

Robert Bloomfield, Object Poet: The Topographical and the Tangible in Bloomfield's Works

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Who sit amid relics of householdry
That date from the days of their mothers' mothers.
But well I know how it is with me
Continually.

I see the hands of the generations
That owned each shiny familiar thing
In play on its knobs and indentations,
And with its ancient fashioning
Still dallying:

Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler,
As in a mirror a candle-flame
Shows images of itself, each frailer
As it recedes, though the eye may frame
Its shape the same.

Like Thomas Hardy's poem "Old Furniture" (456), Robert Bloomfield's writings reflect on the very human meanings contained in objects crafted by human hands. Bloomfield's verse shapes itself repeatedly around the artisanal, rustic, often humble-seeming "familiar thing" of the type of everyday life he tried to convey: the milking stool of *The Farmer's Boy*; the down-at-heel shoes; the old oak table and the crutch of *Wild Flowers* to name but a few; and the Aeolian harps that Bloomfield crafted in his later career.

In Bloomfield's autobiographical manuscript "Outlines and Sketches from Memory" (1811), furthermore, we find a palpable sense that things are conducive to the acquisition of knowledge, both in the account Bloomfield gives of his own experiences and in the lives of his fellow lodgers in Pitchers Court, London.¹ Like him, these were mostly mechanics and laborers of rudimentary, if any, education. The shoemaker Charles Jones, Bloomfield recalled, first learned "the numerical part of the Alphabet as found on the Mile stones on his

road to Bristol and Bath”. After adventures in Ireland, Jones returned to London in possession of a collection of Maps, from which he tutored Bloomfield in longitude and latitude “and much other Geographical knowledge”, in which task “he was an ardent teacher”, whereupon Jones, his brother (a pipe-maker) and Bloomfield’s brother took in “a Folio system of Geography”, “by weekly numbers a History of England”, “a large edition of Cook’s voyages” and a daily morning newspaper, “which afforded matter for the week’s digestion, and most of the reading fell to my share.”² Bloomfield needed words to write about things, needless to say, but one feels it was the things he most wanted to write about. Later in the “Outlines and Scetches”, Bloomfield tells of Banks the violinist, who “had employd himself at his leisure in the construction of a Keyd Instrument rough indeed, but as far as can remember, of no mean workmanship, and quite sufficient to prove the ingenuity of the artist.” These words of high praise do duty to Bloomfield’s whole approach to the crafted object, both as described in his verse and other writings, as this article goes on to explore, and by extension his idea of the written word as a piece of craftsmanship in itself, a signature trope in Bloomfield’s poetry.

In keeping with this special edition’s aim to deepen the interpretation of Bloomfield’s writings as well as extend knowledge of their range and scope, in the latter part of this article I will explore the significance of *things in texts* by Bloomfield, with reference to criticism centered on the phenomenology of objects and modes of expression principally concerned with the nature of objects: their solidity, or otherwise; their texture; their role as repositories of meaning and memory; and what Heidegger in 1950 termed the potential of even the most humdrum artefact to bear on human affairs and furnish “matter for discourse” (174).³ I will suggest that things in Bloomfield’s writings, and in particular handcrafted, quotidian, artisanal objects have a talismanic quality that defends the poet from hostile, unsympathetic forces. In many respects things appears as more honest, indeed more human, than some actual people. Bloomfield’s old oak table, eulogized in a lyric of the same name, emerges as the pragmatic example of an object that is sympathetic to specifically laboring-class concerns, in contrast with the luxury domestic articles associated with upper and middling-class life that Cynthia has documented in her important study *The Prose of Things* (2006). Not least, I consider that things were important to Bloomfield because for much of his life he did not have many of them.

But first, and as something of a foil to what follows, I will consider Bloomfield in relation to a very different mode of representation, the polite picturesque landscape. My focus is around the year 1806, when Bloomfield’s third collection *Wild Flowers; or, Pastoral and Local Poetry* was published, dedicated to the author’s disabled son, Charles (born circa 1799-

1800). This collection, published by Vernor, Hood and Sharpe, contained “My Old Oak Table” and a critical reading of this poem will conclude this article. But 1806 also saw the publication of the antiquarian Edward Wedlake Brayley’s *Views in Suffolk, Norfolk, and Northamptonshire; illustrative of the Works of Robert Bloomfield*, with engravings by James Sargant Storer and John Greig. This was the third in a series of “views” illustrating the works of illustrious poets (as Bloomfield would certainly have been considered at this date) linked with particular geographical areas and locations. The volume on Bloomfield had been preceded by *Cowper, illustrated by a Series of Views, in, or near, the Park of Weston-Underwood, Buckinghamshire. Accompanied by Copious Descriptions and a Sketch of the Poet’s Life* (1804) and *Views in North Britain, illustrative of the Works of Robert Burns. Accompanied by Descriptions, and a Sketch of the Poet’s Life* (1805).⁴ Vernor and Hood published all three titles, which were patently attempts to extract maximum value from their lucrative stable of poets by way of an appeal to enthusiasts of topographical views and, in some cases, to the owners of the properties depicted. But they are of interest here as visual analogues of the various patronal attempts to present Bloomfield as something other than he was. This is to say, a defining feature of Bloomfield’s earlier career was Capel Lofft’s effort to incorporate Bloomfield into the world of polite letters through his interventions as editor, annotator and mentor. Successive editions of *The Farmer’s Boy* attest to Bloomfield trying to resist Lofft’s control over the text, eventually leading to a falling-out between the two men. The picturesque tradition, in which rural and laboring-class elements are disposed around the scene for consumption by viewers possessed of superior understanding, functioned similarly, and the *Views...Illustrative of the Works of Robert Bloomfield* seek repeatedly to contain Bloomfield within a set of aesthetic conventions that were not his own. Bloomfield’s account of his mother, and the previously unpublished poem “To a Spindle”, which appear midway through Brayley’s narrative, provide a platform for Bloomfield to stage a fightback staked on the notion of a much-loved household object as a symbol of individual identity, agency and economic independence.

Brayley’s “Memoir of Robert Bloomfield,” by contrast, adopts the view that Bloomfield’s relatively impoverished background was an impediment to the growth of his poetic genius. Bloomfield according to Brayley was unusual because his creative powers were strong enough to shake off the impecunious circumstances that would have held a lesser mortal back. As such, Brayley holds Bloomfield worthy of especial praise, for “the more humble the state, perhaps, from which any human being has emerged to eminence through the vigor of his talents, the higher must have been his merit.” Brayley continues in lyrical

strain: “Powerful, indeed, must be his genius, who can dissever the brazen trammels that Poverty has forged for her children, and ‘outstepping’ the control of circumstance, make literature his passport to affluence and to fame” (7-8). Brayley acknowledges that as a farm laborer, “our Poet acquired that intimate knowledge of rural occupations and manners, the display of which forms the distinguishing feature through all his writings,” but rather than pursue this thought (as this article shall), he concludes instead that “the sensibility of his soul being awakened by the charms of nature [...] gave fervor to his thoughts” and eventually “became the basis of his subsequent greatness” (11). In short, and here the logic of the *Views* begins to unfurl, it was Bloomfield’s preternatural intuition of natural beauty in the tenanted farmland and rolling parks where he worked, not meditation on the nature of the work itself (again, the thrust of this article), that fed and nurtured his genius. Put another way, Bloomfield according to Brayley had a self-taught knack for appreciating the landscape according to the rules laid down by his social superiors.

Peter de Bolla’s emphasis on the “education of the eye” in this period, particularly in connection to landscape aesthetics, is useful for explicating how the *Views*, sympathetic towards Bloomfield as the volume is, ends up eliding important aspects of Bloomfield’s poetics and occasionally completely missing the point. De Bolla explains that the “regime” of landscape theory as it evolved over the eighteenth century was geared towards different degrees of “access to the demos of taste.” (108, 111). Brayley is positioning Bloomfield as a figure who through his innate genius is capable of apprehending the guiding principles of beauty in the landscape from an unusually low social rung. By contrast, Ann Bermingham and John Barrell have separately mapped the usual fate of the lower classes within picturesque landscapes: Bermingham sees the emergence of a new picturesque aesthetic in the 1780s and 90s that “muted the problems caused by enclosure and the agricultural revolution and hearkened back to a golden age,” accompanied by a fetishization of the rural population in new genre paintings depicting them cheerfully completing tasks such as wood-gathering and mending fishing nets, aestheticized themselves by members of the aestheticizing classes (81-3). Barrell similarly identified a trend around the turn of the century to reinvent the georgic in painting in ways that “describe and protect the virtues fostered in small, closed communities separate from the mainstream of national life” (137-8). These are the guiding principles of Storer and Greig’s landscapes, with particular consequences for the volume’s overall aim of imagining Bloomfield himself as a figure in the landscape.

Cynthia Wall’s recent book *Grammars of Approach* helps us resolve this problem of how we are to see – literally – Bloomfield in the *Views*. Invoking structures of grammar and

syntax, Wall sees landscape aesthetics in the latter half of the eighteenth century as “prepositional”; that is, the picturesque is characterized by a front-loaded adverbial “approach” towards a final “reveal” of the substantive object, usually the great house and its owner on whom the viewer’s eye eventually rests. In Wall’s formulation, Elizabeth Bennet seeing Pemberley for the first time from the Gardiners’ carriage embodies “the concept of approach” while she surveys the woods and hills of the park, whereas Darcy himself “*is* the Noun of the narrative pattern” (48). In the same way, the young Bloomfield’s eye, we are invited to imagine, alighted on Euston Hall and his future patron the Duke of Grafton within. The purpose of each scene is to look *through* the incidentals that (we shall see) actually inspired Bloomfield’s poem to the greater power on which his social and economic world depended. It was, supposedly, part of Bloomfield’s genius that he himself was able to recognize this, through his preternatural appreciation of other people’s properties and parkland. Hence in Storer and Greig’s images that follow, in conformity with Bermingham and Barrell’s analysis, human figures and the incidentals of everyday life are largely absent, or relegated to the function of picturesque staffage. The first conceit is that we are looking through Bloomfield’s eyes, precociously apprehending the rules of landscape aesthetics and able to “overstep” his limited worldview to establish his position within the social terrain. The second conceit arises in those images that feature a single rustic figure surely intended to be the Farmer’s Boy himself. In such cases the gaze is reversed. We are not in Bloomfield’s head, but occupying a superior vantage point which takes in Bloomfield’s lowly environment and ponders the miracle of his achievements in spite of it. Thus any sense of the “reality” of Bloomfield’s rural upbringing is either subsumed in the elite picturesque or sentimentalized according to the visual structures Bermingham and Barrell describe.

Considered as images, the engravings conform to the principles of the picturesque, designed to guide the eye on a journey around controlled space. They strike the conventional balance between roughness and smoothness, light and shade that, Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight and others argued, distinguished this aesthetic from the placidly beautiful and the gloomily sublime.⁵ The underlying philosophical doctrine is that of associationism as propounded by John Locke and David Hartley.⁶ The idea is that striking features in the landscape call to mind a historical period, personage or allegorical virtue. Hence the images of Storer and Greig’s *Views* continually direct attention onto the local dignitaries and worthies whose magnificent properties punctuate the open spaces of Suffolk and Northamptonshire. Occupying pride of place in the volume is Euston Hall, seat of the Duke of Grafton. After Bloomfield had published *The Farmer’s Boy*, Grafton settled an annuity of

£15 on him and in 1802 arranged for his appointment as Undersealer in the Court of the King's Bench.

[Use filename Andrew_01. figure 1, *Euston Hall*]

The illustration and accompanying description take their cue from Grafton's largesse. The scene (here, imagining Bloomfield's perspective) leads from a large overhanging tree shading grazing livestock, over a wooden footbridge, towards the central block and corner towers of Euston Hall, the eye's destination. Brayley's description treats the ducal estate as a vast object in the singular: "the estate of Euston is of considerable extent; its circumference is between thirty and forty miles: it includes a great number of villages and hamlets, over which the Duke presides with an attention nearly approaching to parental care." We are put in mind of the jurist William Blackstone's description of the concept of property, "that sole and despotic dominion" of one individual over the substance of a thing (cited Lamb 4). The text continues to explain that Fakenham wood, near Euston Hall, "was the frequent resort of Mr. Austin and his family, at the time Bloomfield was with him, on a Sunday afternoon" and this is where he strolled with his juniors to "recreate" them after their labors (*Views*, 24), as if the landscape gives back in beauty what it has exacted from the tenant farmers in hard toil.

But as the scenes unfold, a tension opens up between the features Brayley wishes to call attention to and what Bloomfield's poems relating to particular scenes are actually about. In many cases, Brayley simply enfolds a passage of description into his narrative; for example, Bloomfield's lines about Euston Hall park, or the milking scenes from *The Farmer's Boy*. But on occasion he glosses over social criticism or depictions of harsh realities in a manner reminiscent of the "tidying" performed by landscape painters. The image and account of Fakenham provide a clear illustration of this tendency. The image looks across water meadows to where the church and cottages nestle behind four tall elms which comprise the focal point.

[Use filename Andrew_04 figure 2: *Fakenham from the Meadows*]

The Duke comes first once again ("the Duke is perfectly easy of access, and lends a ready ear, and a benevolent hand, to the complaints and necessities of every suitor"). Then Brayley mentions the footbridge, in the right background, which makes an appearance in Bloomfield's poem "The Broken Crutch" published in *Wild Flowers*. This is the bridge squire

Herbert Brooks crosses as he makes his way to church where he intends to woo, or perhaps violently seduce, innocent Peggy Meldrum: Brooks glances “from the foot-bridge on his way / To that still house where all his fathers lay” (*CWRB*, “The Broken Crutch,” lines 97-8). In the lines subjoined to the image, the narrator harks back with seeming placidity to the setting as it appeared in the past: “On thy calm joys with what delight I dream, / Thou dear green valley of my native stream!” (*CWRB*, “The Broken Crutch,” lines 57-8). And Brayley explains that the mansion belonging to the Brooks family was destroyed by fire, hence its name “Burnt Hall”, and that “several decayed trees are still existing near the inner margin of the moat; the remains of a circle of elms that, according to the Poet, once completely surrounded the mansion” (*Views*, 39). But the whole thrust of this section of “The Broken Crutch” is that the landscape has been ravaged by enclosure and tree-felling, “this scythe of desolation call’d ‘Reform’” that foreshadows the threat of inter-class violence in Bloomfield’s plot.

Likewise the engraving of “Shooter’s Hill” focuses squarely on Severndroog castle built in 1784 to commemorate Sir William James’s victory over Maratha pirates in India. Brayley explains “It is an object of considerable interest, as it commemorates a train of exploits of the highest moment to our mercantile transactions with the eastern world” (*Views*, 47). Yet Bloomfield’s poem is addressed to health (Bloomfield visited Shooter’s Hill for valetudinarian purposes) and mentions the castle only to denounce it as an emblem of posthumous vanity he would much rather avoid:

I would not that such turrets rise
 To point out where my bones are laid;
 Save that some wandering bard might prize
 The comforts of its broad cool shade.

(*CWRB*, “Shooter’s Hill,” lines 93-4.)

The view of Fakenham from Euston Park that follows offers a similar paradox. The quatrain beneath the engraving of the copse is from “The Fakenham Ghost” published in *Rural Tales* (1802); it describes the flight of an “ancient Dame” from what she believes is a monster:

Then on she sped; and hope grew strong,
 The white park-gate in view;

Which pushing hard, so long it swung,
The *ghost* and all passed through.

(*CWRB*, “The Fakenham Ghost,” lines 41-4.)

The poem makes no mention whatsoever “the house seen on the right in the distance” to which Brayley calls attention, which is “the Parsonage, inhabited by the Rev. R. Fellowes, curate of this parish, a gentleman of great literary reputation, of benevolent manners, and much esteemed by his parishioners” (*Views*, 40). Fellowes, the philanthropist and editor between 1804 and 1811 of the *Critical Review*, was the sort of prominent local individual who might help Vernor and Hood promote their volume, but neither he nor his house has any connection to Bloomfield’s ballad, inspired by a tale his mother told him.⁷ Bloomfield’s verse has become “prepositional” (to repeat Wall’s term) to his prestigious patrons, so that all subject matter “passes through” to them.

Inevitably, Lofft’s house, Troston Hall, makes a prominent appearance in the volume. The narrative accompanying the view tells that Lofft “has inscribed almost every tree in his garden and its vicinity to names of classical celebrity, such as Homer, Demosthenes, Cicero, Milton, Cowley, and many others.” The large elm in the foreground is named after John Evelyn and a laurel tree is dedicated to the philanthropist John Howard who visited Lofft at Troston Hall in 1805. Bloomfield himself planted two horse-chestnut trees and two oaks in 1805, “which are carefully reared,” whether as paid employment or as part of a ceremony organized by Lofft we do not know. This section of the narrative begins with a reminder that it is Lofft to “whom the public are in a great measure indebted for their knowledge of the Farmer’s Boy,” before the next sentence describes Lofft as “the proprietor,” seeming to extend ownership over poet and park together (41). Thus Bloomfield ends up sunk into the landscape as part of Lofft’s forest of associations. It is nevertheless typical of their relationship that Bloomfield had to do all the work himself.

Bloomfield only acquires a sense of solidity himself when the narrative turns to birthplace, Honington.

[use filename andrew_02: figure 3: *Honington Church, and the Cottage in which Rob.^t Bloomfield was Born*]

To the right of the church is the cottage which Bloomfield's grandfather bought when it was a barn. Brayley explains that Bloomfield has replaced the original thatched roof with the tiled roof we see in the image, although "he lamented the loss of its original simplicity" and that the family "has since been gradually improving to its present neat and comfortable appearance" (33). The cottage was the home of Bloomfield's mother, Elizabeth Manby, before her death in 1804, whereupon Bloomfield inherited it. Here the awareness of property, ownership and the potential for economic independence (Bloomfield's repairs to the roof, presumably paid for with the money he earned from publishing his poems) figure strongly. They are reinforced when Brayley tells the recent history of the building in which it was nearly destroyed: "during the harvest of 1782 or 1783, the village of Honington suffered severely by fire" with many buildings lost. The Bloomfield cottage lay in the path of the flames. Elizabeth, who was at that time the village schoolmistress, fled her house into the fields, where she clutched the two household possessions she evidently prized above all others: her clock and "the title-deeds of the house in her lap" (33-4). She wished to preserve proof of her ownership of the property, even in the event of the building itself being burned to the ground. The clock was essential to her livelihood (running lessons on time) and the running of her household.

Further appearances of the Bloomfield family's possessions have a disrupting effect on a narrative whose overall tendency has been to enfold Bloomfield in a prospect of other people's property. As part of his cooperation with the publishers, Brayley explains, Bloomfield took a portrait of Elizabeth, painted by "P. Violet" in London in 1804, down from the cottage wall so that Storer and Grieg could copy it:

[use filename: Andrew_03: figure 4, *The Mother of Robert Bloomfield, the Poet*]

Elizabeth's careworn but determined stare hauntingly arrests the viewer in a volume otherwise filled with picturesque views. She is an inescapable bodily presence when all other human figures are reduced to diminutive specks in the landscape. Besides the portrait, Bloomfield also contributed a short account of his mother's final days and a blank verse poem "To a Spindle" (36-7). The peculiar violence of her last, obsessive spinning which caused her to suffer a paralytic affliction, leaving the spindle half filled, attests to the centrality of this object to her idea of self-worth and usefulness.⁸ The poem calls the spindle a "relic!" and a "treasure," logically enough for an item bound up with his mother's memory, yet one whose whole purpose is to be touched: the poet remembers how "thy brown fellows

as a task I twirl'd" when only a young boy (*CWRB*, "To a Spindle," lines 1, 2, 4). And it is an instrument that "shalt a moral lesson teach to me and mine" (line 10). The tactile impressions continue, as we feel how Elizabeth's hand has "wore thee smooth" (line 11) and left the spindle half-filled with "soft downy fleece" (line 22). This becomes an emblem for the incompleteness of human affairs at the point of death, causing the poem to reflect on Bloomfield's own vocation and productions: "We spin vain threads, and dream, and thrive, and die / With sillier things than spindles in our hands" (lines 26-7). The poem is concerned about whether writing poetry, "the bias set upon my soul for verse" (line 29), is as useful as the sort of manufacture Elizabeth undertook: who has produced material of most worth? The conceit of spinning threads of wool as akin to spinning lines of verse forces a confrontation between the tangibility and utility of one and the insubstantial and possible pointlessness of the other. The spindle and its productions, even half finished, emerge the stronger.⁹

These household articles arrest the tricky spatial flows of the picturesque on which, I have been suggesting, the whole volume is predicated. They operate here, to quote Bill Brown, as "objects asserting themselves as things."¹⁰ It therefore makes sense to attend to Bloomfield's other focalizations of household, or we may say, laboring-class objects. There are numerous examples, not least the broken crutch whose meaning, as we have seen, hovers ambiguously between a crude symbol of the hot-blooded rustic's propensity for bodily violence and, more positively, an emblem of sturdy willingness to stand up for one's own, with force if necessary. The crutch is threatening or protective, depending on where one places the interpretative dial. Either way, the physical object firmly commands the poet's and the reader's attention. In Bloomfield's late collection, *May Day with the Muses* (1822) we find a suggestive link between a similarly gnarled object and poetic (and thus for Bloomfield economic) generation. "The Forester" features an appearance by a shepherd who carries a staff of his profession "carved round with birds and flowers, / The hieroglyphics of his leisure hours; / And rough form'd animals of various name, / Not just like BEWICK'S, but they meant the same. [...] He was a poet" (*CWRB*, "The Forester," lines 17-22). Like Elizabeth's wheel, the staff is something not only to be touched and handled but that also (as the narrator recognizes) weaves a kind of poetry out of itself: here animals which though crudely shaped take on the mystical aura of hieroglyphics, in imaginative terms surpassing the mimetic delineations of nature made popular by Thomas Bewick.

Simon White has argued that, far from being an impediment to poetic development, Bloomfield's immersion in artisanal culture had a direct bearing on the evolution of his writing. Rejecting the heroic strain of Milton and Wordsworth in the opening lines of *The*

Farmer's Boy, Bloomfield “wanted to demonstrate [...] that ‘meaner objects’ and ‘trifling incidents’ in the lives of the poor could in themselves be of interest as subject matter for poetry.” Moreover, the intimacy with materials, the sense of physical effort and toil, and the habit of working with others as part of a collective that were acquired in the shoemaker’s garret in Bell Alley combined into “a sensibility that shaped his poetry from interaction with others in close and supportive communities” (10, 30). Importantly for this article, this sensibility of Bloomfield’s extended to a feeling that, like Hardy’s old furniture, artisanal objects partook of collective experience past and present. As we shall see, much of the significance of artisanal objects for Bloomfield was that laboring-class hands had made them. In *The Prose of Things* (2006), Wall evokes the widely-held view of the eighteenth century as “a world of goods, awash in mercantile choices,” marked by profusion, acquisition and display to the extent that we must remind ourselves that “things could still be interpreted as intertwined with persons, objects with subjects” (152). Yet if we transfer attention from the emerging bourgeoisie’s materialism, we stand less in need of Wall’s judicious caveat. The artisanal or laboring-class object is far less likely to be lost in the consumerist abyss by the simple virtue of being less prevalent, less disposable, more likely to be “intertwined” with the lives of more than one generation or household.

Rural Tales, Ballads, and Songs (1802) contains Bloomfield’s first discernible object poem, “The Widow to Her Hour-Glass,” composed in May 1800.¹¹ The engraving to illustrate the four-stanza poem shows the widow of the title sitting in a simple but neatly furnished room with sunlight falling on the upheld glass through a leaded casement. White has commented that “a poem about a poor widow using an hour-glass to measure the time spent upon a particular task is strongly evocative of the lifestyle and work rhythms of the semi-independent cottager” (59). The widow narrator addresses the hourglass immediately as a “friend” and “companion of the lonely hour,” endowing it with life and a capacity for sympathetic commiseration, a living soul within the body of its “frame of wood” (*CWRB*, “The Widow to Her Hour-Glass,” lines 1, 2, 6). With the smooth regularity of its motion it has kept the widow company “At every birth” and “when my Husband died” (lines 8, 10). Though inanimate, the “streaming sand” grows and slides down, piling up and hollowing out “Like days and years still filt’ring through, / And mingling joy with pain” (lines 11, 19-20). As a moral emblem of the vicissitudes of life, the hour-glass transcends its status as a manufactured domestic object and becomes assimilated with the widow’s own life experiences. Crucially, its dependability and repetitiveness, the very essence of its mechanical lifelessness, become the qualities that lend the widow the greatest comfort and

equanimity: the glass is “silent” but “Still shalt thou flow, / And jog along the destined way” (lines 25-7). The hour-glass keeps time while the widow spins and sings to pass the time. The particularities of the glass make it peculiarly suitable as a touchstone of moral contemplation: it is “Steady as Truth,” performing its “daily task” well “on either end” (lines 31-2). Its constancy is the “friend” of Meditation” and because it is silent it “strikes the Heart without a Bell” (lines 33-4). As summer days lengthen, marking the passage of time and mortality, the wood, glass and sand instrument, like Keats’s urn, remains consolingly the same, and the widow concludes “Companion of the lonely hour, / I’ll turn thee up again” (lines 39-40).

Bloomfield’s object poems are keenly aware of how relations between the (human) subject – here, the widow – and the (non-human) object, or things – here, the hourglass – are charged with meaning. To pursue this poem’s obvious theme of the passage of time, Brown draws attention to the paradox between an object’s all-at-onceness, or simultaneity – the hourglass is just there, an inert presence of glass, wood and sand – and its capacity, even demand, to be temporalized, as having a before and after: hence the widow combining her remarks that “Spring thirty times hath fed with rain / And cloath’d with leaves my humble bower, / Since thou hast stood / In frame of wood” (lines 3-6), juxtaposing the transit of her life with the static character of the instrument. Brown calls this the quality of “what is excessive in objects [...] what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems” (Brown, 5). In Bloomfield’s conception, laboring-class objects contain specific signifying potentialities: they are precious, because such objects are few and purchased at dear cost; they are precarious, because the vicissitudes of laboring-class life mean that they might need to be sold or may be repossessed; and they are honest, because they serve a demonstrable purpose with their form determined by their function. This links with the fact that Bloomfield’s characters who handle such objects are presented as schooled in homespun wisdom rather than philosophical thought.

This is not to say that Bloomfield’s object poems are simplistic. “The Widow to Her Hour-Glass” paves the way for the most distinctive and sophisticated of this group of poems, “To My Old Oak Table,” published in Bloomfield’s third collection, *Wild Flowers* (1806). The poem, according to the published copy, was composed in December 1803, and harks back to the period immediately preceding the composition of *The Farmer’s Boy*, thus the period around 1795-6. A bold engraving precedes the verse, concentrating the reader’s mind on the subject shortly to be apostrophized:

[filename: pending. figure 5: *Illustration facing "To My Old Oak Table"*]

In this poem, surely the most personal Bloomfield wrote, the particularities of the table, its woodiness, texture and specific functions, directly inform and direct the ensuing associations, which rise like sap from its silent form. The table's massy, unignorable presence is the starting point and solidity, strength and constancy the first themes to emerge. The poet hails the "FRIEND of my peaceful days! substantial friend, / Whom wealth can never change, nor int'rest bend, / I love thee like a child" (*CWRB*, "To My Old Oak Table," lines 1-3). This recalls a tough period of Bloomfield's life, when he was struggling to support a growing family and, as the verse portrays, beset by rheumatism, the "trembling, feverish hands, and aching sight" (line 8) that contrast so pitifully with the table's physical robustness. Yet the poem never loses sight of yielding, absorbent quality of wood, which renders the table, for all its density, a sharer in the poet's life: "I shar'd thy sympathy, Old Heart of Oak!" (line 6).

I have been highlighting how laboring-class objects differ from bourgeois household possessions as typically inscribed into eighteenth-century polite literature. One of the chief characteristic of such objects, including Bloomfield's table, is the multiplicity of functions they served in domestic setting where space is at a premium and substantial articles of furniture were few. After his work in the garret, the poet ate and drank "the draught that cheer'd me and subdu'd my care" which "On thy broad shoulders thou wert proud to bear" (lines 9-10). The poet has stared at the surface patina and pondered his lot, and at happier moments piled "winter muffins" on it, which made him "quite forgot that I was poor" (lines 13, 14). Later, it is from the table's surface that the poet spins the lines that made up *The Farmer's Boy*, the equivalent in terms of creative labor to Elizabeth spinning wool on her precious spindle.

The poem figures the narrator-subject and the table-object as leading parallel lives and endowed with the same virtues and genealogy. The poet imagines the table's birth from an acorn and recognizes that the table, like the cobbler poet, cannot trace its pedigree, a fact that puts them on a reassuring equal footing:

Where dropp'd the acorn that gave birth to thee?
 Can'st thou trace back thy line of ancestry?
 We're match'd, old friend, and let us not repine,
 Darkness o'erhangs thy origin and mine;

Both may be truly honourable: yet,
 We'll date our honours from the day we met;
 When, of my worldly wealth the parent stock,
 Right welcome up the Thames from Woolwich Dock
 Thou cam'st (lines 15-23.)

The poet looks into the seeds of time in this way and finds obscurity. Far from being cause for dismay, the poem hints that from humble origins, like oaks from acorns, greater things will grow. Thus this object is strongly associated with creative workmanship and economic success of a self-made vernacular type. The oak's arrival at Woolwich Dock (where timber was traditionally unshipped) accordingly heralds the poet's "worldly wealth" (line 21).

Yet whereas "The Widow to Her Hour-Glass" sometimes borders on the trite, "To My Old Oak Table" delves deeper into the substrata of human suffering, as befits the multi-layered grains from which the larger object is fashioned. The poem segues into a moving account of the early days of his marriage to Mary-Anne Church and the anxieties that attending the ill health of their children in London. "The sad, faint wailings of a dying child" almost bring tragedy "But Death, obedient to Heav'n's high command, / Withdrew his jav'lin, and unclench'd his hand" (lines 40-2). Now the table's strength becomes a painful contrast, even a source of mockery: the lifeless object casting harsh light on the mortal body. The poet tells how "Anxiety, and Grievs without a name, / Had made their inroads on my frame" as the evils of "Dropsy" (chronic rheumatism) serve as a reminder how detached from human experience the solid object really is, hence the accusation "Thou to thy trust, old friend, hast not been true" (lines 47-8, 49, 51). The poet wept "the bitterest tears they ever knew" (line 52) on its unyielding surface.

After a crisis of faith and marriage, the poet recovers to tell of domestic joys, the "brilliant sun" (line 86) that lit the table-top, now serving as a prop to rest books on and display flowers. "The purchas'd nosegay, or brown ears of corn" that "Were thy gay plumes upon a summer's morn" (lines 89-90) prompted the memories of the Suffolk countryside that culminated in Bloomfield setting *The Farmer's Boy* on paper. Having crafted something himself, the poet seems to rekindle his empathetic connection with the table, his "old friend" once again which "shalt partake, / While I have pen to write, or tongue to speak, / Whatever fortune deals me" (lines 99-101) and to which, like a spouse, he will remain faithful until death. After the affective connection breaks down, the poet thinks his way back towards the table again and the crisis resolves. The poem, concerned as it has been with themes of work,

scarcity and loss, finally moralizes the table from a distinctively laboring-class perspective. Unlike Keats's urn which teases out of thought, the table's "most important duty" is to keep the poet's consciousness of his origins and social affiliations very much alive:

guard me from Temptation's base control,
 From apathy and littleness of soul
 The sight of thy old frame, so rough, so rude,
 Shall twitch the sleeve of nodding Gratitude;
 Shall teach me but to venerate the more
 Honest Oak Tables and their guests – the poor.
 (lines 105-10.)

The poet knows he must face both ways, "nodding" towards his patrons, but more mindful of the "honest" poor (lines 108, 110). Bloomfield typically eschews radicalism, but frequently – and occasionally with vehemence – denounces inequality and the unfair distribution of material goods. Social distinctions may be "unjust" and pride engenders "falsehoods" (lines 111-12), but the table acts as a moral guardian by being the setting where "Fancy", "Intellect" and "Hospitality's enchanting ring" may be encountered in the same spot (lines 13, 14, 15). By not being a Chippendale designed for a single and very possibly highfalutin purpose, the oak table reminds the poet that creativity and kindness towards the poor depend upon each other. This is why any ungrateful person who "would not look with honest pride" upon the table's past "ne'er shall be my guest; / Nor sip my cup, nor witness how I'm blest; / Nor lean, to bring my honest friend to shame, / A sacrilegious elbow on thy frame" (lines 117, 121-4). The humble table with its varied uses is finally apotheosized as a "monitor" "Sacred to Truth, to Poetry, and Love" (lines 125-6).

This article began with Bloomfield assimilated into schemes of landscape that tended to diminish his role at the expense of patrons who controlled the land in which he lived and worked during the formative years of his life. The whole drift of the *Views in Suffolk, Norfolk, and Northamptonshire* is that Bloomfield had imbibed the aesthetic sensibilities of his social superiors and was duly grateful. However, the preoccupation with objects, and specifically objects associated with fundamental aspects of laboring-class life – the home industry of spinning, the hour-glass for dividing up the working day, the broken crutch to defend one's own against sexual depredations of a wicked squirearchy and finally the oak table that plays many parts in a household with not much money to spare – show that

Bloomfield was not only a talented crafter of object poems as such but willing to invoke objects as hand-holds against outside forces that threaten to appropriate his identity. Possessions in the *Views* emerge as points of resistance to the enfolding designs of Storer and Greig's images; it is no coincidence that the poem Bloomfield chose for inclusion in the volume, "To a Spindle," portrays an object profoundly associated with economic independence, as well as connection to his family background. The conceit of composing verse as akin to spinning wool, something tangible, useful and requiring skill, features repeatedly in Bloomfield's verse, as we have seen.

It is to Bloomfield's object poems that we should therefore look for signs of the poetic identity he wished to present to his readers, given his evident willingness to subsume, or at least form powerful associations between, his subjectivity and the inner life of things. And it was time-hallowed, hand-worn laboring-class objects in particular that were his favored markers, treating them as relics that only the poor (and their friends) may touch. A final irony of the fact that Bloomfield valued such objects for their scarcity, among other things, is that he ended up with really rather a large number of household possessions, for one who died in almost total penury. The advertisement for the auction of books and furniture held in 1824 after Bloomfield's death (published on the Bedford District Council website) catalogues an array of articles whose sale spread over two days:

THE FIRST DAY'S SALE will consist principally of Books, which have been presented to Mr. BLOOMFIELD (as Tokens of Friendship and Esteem) by the first Characters of the Age, and will also comprise the *Original Manuscripts of The Farmer's Boy, Rural Tales, Wild Flowers, Banks of the Wye* and *may-Day with the Muses*, in the Author's own Handwriting.

THE SECOND DAY'S SALE will consist of mahogany Dining, pillar-and-claw Tables; Feather-beds; Bolsters and Pillows; Blankets; Wool Mattresses; Tent Bedsteads; Chest of Drawers; Dressing Table; Chamber Chairs; Night Commode; Mahogany Chairs; Harpsichord; portable Writing Desk; handsome modern mahogany Escritoir, fitted up in a superior style with internal Drawers and Bookcase on ditto, with gothic glazed Doors (*fine wood*); Pier and Dressing Glasses; new-improved Terrestrial Globe; Pocket ditto; modern Time-piece in a mahogany case; Bronze Cast of BUONAPARTE in a glass cover; Brussels Carpet; Telescope; very good Microscope (complete), by *Banks*, London; Hawkins' patent Writing Machine; very beautiful INKSTAND (presented to Mr. R. Bloomfield by the celebrated *Dr. Jenner*);

Kitchen Range; Bath Stoves; large brewing Copper; washing ditto; wine Barrels; vertical Jack; Kitchen Requisites; Carpenter's Bench; quantity of Carpenter's Tools. And amongst the Articles of Furniture, the celebrated OAK TABLE will be included, which *Mr. Bloomfield* may be said to have rendered immortal by the beautiful and pathetic Poem inscribed to it in his *Wild Flowers*.

* As it is presumed that many Admirers of the Poetry of *Mr. Bloomfield* may wish to possess some Relic of this celebrated Author, the Auctioneer therefore respectfully assures the Public, that every Article offered for Sale has been the Property of *Mr. Bloomfield*; and those Articles which are so described, were presented to him (as Tokens of Friendship and Esteem) by the Persons whose Names are affixed in the Catalogue.

Every Purchaser of *Books* to the Amount of £1 will be presented with a beautiful Copper-plate Engraving of *Mr. BLOOMFIELD*, Portrait by *Rising*; sold originally at 15s. each.

As well as some 183 manuscripts, books and engravings, the first day's sale on May 28th 1824 ended with the auction of Violet's portrait of Elizabeth Bloomfield. The oak table was lot number 72 on the second day's sale on May 29th and is now located at Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds.¹²

That Bloomfield's possessions, the oak table most conspicuously, should be treated as relics of the poet, as if they contained fragments of his life force like the remains of a saint, attests to the imaginative force imbued on them by his most distinctive poems. It is fitting that Bloomfield's talents should have brought into his possession such a profusion of objects, many of them charged with the aura of association with famous friends and admirers like Jenner and the donors of the various presentation copies. It is apt too that a writer so inclined to merge his creative practice with manufactured objects should finally disperse, as it were, in a cloud of relics. But it is undeniably poignant that, on account of his financial setbacks (exacerbated in part by the very generosity towards one's own kind that Bloomfield extolled in his verse), like laboring-class things in general, these items were held on a precarious tenure.

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¹ I am greatly indebted to Sam Ward for permission to use his transcription.

² On Cook's voyages and "Reflections on Otaheite, Cook's second Voyage, included in the first 10 editions of *The Farmer's Boy*, see White, 23-4.

³ See also Lamb and Jacobus.

⁴ The memoir of Cowper is taken from Hayley, the work William Blake illustrated. The memoir of Burns is taken from Currie.

⁵ See Price and Payne Knight.

⁶ See Locke and David Hartley.

⁷ Fellowes inscribed a stone to Bloomfield's mother after her death; the text is reproduced in *Views*, 34-5.

⁸ Haywood interprets "To a Spindle" as Bloomfield's "psycho-biographical" effort to process feelings of filial separation (18).

⁹ Compare "But why thus spin my tale, thus tedious be?", "The Soldier's Home" published in *May Day with the Muses* (CWRB, line 77).

¹⁰ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory' in Brown (ed.), 'Things', special edition of *Critical Enquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001), 1-22 (4).

¹¹ The second edition of this *Rural Tales* contains notes by Lofft not included in the larger format first edition.

¹² Thanks to Tim Fulford for information on the present whereabouts of the oak table.