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**MERGING THE HUMAN AND THE NONHUMAN: THE OBJECT
NARRATOR IN *THE ADVENTURES OF A BLACK COAT***

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Abstract: Rooted in the tradition of eighteenth-century circulation novels recounted by an object narrator, *The Adventures of a Black Coat* (1760) epitomizes the features of this experimental novelistic subgenre by foregrounding a coat which, acting as a homodiegetic narrator, lambastes the world of commodities prompted by the rise of early capitalism. As an object endowed with moral conscience, the coat epistemologically proves to be a reliable narrator that is able to render authentic experience and feelings by getting empirically involved in the world it describes. Worn by a few owners, the coat becomes a sharp observer of society and, most importantly, it foreshadows what Karl Marx has termed “commodity fetishism.” According to Marx, commodities and humans become part of a process that is economically endorsed by exchange. Read in this light, I argue that the text reveals the Marxist process of reification whereby social relations between humans turn into social relations between things. Despite being an object narrator, the coat fulfils a typically eighteenth-century pedagogical function, in that it warns the reader against the degrading morals of a society addicted to material culture.

Keywords: object narrative, epistemological problems, material culture, commodity fetishism, satire.

Published for the first time in 1760, *The Adventures of a Black Coat* is an it-narrative, a novelistic subgenre that had already been augured by Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709), a hack piece of writing which boosted the popularity of nonhuman

narrators in British literature up until the nineteenth century. Alongside with the anonymous *Adventures of a Black Coat*, reprinted in 1762, 1767 and 1780, Francis Coventry's *The History of Pompey the Little; or, The Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog* (1751) and Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal; or, The Adventures of a Guinea* (1760–65) attest to the acclaim gained by such stories in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Mark Blackwell has interpreted object narratives or “spy novels” as emblematic of a human-object relation, arguing that “inanimate objects (coins, waistcoats, pins, corkscrews, coaches) or animals (dogs, fleas, cats, ponies) (...) enjoy a consciousness – and thus a perspective – of their own” (Blackwell 10). Interpreted from a variety of socio-cultural approaches in the past two decades, it-narratives speak volumes of people's relationship with material culture and, concurrently, of their status as print material embedded within the literary marketplace of the time. Informed by Jan Alber (2016), who claims that the burgeoning commercialism and exchange of goods in eighteenth-century English society may be read as Marxist commodity fetishism *avant la lettre*, my argument shows that commodity fetishism stresses the intrinsic value of the object divorced from men's labour, on the one hand, and men's feeling of alienation prompted by the power of the market, which operates independently of any individual action. At the same time, I shall improve upon Alber's idea by regarding “it-narratives,” or “circulation novels,” as texts which played a major role in the commodification of tales, in “the promiscuous movement of text” which abolished narrative authority as human, thus being suggestive of “a theory of culture in which literary dissemination and economic exchange appear homologous” (Flint 224). Viewed from this angle, object stories are implicitly connected with a growing interest in experimental fiction, particularly when we speak about the new genre of the novel, which was in search of its own form throughout the eighteenth century. Ironically enough, “it-narratives” toy with clichéd novelistic plots, themes and conventions in a context in which “an awareness of reigning conventions, and of their growing staleness, shaped the sometimes anxious and defensive experimentalism of novels” (Folkenflik 53). By being personified or, better say, by assuming human agency, speaking objects like the black coat deconstruct the normative subject-object relation, challenging the novelist's aim to imitate reality. In doing so, they refute the human claim to authenticity and advocate an epistemological strategy which records reality in an authentic, empirical way with the help of the senses, most notably touch

and sight. I shall argue that this perspective enables the it-narrator to create a more legitimate rhetoric of certainty unravelled in the Preface to the work under scrutiny.

As the subtitle makes clear, the story contains “a Series of Remarkable Occurrences and entertaining Incidents” told by a worn-out black coat that “was a Witness to in its Peregrinations through the Cities of London and Westminster, in Company with Variety of Characters.” Apart from introducing the reader into the typically novelistic world of everyday yet “Remarkable”¹ experiences, the setting foregrounds London and Westminster, two of the most economically developed cities at the time. In the words of Barbara M. Benedict, “things were the new immigrants, invading a city emptied by the Great Fire and plague. Objects became the subjects of print in catalogues, posters, newspapers, and literature” (Benedict 194). Their pervasive presence in eighteenth-century English society, much like their ubiquitous presence in our life, allowed authors and owners alike to “look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us)” (Brown 4; emphasis in original). Reversing the subject-object relation, the black coat looks through its owners in order to decode a world prone to materialistic pleasures and, at the same time, to instruct its companion, a white and fashionably tailored coat stored in the same wardrobe, through its lived experiences.

In the Preface, the black coat, which goes by the name of Sable, a species of marten highly treasured for the quality of its fur, discriminates between the novelists’ and drama writers’ methods for instructing their readers. “To excite virtue, depress vice, and ridicule folly, is as much the business of the Novelist, as it is the design of the Drama,”² confesses the object narrator. However, continues Sable, “the former cannot, like the dramatic-writer, represent his scenes to the Senses, yet it is in his power to set his characters in such a light, as to strike the Minds of his readers, in a very forcible manner, with the virtues he would have them imitate or the errors he would wish them to amend” (vi-vii). Such a didactic perspective seems hackneyed when applied to the novelistic genre, since it works either by imitating role models, amending mistakes or

¹ I associate the “Remarkable” events populating the novelistic world with the sensational promoted by journalism, which J. Paul Hunter considers as “commitment to contemporaneity” (Hunter 167) and, more significantly, as one of the cultural “pre-texts” that prepared the ground for the rise of the novel in England. See Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 1990, pp. 167-194.

² *The Adventures of a Black Coat. Containing a Series of Remarkable Occurrences and entertaining Incidents, That it was a Witness to in its Peregrinations through the Cities of London and Westminster, in Company with Variety of Characters. As related by Itself*, Dublin, 1762, vi. Subsequent quotations will be given parenthetically within the text.

condemning vices. Nevertheless, it is highly relevant to it-narratives due to its claim to sheer authenticity conveyed through the senses, particularly touch and sight. Epistemologically, object tales contest this overused perspective because it gives birth to cognitive rather than emotional empathy. As Crystal B. Lake has cogently argued, “fiction’s increasing pretensions to verisimilitude dangerously threatened to refashion an individual’s capacity to engage sensually, materially, and empirically with the world around them” (Lake 183). Sable, our homodiegetic narrator, highlights fiction’s failure to instruct properly, as “our present novel-writers seem to have little else in view than to amuse their readers; or, if they have any design to instruct them, they gild the pill so very thick, that all its latent qualities are destroyed, or its effects prevented” (vii-viii). According to Sable, “gilding the pill so very thick” is tantamount to a lack of credibility, if not exaggeration, when it comes to moral reformation. As a prerequisite for novel writing, instruction is upheld and achieved by means of fictional models of virtue that allow readers to emulate them. Radically opposed to the novel’s pedagogical strategy, Sable recommends dramatic qua empirical, authentic experience as the most convincing way of stimulating readers. Furthermore, the black coat perceives the act of writing novels, especially those produced by Grub Street hack writers, as an infection engulfing the entire city. Sable’s satire against low-quality novels churned out in this ill-reputed area of London is more than evident: “In this age of *Magazines* and *Chronicles*, the *Cacoethes Scribendi* hath infected the town so much, that almost every *shop*, or *work-room*, harbours an author; and *gentlemen* of the *file*, now leave their most useful labour at the *vice*, and toil to *polish periods*” (xi-x; emphasis in original). Hack writers are as perilous as a disease because they even polish less significant aspects such as punctuation marks in the same way in which they “gild the pill” of instruction. At the same time, Sable’s criticism of Grub Street fiction reveals its enormous success and intensive dissemination as lowbrow culture which, despite being attacked by elitist authors like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, “thwart individuals’ sensory capacity to perceive a world outside of Grub Street and its textual productions” (Lake 184). Based on recycled and repeated patterns, these productions, much like other commodities purchased for use-value, become deeply involved in a process of Marxist alienation, as long as their original authorship is lost or, if not lost, they are separated from the labour of their authors. In this context, the anonymous *Adventures of a Black Coat* is a work that is paradoxically part of the exchange process it aims to repudiate. The it-narrator denounces “a fickle marketplace where the

promiscuous circulation of stories and objects alike generates unsavoury and unstable identities for both things and humans” (Lake 187). In a modest tone, Sable characterises her tale as “a *petit* performance” in which “I have endeavoured to make the *Author* less conspicuous than the moral” (viii). It is precisely the narrator’s “experientiality” (Bernaerts et al. 74) that makes the story genuine and able to moralize, since it is filtered through the black coat’s sensibility, the foe of the novel’s credibility induced by fictional experience. Simultaneously, Sable’s “*petit* performance” tells us a lot about “the mechanical and alienated nature of modern writing and highlights the problems of literary property and of the writer’s status in an overpopulated print culture” (Flint 218). Elaborating on Jonathan Lamb’s argument that eighteenth-century object narratives unravel “an epistemological crisis” (Lamb 202), Chrystal Lake associates the sense of alienation with the arbitrary relation between words and things posited by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). According to Locke,

[W]ords, in their immediate signification, are the sensible signs of his ideas who uses them. The use men have of these marks being either to record their own thoughts, for the assistance of their own memory or, as it were, to bring out their ideas, and lay them before the view of others: words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent (Locke 291).

Strictly related to thoughts or ideas, words cannot grasp the meaning of material reality and, warns Locke, “it is a perverting the use of words, and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for any thing but those ideas we have in our own minds” (Locke 292). Locke thus avers that we can erroneously and confusingly use words that allegedly signify the materiality of things, not the ideas in our minds. If constantly employed in a perverted manner, words “excite certain ideas, as if the objects themselves which are apt to produce them did actually affect the senses” (Locke 292). In Lake’s view, the Lockean philosophy of language is paradigmatic of the epistemological issues disclosed by Sable, in that the literary works produced by Grub Street are the epitome of “false consciousness,” since “novels threaten to displace material experiences with fictional ones, and such

displacement hinges on the confusion words can wreak on the senses” (Lake 187). Concerned with representing the world through sensory experience, *The Adventures of a Black Coat* criticizes novel writers for producing verisimilar representations of the world through words, rather than objects.

Afraid that readers may deem the story as a bunch of “blossomed weeds” (xii), a phrase that ironically puts the book on an equal footing with Grub Street literature, the black coat starts telling the story of its peregrinations in which it encounters morally questionable characters. Notwithstanding its episodic structure, Sable’s tale is designed as a moral lesson to be shared with its wardrobe fellow, White, whose “purity and unblemished form” will inevitably fall prey to “the many and various misfortunes thou art, in all probability heir to” (14). The it-narrator’s personal identity – contingent upon consciousness in Lockean philosophy – allows it to remember all the infelicitous incidents it was a witness to: “When I contemplate the scenes I have experienced, and meditate on the vile schemes I have been obliged to countenance in those whose sole merit and reputation arose from my close attachment to them, my very threads blush at the indignity” (16). Sable’s anthropomorphism is the subject matter of “unnatural” narratives (Bernaerts 74), which transgress or defamiliarize³ the normative narrative forms specific to the novel. Challenging readers’ perspective on standard – as human – narrative models, the it-narrator sees and feels like a human, gradually engaging them in an empathetic process. Despite the unfamiliar manner of narrating, readers can imagine the cognitive and emotional makeup of the coat. The moment it starts being lodged in a Monmouth Street shop is a telling example: “Here properly I may say I began to exist; my heart dilated with joy at the prospect of seeing life, and associating with the various characters that visit this place” (17-18). Displaying “a dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization, the familiar and the strange, human and non-human experience” (Bernaerts 75), the object tale reworks concepts such as identity and existence in order to deplore human nature and the capitalistic conditions mirrored by the plot.

Taking the form of autobiography, the black coat symbolizes human feelings and desires tightly related to the social and commercial value of objects as well as social class. Hired by various owners who wish to pose as respectable gentlemen, Sable

³ I employ Victor Shklovsky’s term “defamiliarization,” defined in his essay “Art as Technique” (1917): “The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12).

becomes a picaresque character directly involved in episodic experiences of the road and, most significantly, in “indiscriminate changes of ownership” (Flint 212) inextricably linked to the characters’ pursuit of wealth or self-interest. Apart from satirizing the vice of materialism, moral it-narrators like Sable condemn their hardhearted owners who, once embroiled in unlawful action, inflict harm upon “many of our community,” which “frequently brought home with them marks of various disasters, sometimes being dragged through a horse-pond, at other times rolled in a kennel, besides numberless canings and kickings” (19). Christopher Flint has rightfully suggested that the object and its owner are sentimentally disjointed because “the speaking object’s effectiveness as a narrator derives from its proximity to human beings, but as these objects frequently proclaim, human subjects rarely deserve their attention” (Flint 215-216). Although endowed with moral conscience and human sensitivities, the black coat is itself an object exchanged for profit or employed for utilitarian purposes which, according to Adam Smith’s terminology, underlie humans’ desire for “self-improvement” (Smith 37). In the context of the Enlightenment, the shift from “*homo civilis* to *homo economicus* (...) involved the rationalization of selfishness and self-interest as enlightened ideology, the privatization of virtue and the de-moralization of luxury, pride, selfishness and avarice” (Porter 396). A product of eighteenth-century capitalist consumer society, the black coat metonymically and metaphorically adumbrates what Karl Marx has termed “commodity fetishism,” i. e. “a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx). This process of reification bespeaks the nature of commodity exchange in *The Adventures of a Black Coat*, a title in which the indefinite article points to a thing chosen from a myriad other commodities ready for consumption. Flint pertinently contends that “the eighteenth-century speaking object is almost always a product of manufacture rather than a part of nature, and its satiric vision of the world arises from its particular experience with human commerce” (Flint 212). Emphasizing the manner in which people are defined by the objects they own, narrators like the black coat unmask the moral worth of the characters and, most significantly, shows that “people do *not* exist in self-evident autonomy, aloof from objects, detached from and prior to the things that make and unmake their world” (Festa 311; emphasis in original). In a reflecting tone, Sable admits that it is people’s “gratification of the passions and senses,” rather than reason, which “seems to be the chief consideration and stimulator of all their actions” (124-125). By contemplating

“the soul of this society (...) immersed in its commodities” (Douglas 153), the it-narrator tries to decode their owners’ moral profile by scrutinizing their physical features: “I employed myself in an endeavour to discover, from the physiognomy of the people present, the various expectations that might be traced in each countenance” (27). The gallery of characters that Sable encounters along the road stands as living proof of the vicious nature of some apparently honest gentlemen who are in fact impostors of all sorts.

Excited about “seeing characters and life, for which I had a longing desire that seemed implanted in my nature” (24), the coat is first hired by an “occasional gentleman” (18), a daring Irish footman who pretends to be a talented actor. Addressing to a stage manager at Drury Lane Theatre, the “Hibernian Roscius” (21) requires his salary before proving his acting skills that vie with those of another well-paid famous actor who is “a favourite of the town” (22). Rejected by the manager, the enraged footman returns home, where he throws the coat on the floor and resumes “the humble duties of his station” (23). Passed on to an agreeable gentleman who asks for another term as an official of the embassy to the court of Spain, Sable discovers his cunningness when he seeks to convince a peer that his skills, in which he invested a large amount of money, ought to be rewarded “with something that might retrieve my shattered fortune” (31). The third adventure foregrounds a “genteelish” (35) kind of person whom Sable regards as “a contradiction” (36). Before long he proves to be a swindler who fails to pay for his breakfast, his chocolate and a coach who drops him in Fleet Street and who uses his trickery to steal an auctioned watch and a golden chain. By the same token, the coat observes how another sagacious sharper purloins a rocqueleau. Disheartened to see a clergyman, a farmer, “a laced beau” and “an honest looking tradesman” displaying “watches, rings, swords, snuff-boxes, purses with money, and other things of value” (71), the object narrator reinforces the empirical dictum according to which seeing is believing: “Gods! exclaimed Sable, could I have credited that such things were really practised, had I not been a witness to them!” (73). The portrait of a person dressed in military uniform is also revealing. He is a waiter in disguise and a veritable fortune hunter who tries to marry Susan, the daughter of a butcher. Mr. Sirloin is aware that his wife’s wish to elevate their daughter to the status of a gentlewoman might have a tragic outcome, which is finally confessed by our narrator: Susan becomes a prostitute because of her desire to climb up the social ladder. Similarly, Sable tells the story of an ostensibly rich man who tricks women into

marrying him in order to lay hands on their dowry, as well as that of a fortune teller, “a scheme which his thorough knowledge of the town, together with a great variety of anecdotes (...) made him the best qualified to act of any man in London” (127). Sable concludes her tale with a description of Mr. Stanza, “a gamester, fortune hunter and sharper” (173-174) who ends up as a “lucrative” (174) poet in prison. Sable excoriates the baseness of all these human types that “are esteemed the most worthy” because they are “the most wicked” (73). I side with Aileen Douglas, who maintains that “the logic” of it-narratives “is the logic of consumerism and their most pointed irony is that the objects for which human beings have sacrificed virtue and nature become the last refuge of both” (Douglas 153). Stressing the vicious nature of trade, Henry Fielding writes that “the Narrowness of their Fortune is changed into Wealth; the Simplicity of their Manners into Craft; their Frugality into Luxury; their Humility into Pride, and their Subjection into Equality” (Fielding 70). Passing for “occasional gentlemen,” these crooks attest to the fact that “ever-widening, ever-quickenning, systems of trade and exchange threatened traditional order and hierarchy” (Douglas 150) in the same way in which the massive amounts of commodities exchanged in society cater to all tastes. In Fleet Prison, where Mr. Stanza is held, the black coat becomes fully aware of “the lack of any principle of honesty and sense of shame” (171) that vile characters unravel not only in jail, but also in society, where one’s social status depends on the accumulation of wealth. In a nutshell, the speaking object vehemently criticizes both deception as a means of ensuring upward mobility and mercantilism, which degrade people’s morals. In a society in which individuals fail to contribute to the common good taken as the foundation of civic humanism, Sable observes that commerce underlies human relations. The episode in which a theatre manager dismisses a tragedy written by an author because “yours has no procession” (80) is a case in point. He even tears it to pieces, telling the author that “some of the servants can give you the best account” (82) of the pages that have been ripped up. Sarcastic as he may be, the manager points to the literary taste of the time dictated by the logic of the market. In this context, “the principles of commerce and trade displace the self-determination of human authors who have to follow the taste of their consumers” (Alber 60). By the same token, Flint suggests that “the author is merely a possession, a medium, a specie, reduced to the status of an artefact (...) in a world where print commerce dictates the value of words” (Flint 222). Authors are thus detached from their works and become as objectified as the texts they produce, since “the value-relation between the products

of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom” (Marx).

Critics like Bonnie Blackwell have interpreted the black coat in tandem with female sexuality, more specifically prostitution. According to Blackwell, Sable’s “life of contingency, circulation, and neglect is a female one” (Blackwell 272), which is yet another way of viewing it (as object) or she (as woman) as a commodity. The black coat metaphorically embodies the fate of Susan Sirloin, whose ideal of becoming a lady of society is inculcated by her mother’s mercantile ambitions. The it-narrator pities her, saying that “my censure was involuntarily fixed up on the ill conduct of her parents, but chiefly, upon her mother’s ill-placed pride and silly expectations, *that something might happen*” (186; emphasis in original). Arguing in favour of an analogy between the speaking object and “the sexually exploited female body” (Blackwell 268), the critic insists on the implicit meanings disclosed by the narrative of the black coat which, enmeshed in relations of exchange, fulfils its role as use-value: “I was soon introduced (...) to the class of occasional gentlemen, each of whom I had the mortification to see frequently depart from our prison of dust and moths, and enjoy liberty and fresh air” (18).

As I hope to have shown, the speaking object in a circulation novel such as *The Adventures of a Black Coat* is employed in order to challenge the new epistemology of the novel, on the one hand, and to satirize the commodification of human relations, on the other. Thinking and feeling like a human, Sable becomes a critical voice meant to instruct readers in general, and White, the reader within the text in particular, in an empathetic way. As Jan Alber has pointed out, “so much attention focuses on material objects and commodities that one of these entities suddenly begins to out-human humans” (Alber 62) in the hope that it will recount a realistic experience through the sense of touch and sight. Acting as a consumer good narrator that is part of a network of commodities, the humanized black coat critiques the very logic of commercial transactions it is subject to. Bluntly, the object narrator speaks about commodities which erode the ethical foundation of society. When Sable is about to bring its story to a close, someone takes its companion, White, out of the wardrobe, an indication that the pervasive force of consumerism can hardly be controlled. In epistemological terms, the it-narrator’s unfinished story is “not at liberty to set down words that were really never uttered,” leaving “Sable’s last sentence broken, rather than put down any thing we have not authority for, as some historians do” (188). It-narratives thus never “gild

the pill so thick” or, in other words, represent reality in crude, anti-mimetic terms, satirizing eighteenth-century people’s addiction to material culture and, concurrently, lamenting the impact of commodities on human consciousness. Related by a speaking object, the story aims to challenge readers’ “cognitive biases” (Zunshine 144), proposing a pragmatic perspective on recurrent literary themes and patterns imposed by the demands of the eighteenth-century literary marketplace.

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