Hats, one Cap, and two Shoes that were not Fellows'.¹¹ Not a great deal of sensuous texture there, perhaps; but Crusoe has observed the shoes closely enough to know that they are not fellows. Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe, after escaping from the brothel in which she had been raped, ends up in a bailiff's house, under arrest for debt, in surroundings so sordid that Belford cannot resist describing them to Lovelace in almost sumptuous detail.¹²

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Protagonists brought low in this fashion would have to include Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), whose lengthy visit to her family in Portsmouth, in Chapter 46, forces her to acknowledge that her life has reached an impasse. Fanny feels the loss of Mansfield Park's moral and physical comforts acutely. She expects to hear at any moment that Edmund Bertram, the man she loves, has engaged himself to Mary Crawford, while Henry Crawford, a man she does not love, courts her assiduously. Austen renders this impasse by ceasing to tell us what is going on in her head, and instead showing us what she sees:

She felt that she had, indeed, been three months there; and the sun's rays falling strongly into the parlour, instead of cheering, made her still more melancholy, for sun-shine appeared to her a totally different thing in a town and in the country. Here, its power was only a glare, a stifling, sickly glare, serving but to bring forward stains and dirt that might otherwise have slept. There was neither health nor gaiety in sunshine in a town. She sat in a blaze of oppressive heat, in a cloud of moving dust; and her eyes could only wander from the walls marked by her father's head, to the table cut and notched by her brothers, where stood the tea-board never thoroughly cleaned, the cups and saucers wiped in streaks, the milk a mixture of motes floating in thin blue, and the bread and butter growing every minute more greasy than even Rebecca's hands had first produced it. Her father read his newspaper, and her mother lamented over the ragged carpet as usual, while the tea was in preparation – and wished Rebecca would mend it; and Fanny was first roused by his calling out to her, after humphing and considering over a particular paragraph – ‘What's the name of your great cousins in town, Fan?’¹³

What ‘brings forward’ stains and dirt that might otherwise have slept on unnoticed is the frustration of narrative desire: of Fanny's desire for Edmund, of the reader's desire for the crystallising event. There is melancholy here, to be sure, as Fanny's eyes ‘wander’ from one stain to another. But it is not a melancholy provoked by the stains themselves, which are too much the outcome of other people's habitual actions, and other people's habitual feelings about those actions, for Fanny to find herself in them.

Fanny's eyes level down to matter or stuff already levelled down to the point where there is no proportion in it any longer. The hiatus is soon at an end. Austen, feeling, perhaps, on her own part, and on our part, that narrative desire has been frustrated for long enough, supplies an event. The butter is not a moment greasier before Mr Price broadcasts the news of Henry Crawford's elopement with Maria

Rushworth. Edmund is free again! Fanny will be able to resume immediately the 'active indispensable employment' she craves.

These examples from Defoe, Richardson and Austen make me want to insist on the negative function of a certain kind of description: the description — itself a levelling down — of objects levelled down to matter or stuff. Such descriptions are a description of the world as it will be like when we are no longer here to see it (when for us there is no longer any narrative desire to be frustrated). They oblige us to conceive the indifference of a subject to objects which are already indifferent to it. They are prospective, and therefore not melancholic. The prospect excludes meaning and value.

A distinction I have found useful in addressing that mutual indifference of subject is that drawn by Martin Heidegger, in his major contribution to aesthetic theory 'The Origin of the Work of Art', and subsequently redrawn by Fredric Jameson, in an essay on the work of Raymond Chandler which revises Heidegger from a late-Marxist perspective, between World and Earth, or History and Matter.¹⁴ According to Jameson, World/History constitutes the 'ensemble of acts and efforts' whereby human beings have attempted to extract meaning from the 'limits and constraints' of their environment.¹⁵ Hubert Dreyfus has described it as a 'cultural paradigm' whose function is to unify the 'scattered practices' of a group and to hold them up to the members of that group as 'coherent possibilities for action'.¹⁶ In Heidegger's view, the work of art serves that function: he has in mind the Greek temple. Dreyfus also adduces Clifford Geertz's Balinese cock-fight. Each represents a method or model in and through which an abstract or general knowledge can be organised which explains us to ourselves. It is the temple, Heidegger says, which 'first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny'.¹⁷ The function of the cock-fight, Geertz concludes, 'is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves'.¹⁸ Meanwhile Earth, Jameson continues, is everything meaningless in our surroundings, everything which 'betrays the resistance and inertia of sheer Matter as such'.¹⁹ 'A stone', Heidegger observes, 'is worldless'. It remains forever 'undisclosed and unexplained'. 'Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it'.²⁰ Earth/Matter should be understood as a

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term for that which cannot be assimilated into paradigmatic meaning, for that which fails to explain us to ourselves: for finitude, contingency, death.

What Jameson takes from Heidegger, and I take from him, is that these two dimensions of our experience of reality are ‘radically incommensurable’; and that the task (of philosophy, of art, of politics) is not to heal this fundamental rift, but to exacerbate it and hold it open. Earth/Matter is not passive, but comes about precisely as that which cannot be generalised from, as anti-system to World/History’s system. At the very moment when we have become convinced that the World is all World, art discloses the Earth within it, alien and inseparable; by the same token, at the very moment when we become convinced that the Earth is all Earth, art discloses the World within it, alien and inseparable. It is the first of these disclosures which is my primary topic here. That the stones lying around in art, philosophy, and politics might be worldless is of course an illusion. They are there for a purpose. They carry the potential to explain us to ourselves. By declaring the stone worldless, in an essay on the origin of the work of art, Heidegger decisively worlds it. But we none the less need to believe that some at least of the stones arranged in works of art, philosophy, and politics have not been put there for a purpose, that they do not explain us to ourselves. We need that illusion as badly, I shall argue, as we need that other more honorific illusion, of meaning and value.

My aim in what remains of this essay is to map Lukács’s distinction between proportionate narrative and levelling description onto Heidegger’s distinction between World and Earth. Narrative binds together pieces of Earth into a World. Description unbinds this World-construction, so that all that remains is pieces of Earth. The novel as a genre both binds and unbinds.

IV

Commodity Fetishism

With Balzac, James said, the book fills up with things. But what kinds of things? There are, to be sure, descriptions in the nineteenth-century novel after Balzac of the equivalent of pairs of shoes that don’t match, where the not matching is the point, and streaky cups and saucers, where the streakiness is the point. But there are also descriptions, by the yard, of arrays of objects whose significance is not in doubt: for

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example, of objects which stand forth primarily in and through their potential exchange-value. The social and cultural transformation which above all made new work for description was the establishment in nineteenth-century life and literature of the commodity as the object *par excellence*. Novels began to fill up with commodities.

The objects described in detail in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century novels are often objects laid low by accident or neglect. A commodity, by contrast, is an object raised in and through its preparedness for exchange — its abstraction from the sensuous human activity of which it is the product — to the status of an idea. Marx's chapter on commodity-fetishism in *Das Kapital* defines commodification as a form of transcendence:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was.²¹

Studies of nineteenth-century commodity culture have taught us that the commodity stands forth as commodity, in shop-window, exhibition hall, and novel alike, by reason of its self-transcendence. According to Thomas Richards, the Great Exhibition of 1851 demonstrated 'once and for all that the capitalist system had not only created a dominant form of exchange but was also in the process of creating a dominant form of representation to go along with it'.²² Commodification turned things into signs. Object studies has on the whole sought to distance itself, in its concern for the objectness of objects, from such accounts of the 'culture of consumption'.²³ But we may need to return to them if we are to understand the objectness of the objects on view in a household clearance, objects, I shall argue, at once newly consumable and already beyond consumption.

Andrew Miller has argued that *Vanity Fair* imagines more thoroughly than any other Victorian novel the 'fetishistic reduction of the material environment to commodities, to a world simultaneously brilliant and tedious, in which value is produced without reference either to the needs or to the hopelessly utopian desires of characters'. According to Miller, Thackeray's main interest lay in the stimulus

provided by the display of private possessions at public auction to the recirculation not only of wealth but of 'significance'. Jos Sedley's 'significance' certainly suffers some recirculation when a portrait of him on an elephant is put up for sale, and eventually knocked down for half a guinea, amid much ribaldry, to Rawdon and Becky Crawley (see fig. 2). There is a reduction here from one kind of significance to another, from cherished possession to mere commodity. In theory, it is possible to restore value and meaning to objects thus reduced by means of moral action. Some young stockbrokers buy back 'one dozen well-manufactured silver spoons and forks at per oz., and one dozen dessert ditto ditto' on Mrs Sedley's behalf; while Captain Dobbin, hopelessly in love with Amelia Sedley, fiancée of his best friend and



Fig. 2 William Makepeace Thackeray, 'An Elephant for Sale', illustration from *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847-8)

fellow-officer George Osborne, bids, as we have seen, for her piano. As Miller points out, objects can gain a 'lonely meaning' for Thackeray's characters through 'an allegorical process in which they seem to prefigure a distant realm of satisfaction'. However, such 'libidinal' transcendence of an object's commodity-status rarely proves anything other than a delusion.²⁴ When Amelia learns, many years later, that it was Dobbin who bought the piano on her behalf, not George Osborne, as she had always supposed, it at once ceases to have any value for her (VF 758-9).

I'm not sure that 'libidinal' quite covers the nature and extent of Mrs Tulliver's emotional investment in her silver tea-pot, in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), but there's a kind of loneliness to that too which the novel explores during an extended account of the consequences of Mr Tulliver's bankruptcy. The Tullivers will have to sell up, and the chapter entitled 'Mrs Tulliver's Teraphim, or Household Gods' shows her seated in the store-room inspecting 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.²⁵

In the following chapter, Eliot pokes gentle fun at Mrs Tulliver's anxiety that her silver tea-pot will end up in the local inn, 'being scratched, and set before the travellers and folks – and my letters on it – see here – E. D. – and everybody see 'em'.²⁶ But there is a serious concern, too, with the potential loss of the history sedimented in personal possessions, a history which can easily come to mean either too little or too much. 'Mrs Tulliver's Teraphim. or Household Gods' refers to Judges 18:14-20, in which armed men forcibly remove 'household gods', the ephod and the teraphim, from the house of their possessor. In this case, the moral action required to restore meaning and value will indeed prove biblical in scope. However, a necessary emphasis on the auction as a system for the recirculation of wealth and significance should not be allowed to obscure the intensity of the interest shown by writers like Thackeray and Eliot in what precedes it: in the curious condition of abandonment which afflicts a household awaiting clearance.

We have already witnessed Thackeray's distress, in life and in literature, at such dismal sights. Eliot, concerned though she is above all to explore the moral implications of being sold up, or having the bailiff in the house, none the less takes trouble to register the initial sharp shock of it. The first thing Tom and Maggie notice when they return home on the fateful day is a strong smell of tobacco. 'There was a coarse, dingy man, of whose face Tom had some vague recollection, sitting in his father's chair, smoking, with a jug and glass beside him'.²⁷ Dismal sights can usually be held at distance: an odour is already inside us by the time we notice it. Thackeray and Eliot were not alone in thinking that such physical revulsions mattered.

Here are two examples, from roughly contemporary novels of very different kinds, Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (1861) and Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863). I won't attempt, in either case, to unravel the complicated chains of event surrounding the onset of household clearance. Like Eliot, Trollope waxed biblical at the thought of household clearance. 'The Philistines at the Parsonage' is the title of the chapter in which the consequences of the Rev. Mark Roberts's mild

imprudence are brought home to him and his elegant wife. Trollope found in their misfortune an opportunity to describe the different kinds of investment (of equal vividness) which mistress and servant might have in the spectacle of the commodity. 'But now that this new excitement had come upon the household — seeing that the bailiffs were in possession, and that the chattels were being entered in a catalogue, everybody was willing to do everything — everything but his or her own work'. For the servants, the arrival of the bailiffs is a grand treat. Mrs Robarts's response, by contrast, more closely resembles that of the wife in Martineau's *The Last Day in the Old Home*. Trollope appears sufficiently moved by it to address a section of his readers directly. 'O ladies, who have drawing-rooms in which the things are pretty, good, and dear to you, think of what it would be to have two bailiffs rummaging among them with pen and ink-horn'.²⁸ There is an edge of mockery to this, perhaps. But Trollope understood well enough the feelings of 'contamination' provoked by all the rummaging. Like Emma Bovary, in a novel published only a few years before *Framley Parsonage*, Mrs Robarts feels that her existence has been laid bare down to its most intimate recesses, like a cadaver at an autopsy.²⁹ In both cases, gender and class hostility exacerbate the physical edge such rummaging is always likely to carry.

Hard Cash bears little resemblance, of course, to *Framley Parsonage* or *Madame Bovary*. None the less, Reade saw in household clearances exactly what Trollope and Flaubert had seen. Despite his novel's title, he was not interested in the recirculation of value and meaning, any more than he was in melancholy, or the social and political history of objects. What interested him was rawness, or stuff: the matter in material culture:

Jane Hardie had found Albion Villa in the miserable state that precedes an auction; the house raw, its contents higgledy-piggledly. The stair carpets, and drawing-room carpets, were up, and in rolls in the dining-room; the bulk of the furniture was there too; the auction was to be in that room. The hall was clogged with great packages, and littered with small, all awaiting the railway carts; and Edward, dusty and deliquescent, was cording, strapping, and nailing them at the gallop, in his shirt sleeves.³⁰

Albion Villa and its inhabitants have been brought down low, into a 'miserable state'. The misery inhibits narrative. That failure becomes the opportunity for description: for a description of objects without (or so it might seem) a subject.

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Reade finds a suitably down-to-earth term for this misery. The *OED* defines ‘higgledy-piggledy’ as a vocal gesture, the word conforming to the thing described: ‘whether founded on *pig*, with some reference to the disorderly and utterly irregular fashion in which a herd of these animals huddle together, is uncertain, though examples show that such an association has often been present to persons using it’. Even the chief human being on the scene, dusty and deliquescent, appears to have been reduced to matter.

V

Preliminary Conclusions

Scenes of household clearance imagine the object’s double reduction: from household god to commodity; from commodity to matter, or stuff. The first reduction deprives objects of their past, of that surplus of meaning and value they have acquired since their purchase: of everything but their exchange value in the here and now. It can, of course, be quite brutal, as in the case of Mrs Tulliver’s silver tea-pot. But the transaction at issue does no more (or no worse) than replace the meaning and value a commodity has had for one person by the meaning and value it will sooner or later have for another. It thus remains possible to see how, under favourable circumstances, or as a result of charitable intervention, its original meaning and value might be restored to it. In *Vanity Fair*, the young stockbrokers buy back Mrs Sedley’s spoons for her. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), some ‘friends in need’ step in to spare Miss Matty, who has been ruined by the crash of the Town and County Bank, from recourse to the auctioneer.³¹

As often as not, however, in the scene of household clearance, a second reduction accompanies, and violently exacerbates, the first. This second reduction, enforced by the ruthless scepticism of the bargain-hunters who thumb curtains, prod mattresses, and clap wardrobe drawers to and fro, deprives the objects awaiting disposal not only of their past, but of their future as well. It demonstrates that these still radiant commodities have, beyond a certain point, no future at all. The thumbing and prodding threatens to expose them as the waste-matter they will before very long become. The reduction from commodity to waste-matter which household clearance distinctively fosters is not just the assault of one system of value and

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meaning on another. It is an assault on the very possibility of systems of value and meaning. In Heideggerian terms, it insists on the radical discrepancy between World/History and Earth/Matter. To understand its significance, we will need more than the new ways of thinking about objects that thing-theory has to offer. We will need a way to think about objects *as they cease to be objects*. A mattress shampooed is no longer just a mattress (particularly, one suspects, if the shampooing has been done by a Jew or an odious bombazeen woman).

I have proposed a generic context, because it may well be that a shift in the relation between narrative and description in the nineteenth-century novel laid bare once again the Earth/Matter hidden within World/History, or recreated the useful illusion of a direct insight into the stuff of existence, into what happens when meaning and value come to an end. To demonstrate as much would require a far more systematic account than I have been able to offer here of how and why narrative abruptly gives way to description, in the texts at issue. I would like to conclude, however, by suggesting that in the nineteenth-century as in the eighteenth-century novel, the stuff of existence gets laid bare at precisely the moment when the pressure to generate meaning and value is (for a variety of reasons) at its most intense; and nowhere more so than in novels which concern the moral and sentimental education of a young man of indeterminate origins. The topic of such novels is nothing less than the emergence and gradual self-definition during the nineteenth century of a professional or non-capitalist middle class.³² These young men have their work cut out to create a new History for themselves out of the most recalcitrant Matter. At especially low points in their none-too-brilliant careers, they find themselves after one fashion or another unable altogether to avoid the dismal sight of a household clearance.

Travelling down into Kent, in the penultimate chapter of *Great Expectations* (1861), Pip discovers that news of the 'heavy fall' in his 'high fortunes' has preceded him. Early next morning, he strolls round by Satis House. 'There were printed bills on the gate, and on bits of carpet hanging out of the windows, announcing the sale by auction of the Household Furniture and Effects, next week'. The House itself is to be pulled down and sold as building materials:

Stepping in for a moment at the open gate and looking around me with the uncomfortable air of a stranger who had no business there, I saw the

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auctioneer's clerk walking on the casks and telling them off for the information of a catalogue-compiler, pen in hand, who made a temporary desk of the wheeled chair I had so often pushed along to the tune of Old Clem.³³

The only role there could possibly be for Pip, at this scene of double reduction, would be that of a bargain-hunter, a pincher and prodder, a stranger comfortable in his own strangeness: which he clearly is not.

In Chapter 60 of *Middlemarch* (1870-1), Ladislaw, at a low ebb after the news has got out of the codicil to Casaubon's will, desperately reluctant to leave Middlemarch, but feeling that he must soon do so, attends the auction of furniture, books, and pictures belonging to Mr Edwin Larcher, to secure a painting on behalf of Mrs Bulstrode. Leaving the auction after his business has been completed, Ladislaw runs into the blackmailer Raffles, who has something to tell him about the reasons why his mother had run away from her family. 'He felt as if he had had dirt cast on him amidst shouts of scorn'.³⁴

In the final chapter of the first part of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Arabella tells Jude that she's grown tired of him, and will emigrate to Australia with her family. The last he hears of her, for the time being, is a by way of a handbill in a shop-window announcing the sale by auction of his father-in-law's furniture:

A few days later he entered a dingy broker's shop in the main street of the town, and amid a heterogeneous collection of saucepans, a clothes-horse, rolling pin, brass candlestick, swing looking-glass, and other things the back of the shop, evidently just brought in from a sale, he perceived a framed photograph, which turned out to be his own portrait.

It was one which he had had specially taken and framed by a local man in bird's-eye maple, as a present for Arabella, and had duly given her on their wedding-day. On the back was still to be read, '*Jude to Arabella*', with the date. She must have thrown it in with the rest of her property at the auction.³⁵

The broker, pointing out that the frame could be useful if the likeness were removed, sells the picture to him for a shilling: he takes it home and burns it.

These episodes, in texts by writers as diverse as Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, can surely be taken to indicate both the pervasiveness and the intrinsic interest of the scene or trope of household clearance. Indeed, they give that scene or trope an additional twist. In each case, the household whose clearance the young men witness is not their own, evidently, since a household is what they can still only aspire to.

The event draws attention to the very specific problem of identity which afflicts those whose capital is symbolic through and through: those who only have their own integrity to sell, rather than muscle, or the contents of a bank account. Whether that makes it less painful than it might be to a Mrs Tulliver, or more so, is of course open to debate.

Endnotes:

1. *The Times*, 10 March 1847, p. 12.
2. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 200. Hereafter referred to as VF in the main body of the text. Thackeray mentions the auctioneer George Robins, proprietor of Robins's Rooms, the Piazza, Covent Garden, as likely to preside over such obsequies. Robins died in February 1847. Born in 1778, he would presumably have been in business during the period in which the novel is set.
3. *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray, 4 volumes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945-6), I, p. 532.
4. Bill Brown, *The Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 12, 4.
5. Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 2-3 (original emphasis).
6. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 2-3.
7. Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), pp. 110-48 (pp. 127-8, 131).
8. For example, see Mieke Bal, 'Over-writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time', in *The Novel*, ed. by Franco Moretti, 2 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) I, pp. 571-610.
9. Henry James, 'Honoré de Balzac', in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp. 31-68 (pp. 49-50).
10. Cynthia Wall, 'The Rhetoric of Description and the Spaces of Things', in *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections on Occasional Forms*, ed. by Dennis Todd and Cynthia Wall (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), pp. 261-79.
11. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. by J. Donald Crowley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 46.
12. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 1064-5.
13. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 362-3.

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14. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 139-212; Fredric Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler', in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 33-56.
15. Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler', p. 49.
16. Herbert Dreyfus, 'Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* ed. by Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 289-316 (pp. 298-301).
17. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 167.
18. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), p. 448.
19. Jameson, p. 49.
20. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', pp. 170, 172.
21. Karl Marx, *Das Capital*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, 3 volumes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), I, pp. 163-4.
22. Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 3.
23. For example, Brown, *The Sense of Things*, p. 13.
24. Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 9, 21, 202, 205-6, 35.
25. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 281.
26. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 294.
27. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 280.
28. Anthony Trollope, *Framley Parsonage*, ed. by P. D. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 527.
29. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 377.
30. Charles Reade, *Hard Cash*, rev. edn. (London: Chatto and Windus, [n.d.]), p. 306.
31. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. by Elizabeth Porges Watson and Charlotte Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 14.
32. A topic I discuss at greater length in *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 3. The classic account is Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).
33. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Charlotte Mitchell and David Trotter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 473-4.
34. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (London: J. M. Dent, 1997), p. 547.
35. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 72.

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