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VID STEVANOVIĆ

Objective Observers – Curious Commodities

It-Narratives in the Long 18th Century

Objective Observers – Curious Commodities

It-Narratives in the Scientific, Economic,
and Monetary Discourses of the Long
18th Century

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List of Abbreviations

I cite from Blackwell's *British It Narratives, 1750–1830* wherever possible, as this is often the most accessible version of a given it-narrative. In some cases, mostly where certain passages are not included or the texts lie beyond the timeframe of the anthology, I cite digitalized original editions. Since the full titles of many it-narratives are often very formulaic and/or cumbersome, the central texts will be quoted in the following short titles, given in order of publication:

Golden Spy	The Golden Spy; Or, a Political Journal of the British Nights Entertainments (1709)
Silver Shilling	Adventures of a Silver Shilling (1710)
Old Shoe	The Secret History of an Old Shoe (1734)
Halfpenny	The Adventures of a Halfpenny (1753)
Tye-Wig	The Genuine Memoirs of an Unfortunate Tye-Wig (1751)
Quill	The Genuine and Most Surprizing Adventure of a Very Unfortunate Goose-Quill (1751)
Waistcoat	The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat (1751)
Post-Chaise	The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise (1753)
Slippers	The History and Adventures of a Lady's Slippers and Shoes (1754)
Pocket-Pistol	The Adventures and Metamorphoses of Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol (1754)

Sedan	The Sedan (1757)
Black Coat	The Adventures of a Black Coat (1760)
Chrysal	Chrysal; or, The Adventures of a Guinea (1760–1765)
Bale of Goods	The Adventures of a Bale of Goods (1766)
Farthing	The Adventures of a Farthing (1769)
Bank Note	The Adventures of a Bank-Note (1770–1771)
Birmingham Counterfeit	The Birmingham Counterfeit; or, Invisible Spectator (1772)
Indusiata	Indusiata; or, The Adventures of a Silk Petticoat (1773)
Pence	Adventures of a Six-and-Nine-Pence (1774)
Quire of Paper	Adventures of a Quire of Paper (1779)
Coach	The Adventures of a Hackney Coach (1781)
Rupee	The Adventures of a Rupee (1782)
Cane	Phantoms; or, The Adventures of a Gold-Headed Cane (1783)
Pincushion	The Adventures of a Pincushion (ca. 1784)
Aerostatic Spy	The Aerostatic Spy; or, Excursion with an Air Balloon (1785)
Cork-Screw	The Adventures of a Cork-Screw (1785)
Silver Penny	The Adventures of a Silver Penny (ca. 1786)

Watch	The Adventures of a Watch! (1788)
Shilling	The Adventures of a Shilling (1788–89)
Argal	Argal; or, the Silver Devil (1794)
Argentum	Argentum or, the Adventures of a Shilling (1794)
Thimble	The Silver Thimble (1799)
Bad Shilling	The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland (1805–06)
Silver Token	The Origin and Adventures of a Hull Eighteen-Penny Silver Token (1811)
Feather	The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality (1812)
Old Wig	Memoirs of an Old Wig (1815)
One-Pound	Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note (1819)
Month's Adventures	A Month's Adventures of a Base Shilling (ca. 1820)
Aureus	Aureus; or, The Life and Opinions of a Sovereign (1824)
Scotch Guinea	The Life and Adventures of a Scotch Guinea Note (1826)
Tree	Transformation of a Beech Tree (1828)

When quoting from these texts, original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are preserved.

Additional Abbreviations Used

- FA** The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe
RC The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner
GT Gulliver's Travels, or Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World
IO Institutio Oratoria
RR The Adventures of Roderick Random

The dates of original publication are only given when necessary for distinguishing sources.

Preface

This project would not have been possible without the support of numerous friends and colleagues.

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Za Maju.

1 Introduction

The understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself; and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance and make it its own object.

John Locke

Money [...] the great wheel of circulation, [...] in the course of [...] circulation, distribute[s] to every man the revenue which properly belongs to him.

Adam Smith

Usage however is the surest pilot in speaking, and we should treat language as currency minted with the public stamp.

Marcus Fabius Quintilianus

1.1 The Biography of the Object

In 2010, Sarah Ahmed publishes a contribution to the volume *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. In the essay titled “Orientation Matters”, she explores questions of materiality by following the motif of the writing table through the central works of modern theory. At a crucial point in the essay, when Ahmed aims to complicate the relationship phenomenology takes towards objects, she invites the reader to imagine a table:

This table was made by somebody, and there is a history to its arrival, history of transportation, which could be redescribed as a history of *changing hands*. [...] This table, you might say, has a story. What a story it could tell. (Ahmed 2010: 243, emphases in the original)

This observation serves as the starting point for asking what a change of perspective between subject and object could mean. Ahmed speculates how, “through its biography” (ibid.), the table would allow “us

to tell a larger story: a story not only of ‘things’ changing hands but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labour of others” (ibid.). Here, the biography of the object promises a unique perspective on a subject matter that would otherwise remain hidden.

Although quoting a number of eminent philosophers in her exploration of the biography of the object, Ahmed does not mention a scholar who is concerned with precisely this question. In 1929, the Russian literary critic Sergei Tretyakov publishes an essay titled “Биография Вещи” (“The Biography of the Object”), polemicizing against the dominant position of the literary protagonist in the central works of the canon:

In the classical novel that is based upon the individual hero’s biography, the relative scale of the characters is largely reminiscent of Egyptian wall paintings. The colossal pharaoh is on the throne at the center; near him, in a slightly smaller size, is his wife; still smaller are the ministers and army commanders; and finally in faceless heaps of copper coins, is the entire varied mass of the population: the servants, the soldiers, the slaves. (2006: 58)

In foregrounding the degree to which all elements of narrative are subordinated to the single protagonist, Tretyakov draws on the imagery of the despotic centralism of ancient Egypt. His own time resonates with this imagery. At the historical moment when these passages are written, Stalin has just maneuvered himself into a position of total control over the party. The doctrine of socialist realism will soon follow, marking the definitive end of the Soviet avant-garde. Although it becomes an official policy only in 1934, its proponents are already visibly changing the cultural landscape. At such a historical moment, Tretyakov stages a Marxist attack on the doctrine of the ‘living person’¹ for the way in which it compresses multiple actants into a single heroic character that

¹ In literature, this is expressed in the slogan of the *zhivoi chelovek/живой человек*, the living person, championed by groups such as the *VAPP/ВОАП* (The All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers). The concept is meant to advocate for psychological realism in the novel as the most appropriate method for reflecting the human experience (cf. Tretyakov 2006: 58).

becomes an unrealistic aesthetic convention (cf. Tretyakov 2006: 58). In the words of Osip Brik: “Heroism is a literary device that makes possible the attribution to a single person (the hero) a sum of deeds (exploits) that in reality have been produced by the labors of an entire series of people” (Brik 1972: 85 quoted in Tretyakov 2006: 58). Tretyakov, following the critique voiced by Brik, denounces “[t]he Onegin, Rudins, Karamazovs, and Bezukhovs” as “independent planetary systems around which characters, ideas, objects, and historical processes orbit submissively” (59), not even “suns, but just common planets that have mistaken themselves for suns” (ibid.), waiting for “a Copernicus who will put them in their place” (ibid.). Tretyakov’s essay thus presents a passionate polemic against such a “Ptolemaic system of literature” (ibid.) that reduces the social field to a host of atomized bodies circulating around a humanist kernel. He attacks this system as essentially idealist.²

In order to counter this reductionist idealism, Tretyakov calls for a new poetics – a “Copernicus” (Tretyakov 2006: 59), able to decentre the human protagonist and offer a new perspective on social forces. Ahmed refers to the same effect of estrangement³ when she calls for “a disorientation device, making things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world” (2010: 254). Like her, Tretyakov finds such a poetics in the concept that gives his essay its title: the biography of the object. The essay ends with an emphatic plea for a new kind of literature, one in which not a person moves through a world of objects, but an object through a world of people:

2 Tretyakov calls it idealist in the sense that it abstracts from the economic forces acting upon individuals, removing these individuals from the systems of production and instead focusing on their private lives. Instead of dealing with the everyday processes shaping social reality, these authors focus on the deviant and extraordinary, “[h]ence the tragedies of hunger, love, and jealousy ‘as such’” (Tretyakov 2006: 59).

3 In the course of this study, I use ‘estrangement’ and ‘defamiliarization’ interchangeably, both referring to Shklovsky’s concept of *ostranenie*/остранение.

We urgently need books about our economic resources, about objects made by people, and about people that make objects. Our politics grow out of economics, and there is not a single second in a person's day uninvolved in economics or politics. Books such as *The Forest, Bread, Coal, Iron, Flax, Cotton, Paper*, [...] have not been written. (2006: 62)

Luckily, Tretyakov is wrong. We can indeed find a large number of texts that qualify for such a description, albeit in a context far removed from the last days of the Soviet avant-garde: British prose satire of the 18th century. Not only the stories of flax and paper⁴, but also those of coats, coaches, watches, wigs, pens, air balloons, and above all, the stories of the “faceless heaps of [...] coins” (58) that Tretyakov imagines, are told in a genre nowadays usually referred to as it-narratives. In these texts, objects tell the stories of their lives, generally through first-person narration. The genre is inaugurated, as I will argue, when the human frame-narrator in Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* (1709) remarks how “a half Louis d'Ore, which observing [his] uneasy Curiosity, with a true French Briskness familiarly call[s] to [him]” (5). Thus begins a tale in which a group of coins will each tell the stories of their circulations through human societies, sparking numerous successors. By 1783, a critic laments how “[e]very thing has had its adventures, from a Bank Note to a Shilling, from a Coach to a Sedan, [...] to a Gold-headed Cane” (“Review of ‘Phantoms’” 234). These texts are highly popular in their time, with the best known, Charles Gildon's *Chrysal; or, the Adventures of a Guinea*, going through twenty editions till the end of the century (cf. Festa 2016: 134).

Despite the historical distance, the essays of the Soviet critic and the British-Australian scholar are surprisingly pertinent to these texts. It-narrators talk of being “born” (*Farthing* 38), evoke their “Birth & Family” (*Cane* 47), refer to their “parents” (*One Pound* 231), cite their “brethren” (*Aureus* 11), and allude in their titles to ‘lives’, ‘memoirs’ and above all ‘adventures’. Thus, it seems we have found a contender for the biography of an object called for in the essay of Sarah Ahmed, who, like

4 Such stories, for instance, are told in *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, published anonymously in 1779.

Tretyakov, does not seem to know of this genre. However, while Ahmed fails to connect her speculations to it-narratives, new materialism, the philosophical current she adopts in this essay, soon draws on these texts. Particularly new materialism's interest in the agency of objects becomes central for readings of it-narratives.⁵ Yet, we will see how this stands at odds with the fact that most of these narrators stress their lack of agency.

Instead, this genre hinges on two central propositions that correspond to two aspects informing the idea of the object-biography. For one, its change of narrative focus decentres the human subject and offers a perspective that is not prone to the idealist distortion of classical literature that displays “[t]he whole world” as “essentially just a collection of details that belong to [the protagonist]” (Tretyakov 2006: 58). In contrast to this, it-narrators emphasize how their observations differ from those of their human counterparts. They frequently call on their readers “to bear in mind WHO and WHAT” (*Aureus* 16, emphases in the original) they are, stressing the idiosyncrasy of their unique perspective, reminding us that “there is no intelligence, such as [a coin] can give” (*Golden Spy* 304) and claiming to “always speak the truth” (*Watch* 148). Their claims promise an objectivity that would stand against the tendency of the human hero to “devour[...] and subjectivize[...] all reality” (Tretyakov 2006: 59).

On the other hand, this perspective is closely connected to the impressive mobility of these narrators, which finds its apex when the narrator in Thomas Bridge's *The Adventures of a Bank Note* (1770–1774) goes through the hands of eight successive owners in one short passage (cf. *Bank Note* 142f.). This compositional structure can be understood as “a conveyor belt”, on which “[e]very segment introduces a new group of people” (Tretyakov 2006: 61). The objects in it-narratives are integrated in economic circuits and quickly change owners, accumulating episodes from their lives in the process. By rearranging narrative structure thus, the object boasts of an „absolute Freedom of circulating with the Sun about the World” (*Golden Spy* 7), that results in “an extraordinary capacity to incorporate human material” (Tretyakov 2006: 61), as when

5 The edited volume Ahmed contributes to – *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* – testifies to this interest in its title.

the narrators of *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* (1812) or *The Adventures of a Bank Note* tie together the lives of people from the lowest and the highest ranks of society. It-narratives portray a large number of different people who approach the object at the cross-section of the conveyor belt through their different social positions and can thereby “cut [...] across classes” (Tretyakov 2006: 61). Whereas the reader of the biographical novel mistakes the hero’s social qualities for personal traits, the biography of the object reverses the process (cf. *ibid.*), putting emphasis on the social genesis of the individual object and thereby connecting lives from all ranks of society.

1.2 The Question of Genre

The title of this work, *Objective Observers – Curious Commodities*, reflects the way in which my leading hypotheses are intertwined. It-narrators are objective in a double sense. They stand in opposition to the world of subjects and are yet called upon by these subjects as guarantors of a superior epistemology that is not affected by subjective distortion. As commodities, they have “a thirst for knowledge” (*Ostrich Feather* 287), that is, they are curious in their satirical inquisitiveness that aims to discover the unpleasant realities behind social masks. However, they are also curious in the ways in which they either providentially return to their original owners or hope to continue their circulation indefinitely. In this, my interest lies less in positing a space of autonomy for these narrators and more in how their stories foreground the very lack thereof.⁶ I share Tretyakov’s enthusiasm for the ways in which the biography of the object is conducive to incorporating diverse human lives (cf. 2006: 61), but I also follow him in the sense that I am not interested in an idealist humanism, but in the depiction of social forces as they express themselves in these individuals and in the satiric portrayal of their “social neuroses and professional diseases” (*ibid.*).

Although I speak of it-narratives as a genre, this is by no means as self-evident as might seem at first, and therefore calls for a short clarification. The anthology *British It-Narratives, 1750–1830* by Blackwell et al.

⁶ For the discussion of agency in it-narratives, see the following section.

serves as a good starting point for this discussion. As indicated by the title, the editors proceed from the idea that it-narratives are a British genre that has its heyday from 1750–1830. Upon a closer look, most of the texts are published in England, specifically in London, where a large contingent of grub-street writers produces these stories, often in a serial fashion, for the literary marketplace (cf. Blackwell 2007: 192–194). Yet, there are also notable exceptions, such as the anonymous *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in The Kingdom of Ireland* (1805), published in Dublin, and Robert Ainslie's *The Life and Adventures of a Scotch Guinea Note* (1826), published in Edinburgh. There are also a couple of it-narratives written in the American colonies and later the United States, although the trend starts later than in Britain. The texts are literary imports. James Cooper's novel *Autobiography of a Pocket-Handkerchief* (1843) is probably the closest to its British relatives.

In France, we find earlier examples of narrating objects. Take, for instance, *Le Sofa*, published by Crébillon in 1742. It tells the story of a young courtier whose soul is cursed to inhabit a sofa and who tells of the encounters of the couples who meet on this piece of furniture. *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, written in 1748 by Diderot, is concerned with similar themes. A sultan is presented with a magic ring that gives the gift of speech to the *bijoux*, that is, the private parts of various ladies at court. They tell the wearer of the ring a series of stories about the sexual exploits of their 'owners' as well as the stories of deceit and corruption that go along.

In the German-speaking context, Grimmelshausen's *Der Abentheuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668) employs a sort of it-narrator in the episode of the *Schermesser*. The *Schermesser*, a euphemism for toilet paper, tells the story of how it is first harvested as a hemp plant and subsequently manufactured into different pieces of clothing and writing paper, before finally finding its end as a piece of toilet paper and telling its life story to its prospective user.⁷ Only a few years later, a narrating coin starts its circulation in a Dutch text, *De Wandelende en Spreekende Dukaat* (1682), which uses its coin-narrator to convey satirical

7 The other object-narrative in German is a later translation of a prominent English text. Helenus Scott's *The Rupee* (1782) is translated into German in 1789 as *Die Rupie*.

observations in a manner not unlike later English it-narratives (cf. Link 1980: 75). Like the ducat, the first English text that can be said to employ the device of a circulating object in a similar fashion uses a coin: John Taylor's *A shilling or, The Trauuailes of Twelue-Pence* (1621) (cf. Link 1980: 41). Nevertheless, Taylor's shilling, like the ducat, stands relatively isolated in literary history. Such early examples are few and far between and it is often impossible to establish connections between them.

This raises the question of how to account for the fact that we find an overwhelming clustering of such stories told by things in 18th-century Britain. Genre, I argue, can provide an answer for this question because it allows us to proceed from the assumption that different generic forms provide symbolic solutions to the social contradictions of their time (cf. Habjan 2016: 16). In this, genres function as "problem-solving devices, which address a contradiction of their environment, offering an imaginary resolution by means of their formal organization" (Moretti 2013a: 141). Proceeding from the social contradictions of a historical period thus offers a point of access from which not only the formal organization of texts can be understood, but from which this organization can in turn illuminate the social contradictions and thereby explain the emergence of a genre at a specific historical moment and geographical place. I follow Jernej Habjan in understanding the re-emergence of genre in world literature studies and adjacent fields as a specific symptom of the return of history in the last decades (cf. Habjan 2016: 16) and connect my approach to the broader critical task to "[a]lways historicize" (Jameson 1981: 9).

Frequently, it-narrators refer to a common ancestry, pointing out their connections to texts that came before them. One of the later it-narratives, Peregrine Oakley's *Aureus* (1824), calls back to its predecessors as "beings of yesterday" (*Aureus* 11), and evokes the tradition of the most successful it-narrative of the 18th century, Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal; Or, Adventures of a Guinea* (1760). Conflating physical and literary material, it speaks of itself as "formed of a portion of the identical substance from which was moulded his renowned ancestor of the name of Chrysal, whose life had been handed down to posterity under the title of *The Adventures of a Guinea*" (*Aureus* 11, emphases in the original). The it-narrator in Robert Ainslie's *The Life and Adventures*

of a *Scotch Guinea Note* (1826) goes even further. Literalizing the metaphor of family resemblances, it cites the “members of [...] [its] family”, among them its “brother the golden Guinea, and [its] cousin the Rupee” (*Scotch Guinea* 5), referring to *Chrysal* and *The Adventures of a Rupee*. *The Genuine Memoirs and Most Surprising Adventures of a very Unfortunate Goose-Quill* (1751) incorporates the narrator of Christopher Smart’s *The Genuine Memoirs of an Unfortunate Tye-Wig* (1751) in its story, showing both objects as being owned by the same hack-writer (cf. *Quill* 20). In *The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat* (1751), in turn, the it-narrator sympathizes with “the unfortunate Goose-Quill” (12).⁸

This generic self-consciousness goes so far that even an early narrative like *The Genuine Memoirs of an Unfortunate Tye-Wig* offers a satiric quip on some of the conventions of the genre. Having seen a wig and pondered on its life-story, the frame-narrator in this tale concludes he “shou’d walk home peaceably, go to Bed, sleep soundly, and in the morning write a Vision upon the Occasion” (*Tye-Wig* 3), thereby playing on the fact that many early it-narratives introduce the talking object in such a way.

However, the question of genealogy need not play out in the content of the texts. Consider, for example, a tale that is left out in Blackwell’s anthology, Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709). The story precedes the heyday of it-narratives by four decades, and there are only a few similar texts published before 1750. Yet, Gildon’s it-narrator inaugurates many of the narrative devices that will characterize the genre. It is the first text to draw emphatically on the reliability of the object-narrator and its epistemological superiority to human narrators, and the first to introduce the frame-narrator in a setting suggestive of a dream-episode. This is a device that is taken up only one year later in Joseph Addison’s⁹ *Adventures of a Shilling* (1710) and becomes one of the

⁸ The stories of the goose quill, tye-wig, and the waistcoat, as well as *The Travels of MS Le Post Chaise* (1753) are further tied together by belonging to an exchange between some of the leading journalists of the time that is known as the Paper Wars (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 3, 2).

⁹ The editor of *The Tatler*, the periodical in which *Adventures of a Shilling* is published, is Richard Steele. A friend to both Addison and Gildon, Steele writes an appeal to the Queen when the latter is accused of libel (cf. Steele 1809: 82-92) and would certainly have been familiar with Gildon’s work.

staples of the genre, to the point of being parodied by the tye-wig in 1751. Even without being clearly referenced by later narratives, Gildon's text thus deserves to be considered the "first, fully-fledged it-narrative in English" (Lamb 2001: 213). With this inclusion, I broaden the scope of the genre somewhat in relation to Blackwell et al., yet I narrow it down considerably along another front.

The most prominent exclusion I perform concerns animal-narratives. Although they are sometimes grouped with it-narratives, most notably in Mark Blackwell's anthology that includes a volume titled *Animals*, I hold that these texts are adjacent to the genre but that most of them belong to a different literary tradition. This is a point Blackwell himself implicitly makes some five years earlier, in the title of the edited volume *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, which differentiates it-narratives from texts using animal narrators. Following such a distinction, I connect this to a central observation by Christopher Flint, who points out that in 18th-century literature, animals crucially differ from object-narrators in that they function not as satiric observers of human society, but as stand-ins for human actors. Animal-narrators parody human subjects while object-narrators offer satirical observations of them (cf. Flint 2007: 182):

The stories they [manufactured narrators] relate differ from those told by animals or vegetation, such as *The Vocal Forest* (Howell); *The History of Pompey the Little*; *The Adventures of a Lap-Dog* (Coventry); and *History of a French Louse*, which derive from Aesop, Ovid, and Apuleius and do not equate nonhuman narration with textual circulation. (ibid.)

This observation must be specified. The distinction Flint makes between manufactured goods and animals should be rephrased as that between commodities and animals. The crucial aspect of textual circulation hinges not on manufacture but on the fact that the object in question is a commodity.¹⁰ Thus, some animal-narratives can function as it-narratives. Where the story tends to focus on the commodity-character of

¹⁰ This topic is addressed at length at the beginning of the third chapter of this book.

the animal in question, we can observe similar patterns of circulation and a similar satirical perspective as in other it-narratives. When the reification of the narrator is foregrounded to a sufficient degree, the narrator takes on the characteristic perspective of an object. A similar distinction applies to what Flint calls “vegetation”. Howell’s *Dodona’s Grove, or, The Vocal Forest* (1640), is an allegorical poem in which plants stand in for contemporary persons. Later it-narrators, on the other hand, are only shown as plants insofar as they are the resources from which the commodity that goes on to tell its story is produced.¹¹

Yet, in most cases, the narratives of animals and plants can be said to belong to another literary tradition, going back to Aesop, Ovid and Apuleius, as Flint argues. In addition, animal-narrators are generally written later than it-narratives, running parallel to them for a while, and then branching off into a clearly separate generic tradition towards the beginning of the 19th century.¹² Thus, even though sharing some of the traits of it-narratives that would situate them at the periphery of the genre, most of these texts cannot be subsumed under the heading of it-narratives. They lack many of the traits I identify as central for it-narratives. They are frequently concerned with questions of agency, for instance when the narrators of *The History of Pompey the Little* (1751) or *The Life and Adventures of a Cat* (1760) run away from their owners, like many other animal-narrators do, or try to do. Additionally, both feature a narrative written in the third person, centring not on the people whose lives, in the sense of Tretyakov’s “conveyor belt” (2006: 61), intersect with the cat, but on the life of this animal itself. Unlike it-narrators, animals thus often carry proper names, setting them apart as objects of human attention and affection from the largely nameless it-narrators.¹³ Where animal-narrators do not focus on the lives of their protagonists, they are often either allegorical stand-ins for children or objects towards which children are supposed to learn empathy (cf. Keenleyside

11 E.g., *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper* (1779) or *The Transformation of a Beech Tree* (1828).

12 This observation is examined further in the fourth chapter.

13 For the cases in which it-narrators carry proper names, see the conclusion to this study.

2012: xvi).¹⁴ In addition, they are less recognizable in contemporary discussions of the genre, establish fewer intertextual links to object-narratives, and – most importantly – their social function is a different one. They react to different social problems. Thus, as they mostly fail to adhere to any of the three aspects for generic definition outlined above, I consciously exclude animal-narrators from this study. The only exception is Tolstoy’s story *Khlostomer/Холстомер*, which I draw on in the second chapter in a different context, as a prime example for the processes of reification that make it-narrators out of animals.

Interestingly, the branching off of animal-narrators as a clearly distinct genre signals the end of it-narratives in the narrow sense. By the early Victorian era, as we will see in the fourth chapter, most it-narratives trade the satirical observations of earlier texts for the domestic and educational setting that characterizes animal narratives, thereby being transformed into a genre of children’s literature. This also means that most of the examples from the American context are excluded here, as they are generally from the 19th century and explicitly geared towards children (cf. Douglas 2016: 615).

Thus, the first text in this book is Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709), while the last one is the anonymous *Transformation of a Beech Tree* (1828).¹⁵ However, despite the fact that the first literary text to be examined here is published in 1709, the book itself will have a broader historical scope. The “contradictions of their environment” (Moretti 2013a: 141) to which the formal traits of it-narratives answer, I argue, have their roots outside of the boundaries of the 18th century. For one, many of the texts that prepare the discourses to which it-narratives relate fall into the second half of the 17th century. Likewise, some important it-narratives are written at the beginning of the 19th century.

¹⁴ Heather Keenleyside, the editor of the volume on animals, mentions many of the points discussed here, yet includes animals in the tradition of it-narrators, even citing claims that would see *Pompey the Little* (1751) as a founding text of the genre. Given the existence of it-narratives written before 1751 and the strong thematic and formal ties, connecting them to texts written after that, I must strongly disagree with this claim.

¹⁵ A text quoted extensively in the fourth chapter, the anonymous *The Adventures of a Halfpenny; Commonly Called a Birmingham Halfpenny* is published even later, around 1830, yet is an adaptation of a considerably older text, Bonell Thornton’s *The Adventures of a Halfpenny*, from 1753 (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 2).

The implication of a historical continuity that extends beyond the time-frame of the years 1700–1800 and is characterized by certain economic, social, and discursive formations is not my construction, but already widely established in the concept of the ‘long 18th century’. Encountering no significant event in 1700 itself, historians habitually go back to 1688 to find a date that marks an epochal break. The year of the Glorious Revolution offers a caesura that contemporaries experience as the founding moment of a new religious order and new political institutions, marked by the deposition of the Stuart line (cf. O’Gorman 2009: xi).

However, my work is less interested in the direct political context, and more eager to explore the economic and intellectual history of the long 18th century. Hence, I believe we can make a better plea for 1660 as the year that stands at the beginning of an epoch defined by rapid intellectual and economic developments. The founding of the Royal Society in 1660 begins a process whereby the new science of experimental philosophy is institutionalized. The same year sees the publication of Boyle’s *New Experiments Physico-Mechanicall*, intervening in a debate against the increasingly outdated deductive natural philosophy of Hobbes and others. Only seven years later, Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society* gives an outline of the Fellows’ methodology and codifies a new system of scientific writing that will rise to dominance in the following decades.

Yet, the Royal Society is not concerned with matters of science alone. In the year of its founding, the Navigation Acts pass parliament, establishing a system of imperial trade that would essentially remain in force until well into the 19th century (cf. Marshall 2009: 11). In the wake of this new legal framework, long distance trade begins to represent a significant contribution to English wealth in the second part of the 17th century (cf. *ibid.* 1). As Drayton points out, the Royal Society takes this opportunity to interlink English trade with the interests of science (cf. 2009: 232). England is supposed to become not only “mistress of the Ocean, but the most proper seat for the advancement of knowledge” (1959: 86), as Sprat writes in 1667. Knowledge is to have important influences on imperialism and colonization. Understanding the natural world is seen as the key to empire and trade, while trade, in turn, is seen

as a central opportunity for the gathering of new scientific knowledge (cf. Drayton 2009: 232).

The Royal Society plays another crucial role for synthesizing different social interests after 1660. Later a bishop in the Anglican church, Thomas Sprat promotes the alliance of religion and science in opposition to the religious fanaticism that dominated the period of the civil war. Together with Fellows such as Boyle and Newton, Sprat domesticizes science within the national church (cf. Drayton 2009: 234). This new ideological unity is achieved by the integration of religion into the project of English expansionism via a new understanding of Christian providence. The expansive drive inherent to the scientists' universal ambitions helps frame English expansion as a fact of rational providence (cf. Drayton 2009: 235). As Drayton points out: "By the late seventeenth century, [...] the pursuit of knowledge, commerce and colonies, religious piety, and a nascent patriotism [are] tightly bound together" (234). These developments are crucial for understanding the formal traits of it-narratives and are thus accounted for in the course of my study.¹⁶

Likewise, the end of this period is not found in 1800. The next political event that would mark a historical break is the British-Prussian victory at Waterloo, ending the long series of wars with France and changing the power dynamics on the continent. Yet, as O'Gorman notes, the end of the Napoleonic Wars is more an end than a new beginning. There is no fundamental change back home to be found around 1815 (cf. 2009: xi). Rather, I join O'Gorman in setting the upper boundary of the long 18th century around 1830. The beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria, the Reform Act of 1832, the social changes occasioned by the coming of the railway, and the end of the first industrial revolution all make valid points for locating the beginning of a new period around 1830.

At the beginning of the long 18th century, England is an expanding power that starts to be increasingly influential both on the continent and on the colonial stage. At the end of this protracted century, Britain is an industrializing world power. In the meantime, a middle class

16 This nexus is addressed in more detail towards the end of the third chapter.

emerges in the period from 1660 to 1730 (cf. Earle 1991) and becomes an increasingly important factor of public life. The rise of this class finally dovetails with the establishment of a new communicative sphere in which ideas are publicly negotiated by an increasingly vocal reading public (cf. Habermas 1989).

Hence, the long 18th century is a period of considerable social changes along multiple vectors. Yet, the pace of these changes differs considerably. Marshall points out how in the course of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), the importance of empire grows increasingly prominent, being now seen as vital for Britain's economic situation, even vital for the survival of the nation as such (cf. 2009: 1f.). The colonial expansion that follows paves the way for British dominance in international trade, which in turn transforms the local economy at an increasingly fast pace. Since I understand the emergence of it-narratives as a reaction to social and intellectual developments, this acceleration of changes is indicative of an intensification of social contradictions that can help explain *why* this genre flourishes precisely in the second half of the 18th century.

However, it is also during this time that literary prose writing develops from the (proto-)novelistic texts of Aphra Behn and John Bunyan to the formal innovations of Jane Austen and the historical fiction of Walter Scott that establishes the novelist as a commercially successful profession. At the beginning of this period, the first contenders for the label of 'novel' are published. At its end, the new genre is firmly canonized in anthologies such as Ballantyne's *The Novelist's Library* (1820). The rise of this form has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of the development of "formal realism" (Watt 1959: 28), in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, or as the result of a dialectical struggle between "naïve empiricism" and "extreme skepticism" (2002: 165–167), as Michael McKeon puts it in *The Origin of the English Novel*. It-narratives, rising to prominence in the last decades of the century, a period long regarded as the nadir in the ascendancy of the novel (cf. Blackwell 2007: 187), will have to be understood as carving out a literary space for themselves in the middle of this process.

1.3 Understanding It-Narratives

The work of Mark Blackwell is crucial for the current rediscovery of it-narratives – particularly the publications of *The Secret Life of Things* (2007) and *British It-Narratives, 1750–1830* (2012). Yet, there are important contributions to the study of these texts that predate these works but enjoy much less visibility.

Notably, there is an early study in German that deals with it-narratives but is absent from current work on the genre, Viktor Link's *Die Tradition der aussermenschlichen Erzählperspektive in der englischen und amerikanischen Literatur*¹⁷ (1980). Link focuses on non-human narration in the broad sense and thus includes several texts that fall outside of the scope I have laid out for it-narratives above. Nevertheless, he makes several central observations that later critics will repeat, such as the frequent allusions to empiricist theory or the transgression of class-barriers found in it-narratives. What is more, he draws on an English text that likewise enjoys little attention today. Richard K. Meeker's *Experiments in Point of View: Animal, Vegetable and Mineral Narrators in the Eighteenth Century English Novel* is to my knowledge the earliest study on it-narratives in the modern critical tradition. Written in 1955, Meeker's work prefigures Viktor Link's in its focus on narrative perspective. However, the taxonomy it suggests in its title seems highly idiosyncratic today, including texts that even the broadest definitions of it-narratives tend to exclude. Besides animals, vegetation, and minerals, Meeker also includes apparitions, ghosts, humans that can turn invisible, and even abstract concepts,¹⁸ extending the scope of his study well into the territory of fantastical fiction and allegory.

Meeker's and Link's works point into a direction in the study of it-narratives that puts an emphasis on the non-human perspective of narrators. In contemporary studies, such a focus often dovetails with narratological approaches that derive their interest in the genre from the unconventional position of its narrators. The most influential of

17 'The Tradition of the Non-Human Narrative Perspective in English and American Literature' [V.S].

18 Cf. Lawrence's *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense* (1771).

these readings are undoubtedly the works adopting it-narratives as examples of “unnatural narrative” (Alber 2016), an approach associated above all with the work of Jan Alber. In *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016), Alber makes use of it-narratives in order to point out pre-Modernist examples of cognitive estrangement. By drawing on the framework of cognitive narratology, these texts are understood as offering a new “cognitive frame” (80) for the reader, thereby challenging established forms of reading.

An approach to the question of genre that does not centre on narratological questions is found in the work of Jonathan Lamb. In *The Things Things Say* (2011), Lamb understands it-narratives as part of a broader historical development that changes the relationship of subjects and objects. It-narratives are treated as a genre yet occupy only a small portion of the general argument and are understood less in their narrative specificity, than as a genre among many other forms that express this historical shift, such as the still life, the fable, and the slave narrative (cf. Lamb 2011).

Generally, however, most readings not concerned with questions of genre, or as in the case of Alber, commenting on this question from a diachronic perspective, tend to fall into one of two categories. On the one hand, there are approaches stressing the general ‘thingness’ of it-narrators, that is, their difference *towards* and incommensurability *with* human life. Such readings emphasize the non-human status of the narrator and its relation to the humanity of the reader. In “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators”, Bernaerts, Caracciolo, Herman, and Vervaeck take it-narratives as one of many examples of non-human narration that serve both to defamiliarize human experience and stir up empathy with the non-human world (cf. 2014). They are thus locating it-narratives in a broader tradition of non-human storytelling but thereby ignore many of their characteristics in order to understand them as fulfilling functions also found in 20th- and 21st-century texts featuring non-human narrators.

Nikolina Hatton’s recent *The Agency of Objects in English Prose, 1789–1832* (2020), on the other hand, focuses on the transition from the 18th to the 19th century. She includes narratives such as *The Adventures of a Watch!* (1788) and *Adventures of a Mirror* (1791) in her examination

of the changing ideas of non-human agency around the turn of the century. Reading these texts through the lens of Latourian actor-network theory and alongside works by De Quincey and Austen, she paints the picture of a historical moment in which object agency appears as constitutive of human subjectivity and artistic creation alike (cf. Hatton 2020). Hatton's work focuses on a moment in time in which objects are beginning to lose their function as passive observers and are imagined as increasingly resistant to their human owner's designs and thus helps specify the genre boundaries I propose. This transition will be taken up in more detail in the conclusion to this work.

Other works in this vein cite it-narratives in projects that focus on the circulation of objects. Michael Niehaus' *Das Buch der Wandernden Dinge* (2009) traces the movements of it-narrators, but also a host of other things, through the history of literature and film, focusing on unforeseen encounters and uncanny returns. With a similar focus on circulation, in *Cartographies of the Absolute* (2015), Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle draw on it-narratives in their discussion of a globalized aesthetics of capitalism, allowing us to understand how their "narrative structure [...] is parasitic on the global movements of a particular commodity" (190).

These studies are contrasted by projects that examine individual it-narrators in their immediate historical context, employing texts from this genre for exploring the cultural history of specific things and their relation to adjacent discourses. Mary Poovey, for instance, reads Thomas Bridges' *Adventures of a Bank Note* (1770–1774) in the course of her expansive work on the *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008) (cf. 2008), citing it as a paradigmatic text for the process that separates fictional and factual forms of writing about money. For Poovey, narrators such as the bank note transport a specific knowledge about the object that they represent, combining factual information with aesthetic form (cf. *ibid.*).

In "Clothes without Bodies: Objects, Humans, and the Marketplace in Eighteenth-Century It-Narratives" (2010), Chloe Smith shows how it-narratives that deal with clothes reassert the distinction between subject and object by emphasizing human agency and control over the inanimate world (cf. Smith 2010). In a similar vein, Sara Landreth

focuses on vehicles as it-narrators. In “The Vehicle of the Soul: Motion and Emotion in Vehicular It-Narratives” (cf. Landreth 2013), she reads the stories of vehicle-narrators in order to reframe contemporary debates about the mind/body split and theories of motion. These it-narratives, Landreth argues, uncover links between the aforementioned discourses and shed new light on the importance of concepts of motion for Enlightenment philosophy (ibid.).

My approach departs from these trends in current research in that it proceeds from the question of genre, a concept that does not play a prominent role in most of these studies. My wager is that, despite offering numerous valuable impulses for the understanding and the rediscovery of the genre, many of the present studies on it-narrative aim either too high, understanding all instances of narrating or circulating objects in literature as being essentially commensurate, or too low, focusing on one kind of narrating object as a vehicle for the examination of the discursive nexus in which this object is embedded historically.

However, my insistence on locating prototypes of it-narratives and treating them as a genre of texts does not aim for taxonomy for taxonomy’s sake. Instead, it proceeds from the belief that the construction of generic frameworks allows us to uncover the similarities which link most of these texts to each other and thus, in the sense of Moretti, uncover the historical contradictions to which their formal characteristics offer virtual solutions (cf. 2013a: 141). Nor is my approach thereby infringing on the autonomy of the single text. Genre merely provides the grounds on which social contradictions can be negotiated, the specific relation to the hegemonic ideologies framing these problems remains a question of the individual text.

In order to explore such relations, my work will approach these texts with a specific methodological framework, which I will outline briefly. As I have suggested already in the discussion of Sarah Ahmed’s work, one central way in which my study departs from some of the currently popular frameworks concerns theories of the autonomy of objects. We can observe how the current rediscovery of it-narratives dovetails with the popularity of a specific set of theoretical approaches. The movement of new materialism around Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett,

and Karen Barad, Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, as well as the object-oriented ontology associated with the work of Graham Harman have all given important impulses for the re-evaluation of this long-forgotten genre. Having risen to prominence in the last decade(s), these theories, as well as their many adaptations and offshoots, have significantly shaped the critical reception of it-narratives. Although vastly different in their aims and frameworks, these theories present different attempts at rethinking materiality. They allow for a new understanding of objects, for example as actants forming actor-networks, in which social, technical, and bureaucratic functions merge in complex ways, as the vitalist vibrating matter at work in biological processes, or as material-discursive phenomena that can decentre the supremacy of the human. Although these approaches have undoubtedly their merit, they fall short of explaining the formal traits of a genre putting so much emphasis on the lack of agency of its narrators, who are always fashioned as observers, but very seldom as actants. When the question of intervention arises, it-narrators frequently stress their passivity. The scotch guinea, for instance, foregrounds its passivity when it witnesses a meeting in which politicians debate monetary policy: "I at one time intended to have started from my friend's pocket, and to have stood upright before his Lordship and harangued the meeting, but, Sir, though my zeal is strong, my voice is weak" (21). Instead of acting, the guinea note rests content with observing the scene. When the narrator of *The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise* observes the attempts of his owner to find a woman being held captive in a convent that the it-narrator had seen earlier, it wishes in vain for "the Transformation into some other Shape, that [...] [it] might privately inform him of what [...] [it] had seen" (37), and remains an observer. Finally, when witnessing a dramatic love affair, the narrator of *Argal; or, The Silver Devil* is "determined not to shift [...] [its] quarters" before it sees "the end of the adventure" (78). Yet, these intentions are to no avail. Shortly after voicing this intent, it is given away and thus fails to report on the end of the amorous adventure (cf. 82).

These are only a few examples, but they point to what is a rule in the genre. It-narrators style themselves as observers, not actants. Their movements are portrayed as something external to them, happening

irrespective of their will. Despite the fact that theories such as new materialism and actor-network-theory propose models of agency that are nuanced and broadly inclusive,¹⁹ the explicit manner in which it-narratives foreground their status as passive observers cannot be ignored. The recent focus on the agency of objects has blinded some of the current scholarship on it-narratives to this observation, and thus to some of the central formal traits of these texts, thereby foreclosing an engagement with the question of genre.

As I believe that it-narratives must be understood as providing solutions to challenges emerging in the contexts in which they are written, my study calls for an approach that will allow me to reconstruct the contradictions of the historical situation in which these texts are produced. Yet, in this, we must also keep in mind that our own engagement with these texts is no less historically contingent. As hinted already, neither Sergei Tretyakov's call for the object-biography, nor that of Sarah Ahmed, is incidental. Both are voiced at very specific historical moments. The ossification of the political project of the 'old' materialism frames the former case, the emergence of a 'new' materialism sets the stage for the latter. Only by staying acutely aware of how our own historical position informs our understanding of it-narratives, can we hope to meaningfully approach the historical contradictions that can help understand the genre.

In this process, this book will have to broaden its scope and include a number of textual and non-textual genres, as diverse as court proceedings, travel journals, scientific arguments, diaries, institutional chronicles, sermons, economic theories, pamphlets on monetary policy, satirical engravings, correspondences of foreigner travellers, as well as some of the central texts of the 18th-century literary canon, written

¹⁹ Latour's concept of an actant is a good example for this broadening of the concept of agency. An actant is understood as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action" (Latour 2017: 7). Despite this broad definition, it-narrators are hardly actants in this sense. As we have seen in the examples cited here, and will see later throughout this work, these narrators stress their position as observers who do not intervene in what they observe. While one can certainly find it-narrators that are actants in Latour's sense, this is only possible by selecting texts carefully, and thus fails to derive meaningful insights about the genre.

by Defoe, Swift, Smollett and others. Many of these are non-literary texts and thus raise the question of the nature of their relationship to the literary genre I am interested in. Instead of perpetuating the text-context dichotomy privileging the genre of the text(s) over the genres of the context(s), Berensmeyer proposes the concept of “contexture” (2020: 18), that is, “a continuum of mutual influence that affects the form, content, and meaning of individual texts” (ibid.). This understanding of the historical position of texts will offer a “thick description” (Geertz 2000: 6) of it-narratives, not as individual aesthetic units separate from their surroundings, but as embedded in a vast network of other texts and non-textual signifying frameworks. However, this does not imply expanding the category of text to encompass all cultural production indiscriminately and to level all difference between genres. I do not engage in what Greenblatt and Gallagher call the pan-textualism of deconstruction, which risks a levelling of historical difference between cultural products (cf. 2000: 14). Avoiding this pitfall by proceeding from the insight that the division between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, or, between the artificial and the non-artificial, is carefully constructed at each historical moment (cf. Greenblatt 1989: 9), the present study will make explicit the tension between aesthetic and non-aesthetic writing in the long 18th century.

This tension is of crucial importance for a century witnessing a process of differentiation whereby aesthetic writing is assigned a value that is the privilege of literature, while non-aesthetic writing is held to be purged of the ambiguities of literary language, breaking up what Mary Poovey calls the “fact/fiction continuum” (cf. 2008: 151). While informative texts deny their aesthetic dimension, imaginative writing at the end of the 18th century disavows its connection to social forces, such as those of the market (cf. ibid.). Against this two-way disavowal, the present study wants to bring the aesthetic and non-aesthetic texts of the century into a new configuration in order to make visible the ideological processes by which they are constituted as such.

This will not only allow us to understand it-narratives in a more nuanced way, but also shed new light on all the texts that surround them, making, as Greenblatt and Gallagher put it, “the literary and the non-literary each other’s thick description” (2000: 31). Literary texts

will thus be understood not only as products of the social forces that shape them, but as objects that “talk back” (Bal 1999 quoted in Berensmeyer 2020: 9). In the case of it-narratives, quite literally. From this perspective, these tales can serve as a means of uncovering “the slippages, cracks, fault-lines and surprising absences” (Greenblatt and Gallagher 2000: 16) lurking beneath structures taken for granted. In this, a genre hitherto considered as minor and excluded from the literary canon can be shown to be able to defamiliarize our understanding of a number of historical discourses – scientific, economic, and monetary.

To this end, I will show how these “[c]ontextures [...] exchange ideas, keywords and tropes” (cf. Berensmeyer 2020: 19), with a particular focus on the latter, as tropes are the main field on which the differentiation of aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms is negotiated. I understand tropes here not as *topoi*, but rather as figures of speech, in the sense of the Ancient Greek *τρόπος*/*trópos* (‘turn’, from *τρέπειν*, to turn) (*OED* s.v. *trope*, n.) that is, as devices in a process of substitution. Aesthetic writing is considered to employ tropes and thereby claim its aesthetic value, whereas non-aesthetic writing cites precisely the absence of troped language as evidence of its textual worth. However, the function of tropes extends far beyond the effect of constructedness or aesthetization that they confer upon a text. Famously conceptualized as tools for the “discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (503) in Kenneth Burke’s seminal essay “Four Master Tropes”, as modes of historiography by Hayden White (cf. 1973), and as aesthetic ideologies by Paul de Man (cf. Warminski 2006: 2), tropes are at the same time aesthetic and epistemological devices. In this second function, as “styles of thought’ which might appear, more or less hidden, in any representation of reality, whether manifestly poetic or prosaic” (White 1973: 33), they ultimately structure all form of discourse. By drawing on the tradition of rhetorical criticism from Quintilian onwards, we can find the workings of tropological devices at the most basic structure of the discourses I am interested in. My wager is that this methodological focus can help accentuate the generic forms characterizing it-narratives and at the same time uncover the work of tropes at the very heart of what appears to be the non-figurative language of specific parts of its contexture, thereby foregrounding the operation by which these discourses fashion themselves as non-figurative and the ways in which it-narratives relate to them.

Occasionally, this methodological frame will be complemented by theoretical insights derived from structural psychoanalysis. In contrast to ego psychology that branches off from Freud's work, the Lacanian tradition emphasizes the abstract relation of subjects (not necessarily individuals) to structures of signification, by enriching psychoanalytic concepts with frameworks from structuralist linguistics. These critical instruments allow for an examination of the relations that constitute systems of signifiers: the symbolic order(s). These ordering systems are held together by what Lacan calls the master signifier, the "point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated" (1993: 268). Such an approach helps us critically examine the relations of signifiers that form the contexture(s) of this genre and locate the master signifiers providing the quilting points for the ideological networks spanning across these texts (cf. Lacan 1993: 258–271). However, it also calls for an increased attention to what we have seen Greenblatt and Gallagher call the "slippages, cracks, fault-lines and surprising absences" (2000: 16), and which are indicative of the Real, the non-symbolic core around which symbolic orders are structured and that emerges when they fail (cf. Lacan 1988: 168). By completing its methodological framework in this way, this study aims to offer the reader not only a "touch of the real" (Greenblatt and Gallagher 2000: 31), that is, a point of access to the social forces that shape the historical moment in which it-narratives are written, but also a sense of the way in which these moments are structured by the disavowed elements that lie at their centre – a 'touch of the Real' in the Lacanian sense.

When Tretyakov calls for a Copernicus to decentre the human hero in *The Biography of the Object*, we can hear a faint echo of Freud himself who locates his project in this tradition, citing psychoanalysis as a third blow to human narcissism after those of Copernicus and Darwin (cf. 1963: 284f.). Reading this 18th-century genre through the framework outlined here, we can search for such a blow to the "Ptolemaic system of literature" (Tretyakov 2006: 59) in it-narratives. However, in reading for this rupture, this study does not aim to replace the discarded human hero with the agency (heroic, spiteful, or otherwise) of things, but instead wants to offer new perspectives on the social forces that animate subjects and objects alike.

2 Object(ive) Perspectives

2.1 Telling the Lives of Things

At the beginning of the second half of the 18th century, the period that Blackwell marks out as the heyday of it-narratives, stands a narrative that is emblematic of a paradox that characterizes this genre. *The Adventures and Metamorphoses of Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol*, written in 1754, does not tell the story of a pistol, as we would nowadays assume, but of a coastal defence cannon. The ironically named Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol is a basilisk, an oversized cannon, gifted to Henry VIII by a Dutch count and later set up to defend Dover. Like many similar narrators, it tells its life-story, from the moment its material was “dug out of the Mines of *Asturias*, Anno 1582” (1), to when it “fell into the Hands of Capt. *Drake*” (2), is set up at the Fort in Dover and finally finds itself neglected, “rude and unpolished” (ibid.), but looking back on its former glory. This life-story from the perspective of a gun thereby serves as a device to tie together a number of short observations. However, *Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol* is remarkable for something else. In its preface, a human frame-narrator offers an apology for the anti-mimetic fact of the talking object. He claims that everything that is being told is “capable of Proof, both from History and living Witnesses”, yet “desires but one Fact to be taken on his Word [...] to believe it possible that a Gun may speak” (*Pocket-Pistol* 1). In this sentence, a central conundrum of it-narratives is laid out. We are asked to believe in the reliability of a narrator, which we know to be impossible. When the reader of the *Pocket-Pistol* is assured of the veracity of the tale about to be told, it connects to a claim that is central to the genre and goes back to its beginning. In the first it-narrative written in English, Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* (1709), the frame-narrator posits “that Gold would not lye” (175), confirming, at the end of the story, that “there is no intelligence, such as [...] [the coin] can give” (304). One of its successors, and probably the commercially most successful it-narrative, Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal; or, the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760), claims it would “see things as they really are, [since] to represent them otherwise to [the

reader], would invert the design of [...] [its] mission” (1, 127). The narrator in Peregrine Oakley’s *Aureus; or, the Life and Opinions of a Sovereign* (1824) assures the reader of a similar predisposition, and expands on the argument behind this claim:

I therefore entreat the Public to bear in mind WHO and WHAT I am; that I am above all undue bias, for I have no favours to ask; that I write freely and independently, because I have nobody to fear; that my intentions are honourable and worthy of approbation [...]. I [am] qualified to distinguish truth from falsehood, wisdom from folly, and virtue from vice; and no specious gloss of dissimulation could deceive me. (16–22)

With these claims, the golden sovereign raises the question of narrative reliability. The narrator of *Aureus* connects to two common ways for understanding reliability. These aspects can, for example, be found in Wayne Booth’s classical study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which talks of the “moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator” (Booth 1983: 158).²⁰ Essentially, this refers to the question if the narrator is ideologically or epistemologically fallible, that is, if they lie to the reader, or if they are not able to represent events truthfully.

It-narrators stress their superior narrative reliability by alluding precisely to the two aspects Booth identifies. As an object, the narrator of *Aureus* is removed from the human world. It has “nobody to fear” and is thus “above all undue bias” (16). Human narrators might have personal interests that can influence what they will tell, but a coin is disinterested, since it is free from all such constraints and will thus report truthfully. On the other hand, it claims to be “qualified to distinguish truth from falsehood” (*Aureus* 22) and vows that no “gloss of dissimulation could deceive [it]” (*ibid.*). In other words, it claims an epistemological superiority over human narrators. Hence, the reader is asked to remember that the narrator is a coin in the first sentence. It is not an abstract stand-in for a narrative position, but an object that derives its authority from its difference to subjects. Human narrators, it is suggested,

²⁰ James Phelan’s proposed differentiation between the “axis of ethics” and “axis of events” (Phelan 2005: 33) in narratives captures the same distinction.

might turn out to be unreliable, but objects are *objective*. Claims such as these are found in many of the narratives that follow. They become a hallmark of the genre as it-narrators fashion themselves as decidedly more reliable than their human counterparts.

However, these claims are undercut by an important fact that is already made very clear by the narrator in *Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol*: The thing that would vouch for this increased reliability is itself anti-mimetic. The reader knows very well that no “Gun may speak” (*Pocket-Pistol* 1), and neither can the coins in Gildon’s tale. Yet, this is the presupposition that grants the realization of the it-narrator’s claim to reliability – precisely by being non-human and thus impossible as narrators, they can draw on the fantasy of a superior reliability.

It is in this sense that it-narratives belong to what can be called anti-mimetic literature. In the words of Brian Richardson: “By anti-mimetic, I mean representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres” (2015: 3). It-narratives are thus anti-mimetic in the sense that they do not strive to represent the actual world as the reader knows it, while still representing *a* world in fiction (cf. Alber 2016: 28). While all literature is per definition non-actual, anti-mimetic literature is non-actualizable; that a thing can speak is an impossible proposition.²¹ Yet, precisely such propositions are voiced by the narrating things themselves when they ask their readers to suspend disbelief. It-narrators such as the Pock-

21 This proposition is impossible in relation to the ontology of the reader’s actual world. This ontology is of course historically contingent, but not less valid for it – Ronen cites the example of the Greek Gods in antiquity to illustrate this point (cf. 1994: 45). I am relying here on the framework developed by Jan Alber. He departs in some central points from scholars working on possible worlds theory, who have a much higher standard for considering a storyworld impossible, ranging from the invalidation of fundamental laws of logic (cf. Berto and Jago 2018) to the somewhat casuistic assertion that impossible narratives are non-existent, as they themselves posit their impossibility in what in the end is another possible narrative (cf. Ronen 1994: 55f.; Eco 1989: 353). Nevertheless, I find Alber’s work to be better suited for my present purpose, as it allows us to focus on the specific cognitive frames readers employ when dealing with elements of a literary storyworld they recognize as impossible in the actual world and how these frames shape the reception of such texts (cf. Alber 2016: 3–9).

et-Pistol thus open up counterfactual spaces, the implications of which are played through in the tales of these peculiar objects.

To understand how this is done, we first have to pay close attention to how it-narratives set up the framework for their stories. Interestingly, when the narrator of *The Adventures of a Farthing* begins its tale, there is little that would suggest that what one is reading is the life-story of an object:

Not to trouble you with a long detail of particulars, as insignificant, perhaps, as foreign to the purpose, I shall therefore, very abruptly acquaint you, that I was born in the county of Middlesex. My brethren being very numerous, I was put abroad very young, and first placed in the hands of an eminent bookseller near St. Paul's. – My Master was a man of no mean abilities, was endowed with a liberal education and had served his apprenticeship with one of the most capital booksellers in the city. [...] In his till, therefore, near a purse of inestimable value, I remained some time. (*Farthing* 38)

The first sentences of this it-narrative from 1769 do not refer to the farthing mentioned in the title but seem to suggest a human referent. The talk of a birthplace and the frames of kinship that are cited contribute to this effect. It is only when the narrator is said to reside in its master's till, that it becomes clear that it is a coin that tells its story. From this vantage point, the beginning of the text is recontextualized. The word “master” is shown to refer to the owner, not to a master tradesman as suggested at first. Phrases such as “put abroad” and “placed in the hands” turn out to refer to a literal object, not a child who is figuratively given away to become an apprentice. From the very beginning, this text about inanimate things is evoking the most ‘human’ genre of all, autobiography.

Are we to read passages such as the above ‘only’ as playfully blurring the line between the human and the non-human in employing an artfully ambiguous language? Or is there a deeper structural significance to the mimicry of life writing in this genre? The examination of these questions can not only reframe how we think about the genre of it-narratives, but also allow us to understand how these stories are positioned

in relation to established “cognitive frames” (Alber 2011: 58), that is, the cognitive frameworks that guide the reception of narratives.

When reading these texts, we encounter such calls upon autobiographical forms not only in *The Adventures of a Farthing*, but repeatedly in a large number of different texts. In *The Adventures of a One-Pound Bank Note* (1819), for instance, the narrator laments how its “parents have been accused of *illicit connections*” (231). Like the farthing, it speaks of being “born” and even of its “conception”, evoking a particularly notorious text that is already an ironic examination of life-writing, Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767)²². When the bank note insists that it wants to offer its story rather as “an *apology* for, than as an *emblazoning* of [its] [...] life” (ibid., emphases in the original), it expands this allusion in playing on both Henry Fielding’s Satire *Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741) and the autobiographical *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (1740) (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 346–347). Other narratives follow in the same vein: A feather refers to its parentage (cf. *Feather* 273), a cane evokes its “Birth & Family” (*Cane* 47), and a cannon speaks both of being “christened” and of its “Godfather” (*Pocket-Pistol* 1). In 1770, this convention is so firmly in place that the narrator of Thomas Bridges’ *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* announces at the beginning of its story: “I design to comply with the fashion, and give a full and true account of my birth, parentage, life and education” (*Bank-Note* 2).

Yet even it-narrators who do not allude to genres of life writing in their texts carry its paratextual marks. Titles such as *The Genuine Memoirs of an Unfortunate Tye-Wig* (1751), *The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat* (1751), *The Travels of Monsieur Le Post-Chaise* (1754), *Adventures of a Six-and-Nine-Pence* (1774), and *Aureus; Or, the Life and Opinions of a Sovereign* (1824) mark out the style in which it-narratives receive their titles. The vast majority of it-narratives evoke autobiographical genres such as the diary, the memoir, or the travelogue.

22 Although many it-narrators fashion themselves as belonging to the tradition of Sterne’s quasi-autobiographical sentimental novels, we will see that they do not offer the self-reflexive exploration of subjectivity associated with these works (cf. Festa 2016: 135).

Viktor Link argues that titles such as these, by evoking a ‘history’, ‘autobiography’, ‘memoirs’, or ‘life’, imply the facticity of the narrated events and an identity between author and narrator (cf. 1980: 185). This observation conforms to the claim that such stories are “capable of Proof, both from History and living Witnesses” (*Pocket-Pistol* 1). Nevertheless, the fashioning of these stories as autobiographies is completed by another trait – most of them are published anonymously. First, this can be attributed to the specific conditions of their production: It-narratives are mostly written by grub-street hacks, often under dire time-constraints and with little consideration for concepts of original authorship, as critics, contemporary and modern, are keen to point out (cf. “Novels”; Baker 1957: 52).²³ However, the anonymous publication of these texts also serves a purpose that is immanent to the logic of the genre. The claim to autobiography calls for the erasure of the author’s name in order to keep open the speculative space in which the constitutive assumption of an object-author can be maintained. In *The History and Adventures of a Lady’s Slippers and Shoes* (1754), for instance, the object “beg[s] leave to subscribe” (65) itself, and does so literally, by signing the text with “SLIPPERS” (ibid. emphasis in the original). Narratives such as *Chrysal*, *Aureus*, or *The Adventures of MS Le Post Chaise* follow this model by signing the name of the object-narrators under the body of the text. In other cases, the object is implied to be the author by means of additions to the title in the style of *The Adventures of a Black Coat, as Related by Itself* (1760), *The Adventures of a Whipping Top, Related by Itself* (ca. 1786), or the *Transformations of a Beech Tree; or, the History of a Favourite Black Chair, Related by Itself* (1828).²⁴

In most cases, the claims to autobiographical referentiality that are made by titles, signatures, and prefaces operate through the literary device of the found manuscript (cf. Blackwell 2012: xi). We can see this process at work in the preface of *Aureus; or, the Life and Opinions of a Sovereign*, when the ‘publisher’ presents a manuscript containing the life-story of a golden sovereign and makes the following claims:

²³ The passages alluded to are quoted at length in the conclusion of this book.

²⁴ As Jonathan Lamb attests, this is a naming convention it-narratives share with slave-narratives (cf. 2011: 230).

The work itself bears internal evidence of its authenticity; as it may be truly said to contain Golden Opinions for all sorts of people; and I am fully convinced, from the elicitation of certain circumstances of my own history, that there can be no deception. [...] Since nobody can disprove it, I shall now take it for granted, that every one must regard it as a fact: And as these Memoirs were confidently bequeathed to me, I consider myself in the light of a trustee. In publishing them, I only conform to the will of the testator and do – as I have always endeavoured to do – my duty. (vii–viii, emphases in the original)

The author, who is here posing as the publisher, first dwells on the claims to reliability we have previously encountered. However, this is soon supplemented by claims to identity, that is, claims to the identity of the author, narrator, and protagonist of the text that follows this preface. The person writing the preface is no longer an author, but merely a “trustee”, not engaging in an act of poetic creativity, but merely doing their “duty” toward another: the coin that we are asked to believe is the real author of the text.

We see how this device turns a real author into a fictional publisher who claims to have found, or otherwise received a text authored by another. During the emergence of the novel in the 17th and early 18th century, a publisher claiming to have found the material that goes on to constitute the text proper is commonly found in the framing of fictional prose texts (cf. Genette 1997: 186f.). For instance, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is famously preceded by a preface in which an ‘editor’ claims to have found a text that constitutes a “just History of Fact” (RC 3). The fictional publisher is a useful device for providing legal security against a well-oiled censorship apparatus or in order to screen the author from being personally associated with transgressions against public decorum.²⁵ However, it is also legitimized by the fact that, until approximately the middle of the 18th century, there is not yet an autonomous aesthetic sphere that would value non-factual writing and set it apart from false statements (cf. Poovey 2008: 93). In this context, the author-

25 On the dangers of satire for the satirist, cf. Link 1980: 127f.

as-publisher cancels out the text's fictionality by feigning to have found the manuscript constituting the body of the text (cf. Wirth 2010: 121).

Yet, this feigning is not a proper act of deception. This is immediately clear once one considers how the found manuscript trope plays out in practice in the 18th century. Even though the device is employed widely, the authorship of a well-received 18th-century literary text is oftentimes an open secret. Neither *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, nor *Pamela* carry the names of their authors on their title pages, yet the reading public soon finds out their authors are Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Richardson (cf. Keymer 2008: xl; Hunter 2003: 216; Keymer and Sabor 2005: 43). In it-narratives, the case is even clearer. The reader knows very well that objects cannot tell stories. What function remains then for the preface written by a fictional publisher?

Uwe Wirth points out the performative and indexical functions of the preface (cf. Wirth 2008: 128). It is performative in the sense that it establishes a modulating change of frame that allows a distinction between Austin's concepts of "pretending that" and "pretending to" (Austin 1961: 217), that is, it opens up a space for non-factual writing that sets itself apart from deception. Accordingly, the preface works as an indexical sign, in that it does not refer to an object but provides the imaginary and experiential conditions that the reader needs in order to – in case of it-narratives – construct the object that is narrating in the main body of the text (cf. Wirth 2008: 128).

Yet while this device becomes redundant as aesthetic writing carves out legitimacy for itself, it is still found in it-narratives in the early 19th century. In such texts, I argue, the device responds not (only) to an external pressure to disavow the fictionality of the story, as in the three canonical texts mentioned above, but connects to a constitutive necessity of the genre. If the internal assumption of the sentient object is to be held up, the text must playfully foreclose its production by the hands of a human author-subject. At the same time, it must be able to provide a rationalization for the text's publication. The lack of an author's name, the signature of the object, and the found manuscript device are crucial tools in this endeavour.

This framing of a text as a found manuscript works in order to identify the main body of the text as an artefact in their specific histori-

cal moment (cf. Baker 2014: 56). It is a force of reification that constructs the text as an object that has a physical existence somewhere in the extra-textual world where it can be found and issued by the publisher. In reifying the text, it introduces a homology between it-narrator and textual body. Their claim to authority is parallel. They are reliable because they can claim a position outside of human discourse – their materiality grants reliable knowledge.

We have seen how the question of authorship (or, differently put, the question of the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist) becomes a crucial prerequisite for upholding the fantasy of the object-narrator. The central claim of these narrators, their heightened reliability compared to their human counterparts, can only be maintained by embedding the narration in paratextual markers that suggest a non-human authorship. Connecting to the central hypothesis of the texts, the assertion that an object can tell a story, the signatures of objects seem parodies of what Philippe Lejeune calls the “autobiographical pact” (1989), a concept referring to the fact that the reader assumes the identity of author, narrator and protagonist. The retrospective first person account of the character is matched through the author’s name and suggests a real referent (cf. Lejeune 1989: 5). Yet we have seen how the extra-textual referent is clearly impossible in the cognitive framework of the reader – things cannot tell stories. In this prototypical instance of Genette’s “authorial disavowal” (1997: 186), it-narratives engender the formal characteristics of autobiographies, while their content at the same time renders the necessary relationship between the reader and the text that would characterize an autobiographic work impossible. As Lynn Festa puts it, the reader knows that objects have neither *autos* (a reflexive self), *bios* (a life), nor *graphie* (the ability to write) (cf. 2016: 133).²⁶

Yet while it-narratives lack the ability to suggest referentiality believably, they continue to cite the paratextual devices that evoke an auto-

26 Citing James Olney, she points out the lack of development in it-narratives, whose narrators, “are, tautologically, always already what they are” (Festa 2016: 135; Olney 1980: 22). This observation is correct in general, yet there are some crucial exceptions to this rule. When they occur, as in the narratives of (counterfeit) coins and industrial products, the changes are experienced as violent incursions into the life of the narrator. These two instances of changes to the it-narrator will be explored in the fourth chapter and the conclusion respectively.

biographical form, *as if* they could claim an extradiegetic referent for their author. Signing the ‘names’ of objects under these texts, the impossible autodiegetic narrators call on readers to sign their own names to a mock-autobiographical pact. Thus, drawing on Lejeune can help us conceptualize the distinctive narrative logic of this genre. For Lejeune, autobiographies confirm the semblance of intra-textual and extra-textual facts through the author’s signature as these narrators double as the text’s autodiegetic narrator, and precisely not, the other way around, through the congruence of intra- and extratextual referents. It is the distinctive appeal of autobiographical writing that it promises to offer access to a knowledge that cannot be acquired and evaluated by the reader in their relation to extratextual referents but is unique to its author (cf. Lejeune 1989: 21–24). We read autobiographies, the argument goes, because we want to know things about a life that only the person who has lived it can know. The case is different with biographies. In the absence of the authorial trust granted by the signature promising the identity of author and narrator, its truthfulness can only be confirmed by the reader if they can align intra- and extra-textual referents – the closer the biographer is to the facts of a third person’s life, the more reliable they seem to us. Hence, autobiography rests on the identity between author, narrator, and protagonist, while biography must convincingly claim a semblance between the text and the extratextual world in its narration (cf. *ibid.*).

To reformulate this relationship in epistemological categories, this means that referentiality is suggested through identity in autobiography, but through exactness in biography (Lejeune 1989: 14f. and 24). Identity is hereby understood as the effect of the autobiographical pact, in that the author’s signature vouches for the semblance of textual meaning by imposing a truth of meaning on the text. On the other hand, biography claims resemblance by means of exact observations (cf. Lejeune 1989: 24), as when the narrator of *The Adventures of a Goose-Quill* claims to give “an exact and impartial Narrative” (*Goose-Quill* 26). These two modes are co-dependent in it-narratives, as the lives of things intersect with the lives of their owners. A contemporary critic reviewing *The Adventures of a Black Coat* (1760) comments on this fact: “Not the adventures of the coat, but of the persons who wore it, make up the

greatest part of the performance” (“Review of “The Adventures of a Black Coat” 499). As Lynn Festa puts it, “[T]he autobiography of the thing proves to be the biography of the people this thing encounters” (2016: 136).

Devices suggesting identity are by no means exclusive to it-narratives, yet they provide an indispensable support for their unconventional narrative layout. They step in as mediators that reframe the anti-mimetic narration of the object. Hence, it comes as no surprise that these framing devices enjoy a peculiar afterlife in this genre, long after they have become redundant in the emerging novel. Instead of dismissing these devices as vestigial features of a kind of aesthetic writing that has not yet established its legitimacy, I argue that they must be taken seriously in the internal logic of this genre.

2.2 It-Narratives and the Epistemological Revolution

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, claims to narrative reliability can be found as early as Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709). In this text, a human frame-narrator in a late-night setting is confounded by an indistinguishable noise emanating from the direction of his purse. In this purse, he finds a number of gold coins endowed with the faculty of speech. As in the case of the first coin, a golden Louis D’Or promise a privileged perspective onto the follies of contemporary society:

I have been lock’d up in the Cabinets of Princes, great Kings, and mighty Emperors, and am perfectly acquainted with their most secret Intrigues, private Vices and Follies. I have belong’d to several great Politicians, Favourites and Courtiers, and known all their Principles and Maxims. [...]. I have belong’d to Pimps and Bawds of all Nations, and know the secret Amours of all the Great Men. [...]. In short, Sir, I have been in every station of Life, from the *Prince* to the *Peasant*, and can unfold all the Mysteries of Iniquity, that in all Nations have always enrich’d Knaves, impos’d on Fools, and baffled Men of Sense, (*Golden Spy* 9–14).

Over the course of the following nights, these coins make good on their promise, relating the tales of their individual circulations in a style modelled after the succession of stories in Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. The nightly setting somewhat rationalizes the apparition of a talking coin, leaving open the possibility that this unnatural event can be attributed to the human narrator's exuberant fancy or dream-like state. Yet, the tale resists being relegated to the register of the fantastical or the marvellous. Faced with the question of the truthfulness of one of its stories, the human frame-narrator explains the constellation of narrative reliability and privileged perspective: "I remembered that Gold would not Lye, and that a Metal so Mercurial had means of seeing in Security, what I could not experience but at my proper Expence" (*Golden Spy* 175). The satirical stories in which a number of private vices and follies are exposed rest on the epistemologically superior position of the it-narrator, telling not only the story of its 'life', but also of the lives of its owners. The narrator of another it-narrative, *The Aerostatic Spy* (1785), comments on the privileges of such a position, explaining how "seeing, whilst unseen, impart[s] a most pleasing sensation" (241). This comment resonates with the concept of the "unobserved observer" (Benedict 2001: 144), that is, a privileged position from which the narrator can watch human interactions while remaining itself hidden; in this case, by virtue of being considered an inanimate object. The superior reliability of the it-narrator is guaranteed by this privileged vantage point.

As we have already seen, this *topos* is found time after time and is fleshed out as the genre gains popularity towards the end of the century. Neither is this narrative authority restricted to a certain type of it-narrator. Rather, it seems to rest in the non-human status of the thing itself. The truth claims are repeated across a wide range of narrating objects. The narrator of *Adventures of a Watch!* reminds the reader that "an honest watch should always speak the truth or be totally silent" (148), while a hackney coach claims that it "is confirmed in the truth of" (*Hackney Coach* 208) everything it has 'written'. Eventually, at the end of Helenus Scott's *The Adventures of a Rupee*, the eponymous narrator emphasizes its claims to narrative reliability when it reminisces over the stories it has told:

Gentle reader, this shall be the last chapter of my adventures, for I would not [...] tell any thing that is not absolutely true, though by acting otherwise, I might imitate many grave historians, and celebrated biographers. [...] I spent my hours in separating truth from the ashes of time. Our eyes can penetrate with the same ease the shade of antiquity, and the prejudice, that surrounds the modern day. (*Rupee* 70)

The it-narrator here fashions itself as decidedly more trustworthy than its human counterparts, the “grave historians and celebrated biographers” to which it alludes. They are contrasted sharply with the it-narrator, who only aspires to disinterested truth. This increased reliability is again grounded in an epistemological advantage, namely the “eyes that can penetrate” farther than those of any human subject. Epistemic authority is understood as deriving from the acuteness of sensory experience.

Thus, while human frame-narrators show explicit signs of epistemic shortcomings, sometimes even suggesting that they might merely be imagining their object-informers, these talking things themselves are portrayed as resistant to such sensory deceptions. The human narrator might hear voices and see apparitions, but their object-counterparts record facts:

I can recount a plain fact, without either adding or diminishing, and make a shift to understand myself, though perhaps not many of my readers can, but as to dissertations, observations, allegations, ratiocinations [...] too tedious for me to recollect or for my readers to read, I pretend not to meddle with them at all, but leave each article to the person best qualified to handle it, only recommending to the learned doctor [...], to follow my example, and take particular care not to fall upon the subject they are the least qualified to handle. (*Bank-Note* 23–25)

The it-narrator only lays claim to the acute transmission of sensory data, “plain fact[s]”. Its reliability is guaranteed not by a zero-focalized perspective endowing it with universal knowledge, but by the very fact that it can only recount particular facts. This explicit narrowing down of its narrative scope is not presented as a shortcoming but is made to

ensure the exactness of those observations that *can* be made. Such an immunization is achieved by cauterizing all those observations of the second order, the “dissertations, allegations, ratiocinations”, from those uncorrupted observations of the first order. Thus humbled down, this epistemic horizon allows for the fantasy²⁷ of a discourse in which such a direct transmission of a non-discursive fact is possible.

In this figure, a “natural narrative” (Fludernik 1996: 10)²⁸, autodiegesis, is fused with the impossible identity of a self-conscious object, in order to purport a unique perspective – a way of relating to the diegetic world that would allow for the ‘objective’ transmission of observed ‘facts’. I argue that the configuration of these two claims in a genre emerging at the beginning of the 18th century is anything but incidental. Both concepts, the imperative of exact observation and the idea of the objective fact will be shown to function as the central keywords of empiricist epistemology.

While the “epistemic revolution” (Kukkonen 2017: 5) of empiricism goes back to at least the late 17th century and the development of experimental science, the 18th century sees the widespread solidification of the key tenets of empiricism and its rise to the dominant methodological framework for knowledge production (cf. Coppola 2016: 13).²⁹ This process, however, does not proceed unchallenged. Up to the point at which it-narratives proliferate at the middle of the century, the new epistemology must compete against established systems (cf. Lynall 2012: 1). While earlier natural philosophy, the most dominant of these systems, still relies on deductive reasoning from axioms, empiricism

27 I am not using the word in the sense of ‘imagination’ or ‘free association’, that is, as ontologically deficient, or as obscuring a reality that lies underneath. Instead, I am referring to the Lacanian concept of fantasy as an “external ideological ritual” (Žižek 2009: 5), as a symbolically efficacious practice that constitutes the relations between subjects and thereby constitutes reality (cf. *ibid*; Brivic and Shelly 2008: 81–83).

28 Natural narration refers to acts of storytelling that occur in interpersonal settings. Whereas, for instance, third person narrative is indicative of fictional writing (e.g., through changes of focalization, access to character thought etc.), in natural narratives, there are no such direct indicators of fictionality. The concept goes back to Monika Fludernik’s *Towards a Natural Narratology* (cf. Fludernik 1996) and will be elaborated in the fourth chapter of this work.

29 While the most elaborate presentation of empiricism would be found in John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), the writings of Francis Bacon, above all the *Novum Organum* (1620), provide important points of reference for Locke and others.

champions experimental practice and establishes the lasting authority of the inductive experiment, working through a hypothesis that is further refined through a series of ever more accurate experimental arrangements. This development not only engenders the corresponding institutional representation of this new epistemological maxim, as in the establishment of the Royal Society, but also, as we will see later, produces a new type of scientist. At the end of the 17th century, it still competes with other forms of natural philosophy, but by the end of the next century, its practices are central to the Enlightenment project (cf. Bristow 2017). In between, it-narratives emerge as a genre situated in a historical context that witnesses heated debates about the fundamental questions of epistemology.

As a result of these debates, empiricist experimental philosophy is being assimilated into genteel culture, but not without facing resistance and ridicule in a process (cf. Lynall 2012: 102). Far from being confined to the discourses of a select few, those discussions reach a wider reading public and become the formative debates of the cultural moment. The fascination with the new sciences is cultivated as a means for refinement by periodicals such as Joseph Addison's and Richard Steele's *The Tatler* (1709-1710) and *The Spectator* (1711-1712) (cf. Lynall 2012: 102). Addison's own it-narrative, *Adventures of a Shilling*, is printed in *The Tatler* in 1710, thus suggesting a certain proximity between empiricist writing and it-narratives, in showing these genres of writing being featured in the same publications.

Occasionally, as in the case of *The Aerostatic Spy: or, Excursion with an Air Balloon* (1785), the ideas of the new science and the debates surrounding it are taken up directly by it-narratives. As suggested in the introduction, the text assembles a rather unusual narrative configuration, even compared to other representatives of the genre. It employs a human frame-narrator, an American shipwreck survivor, who escapes from a desert island by help of a self-constructed balloon. As the story progresses, the balloon is infused by a "spirit of the Atmosphere" (*Aerostatic Spy* 229) that henceforth serves as the it-narrator of the tale, but occasionally leaves room for the human narrator's voice. After visiting a multitude of foreign destinations, and observing instances of vice and corruption, the it-narrator and its passenger manage to return to

England, where a broad range of satirical observations is offered before the human frame-narrator is finally reunited with his love-interest.

The following excerpt begins when the human narrator disembarks from the balloon and enters an inn in the vicinity of London, where he is drawn into a discussion. The ensuing debate is concerned with the scientific potential of the recent technical innovation of the air-balloon. The passage is worth quoting at length, from the point at which the human narrator joins the debate and encounters:

a Schoolmaster and an Exciseman³⁰, which, it seems, had been arguing upon some learned topics. They were both reckoned by the company to be persons of learning and understanding. But to the first of these in particular, it appeared that the Schoolmaster only had a claim; – the other was but a pretender. The Schoolmaster asserted that, from the experiments made in France, where these Machines had already taken up Animals into the atmosphere, it was probable that men might ascend with them thereafter. The Exciseman not only declared that to be impossible, but treated all that had been related to the subject in the French papers a mere fiction. I joined in this discourse, taking part with the schoolmaster. However, I did this with caution, as I had received an injunction not to say any thing of the kind as from experience. [...] I argued therefore from reason and probability; the Exciseman from mere dogma and invincible obstinacy. He said could any be silly enough to make such an attempt, it would be more ridiculous than that of the Builders of the Tower of Babel. [...] I continued to maintain the argument: and though I was partly supported in it by one who, at this time, entered the room, and who appeared to command some respect from the company, I was called a Babel-Builder for my pains. (*Aerostatic Spy* 249f.)

Here, a long cultural history of the debate about what constitutes the preferential method of knowledge production is revised *en passant*. At stake is the status of the reports of the first manned balloon flights. In 1783, the Montgolfier-Brothers undertake the first flight in France and spark a ballooning craze, inspiring numerous copies of the original

30 Someone tasked with the extraction of taxes on specific goods, often luxuries.

balloon-design. The discovery of hydrogen fuels (quite literally) the enthusiasm for manned flight, particularly in the balloon designs of Vincenzo Lunardi, who successfully attempts a balloon ascent in front of a large crowd on the 15th of September 1784 near London. Despite the large audiences (the flight takes place in front of some 200.000 spectators and is repeated to an equally numerous London crowd in 1785), many people who are not present at these events remain unconvinced.

The Aerostatic Spy inscribes itself as a physical text into this discussion by way of its frontispiece – it is fitted with a commissioned etching of a balloon ascent. It thereby connects its fictional story to an event that is debated passionately at the time of its publishing in 1785. As Clare Brant points out, these experimental flights fuel flights of imagination (cf. 2011: 73), but also bring scepticism to new heights, instigating a controversial public debate about the possibility and usefulness of ballooning and the position of the Royal Society in these experiments (cf. 76).³¹ Much like the scientific revolution at the end of the last century, it questions the epistemological foundations of a society.³² Ballooning is constantly under threat of being seen not as the product of a scientific breakthrough, but merely a form of short-lived entertainment (cf. Keen 2006: 524f.), the accounts of which can sound outright fantastic. Literary texts that comment on the fashion of the day, such as *London Unmask'd: Or, The New Town Spy* (1784), are eager to position themselves in regard to this fad. Its sceptical narrator dismisses ballooning as “a piece of foreign finesse, like the bottle conjuror, or a domestic humbug, like the Cock-lane Ghost” (136).

Consequently, the stories of the first French balloon-flights can be dismissed as “fiction” by the exciseman in the *Aerostatic Spy*. He does not question the existence of the documents, but rather their reliability. It is no coincidence that the position of the sceptic is occupied by

31 The close connection of experimental science and ballooning is not only illustrated in the imagery of the ascent as an experiment, but also in the Balloon as a new vehicle for ‘old’ experimental setups. In *Atropaedia* (1785), Thomas Baldwin gives a list of items the aeronaut is supposed to carry with him on the flight in order to be able to perform experiments while airborne (cf. Brant 2011: 76f.).

32 The balloon filled with air serves as a figure for the inconsistency and turbulence of the age (cf. Keen 2006: 509) – not least because its spectacular ascents blur class distinctions (cf. *ibid.* 524).

the exciseman, in accordance with his profession of extracting a tax on manufactured goods; he is employed in gate-keeping, that is, in regulating the intrusion of newly fabricated discourse. This institutional position as a representative of state power and the limits it imposes on the circulation of knowledge is mirrored in his conservative epistemology. His “recourse to dogma” (*Aerostatic Spy* 250) is a nod to a pre-empiricist framework that relies on doxological postulates to serve as the irrevocable basis for all further deductions.

On the other side of the debate, the schoolteacher champions a new methodological framework. In his support, the air-traveller argues from “reason and probability” (*ibid.*).³³ Already its pairing with probability suggests that the reason in question here is not the deductive reasoning that relies on an authoritative axiom, but the new inductive reason, whose introduction opens up a discursive space beyond the opposites of orthodoxy or heterodoxy in relation to a foundational dogma. Throughout this exchange, the unambiguous evidence literally looms in the air. Above, the it-narrator is hovering, waiting for its human traveller. Its presence would confirm the sensual “experience” (*ibid.*) of balloon-flight that the human traveller possesses. However, this evidence by means of experience and the senses, the ideal mode of witnessing for empirical epistemology, is suspended. The human narrator is under “injunction not to say any thing of the kind as from experience” (*Aerostatic Spy* 249), that is, not to reveal his aerial companion.

Since it cannot refer to empirical facts, the human narrator’s discourse is not able to assert its authority against the appeals to dogma by the exciseman. His position is dismissed in the language of the chief register of dogmatic reasoning, that is, the theological framework and the ultimate doxa of the Holy Scripture. He is called a “Babel-Builder” (*ibid.*) for his hubristic claims.

Despite the support of a new arrival, “who appeared to command some respect from the company” (*ibid.*), his claims fail to persuade. The contrast between the narrator who lacks public credit, and a person of narrative authority only illustrates the importance of the subject-posi-

33 For the importance of the concept of probability for Empiricist discourses, see the fourth book of Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1975 [1690]: 525–721).

tion for the epistemological discourse in which the argument is settled. Instead of the inductive reasoning from experience and the subject-less language of empiricism, the debate at the inn remains grounded in the “obstinacy” (ibid.) of dogma and the “authority and respect” that individual subjects command (ibid.).

The Aerostatic Spy thus restages a social debate about the validity of empiricism in contrast to dogmatic forms of knowledge production. This shows that the debates about empiricism are not yet settled as thoroughly as one might think. Hence, the text situates itself in a broader debate about what kinds of knowledge may be allowed to circulate as reliable and who can be allowed to occupy the position of the knowing subject. *The Aerostatic Spy* is explicit on this topic – the superior epistemology of the schoolteacher secures his “claim”; the exciseman remains a “pretender” (ibid.).

2.3 Fallible Subjects – Reliable Objects

The Aerostatic Spy is by no means the only it-narrative that deals explicitly with questions of empiricist epistemology. *Chrysal; or, the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760) lifts entire passages almost word-for-word from the writings of John Locke (cf. Link 1980: 110). However, while there are numerous examples of such direct allusions in the content of it-narratives, this relationship runs much deeper.

At the heart of this relationship stand the ubiquitous claims to objectivity in it-narratives, the claims to “plain fact[s]” (*Bank-Note* 23) and the constant promises that object-narrators, unlike their human counterparts, “wou’d not Lye” (*Golden Spy* 175). My wager here is that there is a crucial similarity in discursive structure at stake. The topicality of empiricist debates seems less surprising when we recognize that it-narratives and empiricist experimental science share a common epistemological doctrine, the idea that the production of reliable knowledge must be mediated by an object. My hypothesis is that the it-narrator in fiction and the instrument in the experiment subscribe to the same epistemological tenets. To make this relationship visible, we first need to examine how the object comes to assume this privileged role in scientific discourse.

Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer trace the conflictive rise to dominance of the experimental method in their seminal study *Leviathan and the Air Pump* (1985). As they follow the development of experimental practice through the late 17th century, they concentrate on the paradigmatic question of the “spring of the air” (Shapin and Schaffer 1985: 10) that becomes a shibboleth between deductive natural philosophy, on the one hand, and empiricist experimentalism, on the other. The underlying question is that of the ontological status of empty space, that is, of vacuum. The debate marks the focal point where the conflict between the adherents of the theory that all space contains matter, the *plenists*, and their antagonists, the *vacuists*, who hold the idea of emptiness between bodies, is settled. However, what gives this dispute its historical significance is not the debate between two theories that are soon made obsolete by advancements in knowledge about the physical world. Rather, its importance resides in the epistemological dispute between deductive natural philosophy and inductive empiricism in the form of experimental philosophy (cf. Shapin and Schaffer 1985). The epistemological scope in this debate proves much more consequential to the history of science than its ontological ‘content’. Thus, the question of the spring of the air is not one of a specific knowledge about the world, but one about the very way in which this knowledge can be obtained.

In a debate that spans almost two decades, this dispute leads to a series of controversial engagements inside as well as outside of the newly formed Royal Society. It is decided between Robert Boyle’s theory of the spring of the air, who seeks to prove it through experimental philosophy, and Thomas Hobbes, who insists on a deductive explanation through syllogism. In 1660, Boyle publishes *New Experiments Physico-Mechanical: Touching the Spring of the Air and their Effects*, in which the experiments conducted with the prototype for an ‘air pump’ are described in meticulous detail. In the course of the 43 experiments described therein, Boyle transforms the observations made with the air pump into a new unit of knowledge, the “matter of fact” (cf. Shapin and Schaffer 1989: 24). These matters of fact are to become a new and universally accepted currency in the world of science (cf. *ibid.* 75). They are seen as “innocent of human intention” (Daston 1991: 94) as they are guaranteed by the ‘objectivity’ of the air pump. This superior reliability

is made explicit when Boyle talks about the advantages of an experimental installation over the witness-accounts of human divers:

[T]he pressure of the water in our recited experiment having manifest effects upon inanimate bodies, which are not capable of prepossessions, or giving us partial informations, will have much more weight with unprejudiced persons, than the suspicious, and sometimes disagreeing accounts of ignorant divers, whom prejudicate opinions may much sway, and whose very sensations, as those of other vulgar men, may be influenced by predispositions, and so many other circumstances, that they may easily give occasion to mistakes. (Boyle 1772 [1672]: 3, 626)

Julia Schleck traces Boyle's distrust of the divers' testimonies to a class-hierarchy that would value the alleged observations of skilled labourers less than those of the scientist-gentleman himself (cf. 2012: 56). Yet, while she follows an important argument about the dependency of 18th-century witnessing credentials on class-identity as put forward by Barbara Shapiro (cf. 1991: 188), this explanation falls somewhat short.³⁴ Boyle is concerned with two potential sources of error: on the one hand, human subjects are prone to "prepossessions" and "prejudicate opinions" as an ideological failure in reliability. On the other hand, the failure is located at a deeper level; their "very sensations" can be influenced by predispositions and thus bear false witness to them. This second failure, a treachery of the human body, constitutes an epistemological failure in reliability, since for the Royal Society, human senses are notoriously deficient (cf. Henderson 2019: 427). In this distinction, we recall the two sources of unreliability that Booth identifies. In sharp contrast to those always potentially unreliable human subjects,

³⁴ In the specific case of the rhetoric of the Royal Society, the class character of trustworthiness is certainly more ambiguous than that. Michael McKeon quotes Thomas Sprat arguing that the fellows were inclined to favour the witnessing of "Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants", who "though they bring not much knowledge [...] bring their eyes uncorrupted: such as have not their Brains infected by false images" (McKeon 2002: 104). Here, class identity can correlate negatively with trustworthiness as those higher up in the social hierarchy are more likely to harbour pre-conceived ideas, hence Barbara Benedict's case cannot be made as convincingly as it seems at first. For more on this question, see the section "The Naked Way of Writing".

non-human witnesses promise a transmission of knowledge without the distortions of subjectivity. Hence, Boyle's distrust of the divers' opinions is not only based on their class-status, but on their subjectivity itself, which must always fall short of the exactness that an instrument can provide. In the words of Bruno Latour, instruments thus become "inert bodies, incapable of will and bias but capable of showing, signing, writing and scribbling" (cf. 1993: 23).

Robert Boyle constructs such a non-human witness after reading about Otto Guericke's Air pump in 1675. The resulting "pneumatic engine" (Webster 1965: 465) is an air pump that consists of a globe made of glass with two openings, one through which the air in the globe can be evacuated using a piston operated via a rack and pinion, and another, through which experimental objects can be inserted (cf. *ibid.*).

This machine is to prove by means of experiment that air indeed has a specific weight, and that this weight can be measured. It can thereby provide the means to prove a physical fact experimentally without having to refer to a postulate that would serve as the basis for deductive reasoning from dogma. For Robert Boyle, the aim is to "explain the phenomena exhibited in [...] [the] engine [...] without recourse to a fuga vacui or the anima mundi or any such unphysical principle" (1772 [1672]: 3, 601).

For this, a series of experiments are prepared, which involve observing the interactions of different liquids (e.g., water and mercury) within different atmospheric conditions generated inside the glass globe of the pump. The observable changes in the properties of these substances serve to confirm the theory of the weight and spring of air, which will later form the basis for *Boyle's Law*.³⁵

However, the observations that can be made and the conclusions that can be inferred from these observations depend on the fact that what is found inside the glass globe is indeed a vacuum. The question of the integrity of the air pump's globe becomes the central ground for contesting Boyle's experimental findings. Hobbes attacks the experiment, arguing on the grounds that the globe could not possibly be

³⁵ A physical law describing the relation of gas pressure to the volume of the vessel to which the gas is confined.

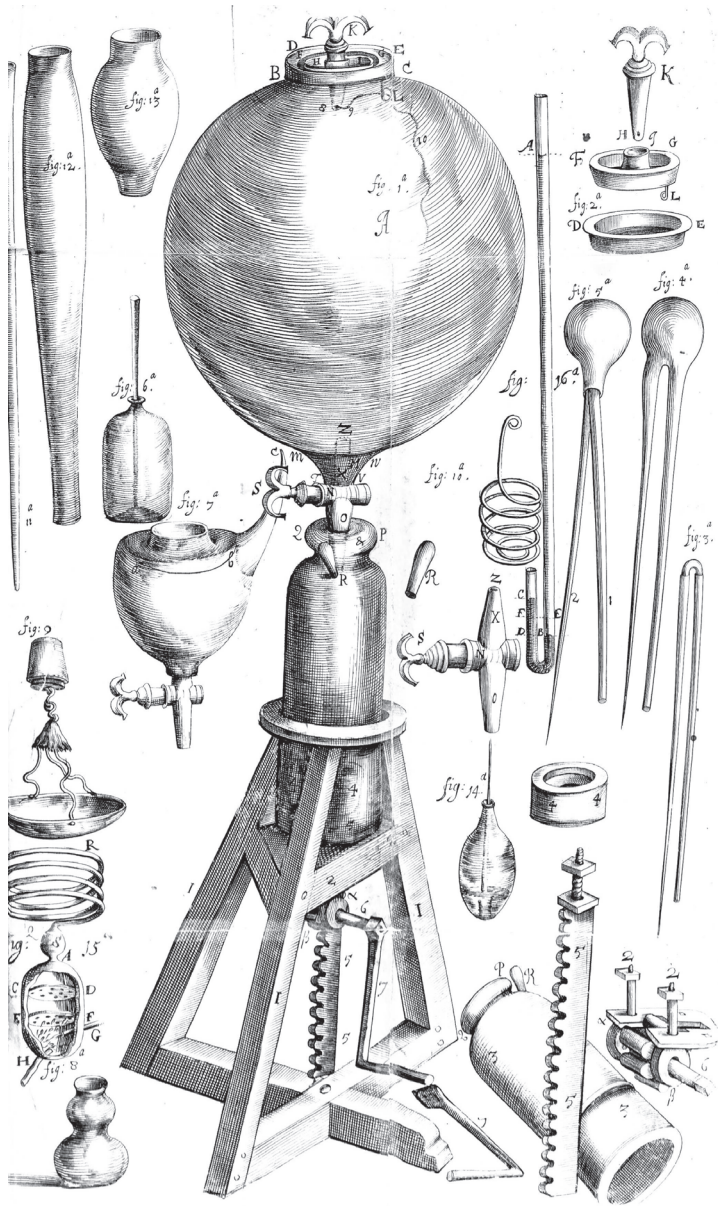


Figure 1: Boyle's air pump as depicted in *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, 1744 [1660]

sealed thoroughly enough as to impede the entry of air. Shapin and Schaffer conclude from this that:

both the engine's integrity and its limited leakage were important resources for Boyle in validating his pneumatic findings and their proper interpretation; the physical integrity of the machine was vital to the perceived integrity of the knowledge the machine helped to produce; and [...] the lack of its physical integrity was a strategy used by critics, particularly Hobbes, to deconstruct Boyle's claims and to substitute alternative accounts. (Shapin and Schaffer 1989: 30)

The integrity of an object thus becomes the joint on which the reliability of the knowledge that it can produce hinges. The material integrity of the object vouches for the ideological and epistemological integrity of the scientist and the objectivity of the facts that are produced.

We can find pointers to how this reliable knowledge is produced at the beginning of *Chrysal*. The tale is framed by a human narrator who discovers the writings of a peculiar type of proto-experimentalist, a "votary of science" (1, 12), that is, an alchemist. While he is absorbed in his experiments, the it-narrator appears and announces that he is to be rewarded for his sacrifices at the "shrine of knowledge" (ibid.). *Chrysal* promises to "trace the operations of nature through her most secret recesses and illustrate the truth of what [...] [it] say[s], by a detail of the various incidents of [...] [its] being" (ibid.). The it-narrator stresses the reliability of its "incorruptible mass" and promises to reveal all the "mysteries of nature" (ibid.), thus completing the project of natural philosophy. Yet, this revelation hinges on one particular detail: "awful silence [...] the least breach of which puts an end to it for ever" (ibid.). The alchemist is "to listen in mute attention" (ibid.) and only write down what the it-narrator imparts to him. The it-narrator stresses how the knowledge thus transmitted is reliable but depends on the speech of the object and the silence of the subject, who is only a vessel for recording this knowledge.

Interestingly, the beginning of the best-known it-narrative thus resonates in a striking fashion with the way in which Bruno Latour describes the production of matters of fact in the experimental labo-

ratory. He shows how facts are produced in the presence of the community of scientists, but not by those scientists themselves. What takes place in the laboratory is a performative speech act, albeit a very peculiar one:

[T]he scientists declare that they themselves are not speaking; rather, facts speak for themselves. These mute entities are thus capable of speaking, writing, signifying within the artificial chamber of the laboratory or inside the even more rarefied chamber of the vacuum pump. Little groups of gentlemen take testimony from natural forces and they testify to each other that they are not betraying but translating the silent behaviour of objects. (Latour 1993: 29).

In the laboratory, just as in *Chrysal*, a strange sort of ventriloquism is at work. The scientist's role is that of a passive vessel, which gives voice to the non-human object, thus guaranteeing scientific reliability. There is a double proxy at work: The matters of fact can reach language only through two agents of translation. The mute scientific instruments register matters of fact in what Latour calls their "speaking, writing, signifying". Speech is here imagined as a procedure of grafting – scientists speak, but they speak with the voice of another. Their speech is giving voice to otherwise mute objects. Only this instrumental speech finally gives birth to the matters of fact that can talk back to the scientific community.

Finding this ventriloquism at the heart of experimental science now also allows us to shed a new light on the importance of the functions of the frameworks of life-writing in it-narratives. The discursive structure of the empiricist experiment provides the template for how it-narratives give voice to things. In both cases, the authorial instance is disavowed in order to confer a voice on the object. Where the authors do not disappear, they claim to play a different role in the enunciatory process. Much like the scientist in the experiment, they are not at the site of the production of discourse, but mere witnesses, who, in giving voice to the mute signifying of an otherwise inanimate object (a text transmitted, a manuscript that is found, etc.), allow the matters of fact to be spoken through them. To put it yet more pointedly: The found manuscript and

fictional publisher device, central to the autobiographical structure that it-narratives employ in order to suggest the life-writing of an object, are the equivalents of the ventriloquism of the empiricist discourse. Both are internally structured by a fantasy of the author's disappearance that operates through the erasure of subjectivity and the reification of the text. Between the scientific observer and the matter of fact, the scientific instrument serves as a mediator on which the transmission of "incorruptible" (*Chrysal* 1, 12) knowledge hinges.

The result of this process is the idea of the reliable object, granting exact observations where human scientists are fallible. The claim to objective witnessing in the experiment takes the shape of the claim to exact and reliable observation in it-narratives. In being transposed from a scientific discourse into a literary genre, it is expressed in the framework of biography in it-narratives.

As I have pointed out in the introduction, I understand the specific generic traits of a group of texts to function in providing problem-solving devices for contradictions in their social surroundings (cf. Moretti 2013a: 141). My hypothesis is that the concept of the reliable, inanimate object that composes the genre of it-narratives functions as such a problem-solving device in relation to the contradictions of the new epistemology of empiricist experimental philosophy. As these contradictions are concerned with questions of epistemological reliability, they are translated into poetical problems by help of the framework of life-writing. In the following sections, I will trace these contradictions, illuminating them from different angles through readings of prototypical it-narratives as well as their "contextures" (Berensmeyer 2020: 8) in order to illuminate the social function of it-narratives in relation to these contradictions and the aesthetic tradition in which these texts stand.

2.4 The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise

So far, we have understood how the structure of the empiricist experiment ties in with the framework of the literary genre of (auto)biography in it-narratives and establishes the cognitive frame for the reliable narration of the object. The discursive structure of the experiment discussed in the previous section is responsible not only for the position

that an it-narrator occupies in a text, but also for the poetics of its narrative. Consider the example of *The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise* (1753). Being one of the better-known representatives of the genre, *The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise* goes through several editions in 1753 and portrays the adventures of the various people riding in the eponymous narrator, a type of horse-drawn carriage. The outline is typical of most it-narratives. The post-chaise is the sole autodiegetic narrator that relates episodes of the lives of its owner as it witnesses them. The carriage itself is presented as a luxury commodity imported from France, testifying to the busy trade between the two countries prior to the start of the *Seven Years War*. Yet the narrative is also indicative of growing animosity and cultural antagonism: The story begins with a diatribe against France and the French cultural influence in England, before turning into a broad satire on the English literary scene at the end of the text (cf. Lup-ton 2012: 27). In between, we find the characteristic episodic structure of the genre, in which the post-chaise relates the exploits of its owners. One of these adventures is concerned with a lord who embarks on the task to free a young woman being detained in a convent – a scene that will be reworked by Laurence Sterne in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) (cf. *ibid.* 27f.). The post-chaise is witness to their first attempts at evading the surveillance of the priests and communicating with each other:

I had not lost sight of her many Minutes, before that disagreeable Composition of Nature's worst Part, the Priest, appear'd; as if design'd to form the Contrast between Beauty and Ugliness [...]. Seeing him meet my Lord, who as yet had been conceal'd from me, and was in another Walk admiring the Order and Beauty of some Flowers, that seem'd to ingross his attention: I wished for a Transformation into some other Shape, that I might privately inform him of what I had seen, and that the most beautiful Flower in those Walks, was cover'd by the Shade that lay behind him; but it was to no Purpose, all I had to hope for was, that Chance would give him the Sight of her. (*Post-Chaise* 37)

It is obvious that it is not the human perspective on mute inanimate things that is presented here, but a thing's perspective on the human

world. Instead of only being used as a vehicle for an “unnatural” (Alber 2013),³⁶ that is, all-knowing narrator, the non-human thing is taken seriously in its immanence. Its instrumental perspective might guarantee impartiality, but certainly not omniscience. The post-chaise is limited to a perspective, certain things are “conceal’d” from it, and it can only try to infer the inner life of characters from outside observation. What is being staged here can be conceptualized according to the notion of the “reverse gaze” (Ballaster 2005: 149). The human subject finds itself in the position of the observed, not the observer.³⁷ It trades places with the consciousness of an object, which takes its place as the subject of epistemology.

As suggested in the introduction, scenes such as these are thus not remarkable for the portrayal of non-human agency, but for the very lack of it. The anthropomorphized object offers the experience of the absence of a subject of agency while simultaneously suggesting the presence of a subject of cognition. The tension between these two states dramatizes the scene of an observation without intervention. The way the object perceives its surrounding is mediated by the epistemic master-metaphor of sight and its perspective is presented as a decidedly embedded one. Thus, the verbs of perception in the passage are taken from a register of scepticism and probability. The authority that the narrator’s language commands stems not from an abstract omniscience, but from the embeddedness of a perspective that stresses its own limitations. Accordingly, when things are “conceal’d” from the narrator, the effect is that of a prismatic narrowing down of the observable world. As Shapin and Schaffer note:

36 With Alber, the concept refers to all instances where narration is not occurring in real-life situations. It is opposed to Fludernik’s concept of “natural narrative” (Fludernik 1996: 10). See the discussion on natural and unnatural narration at the end of the fourth chapter.

37 The concept was originally coined to understand the experiment in perspective in English Literature that was introduced by an oriental traveller describing British society. Interestingly, the outsider perspective is doubled in this case; the narrator is foreign to the reader not only by being an object, but also by being a foreign one at that. The post-chaise is imported from France and frequently dwells on topics of cultural differences.

[A] man who recounted unsuccessful experiments was such a man whose objectivity was not distorted by his interests. Thus the literary display of a certain sort of morality was a technique in the making of matters of fact. A man whose narratives could be credited as mirrors of reality was a modest man; his reports ought to make that modesty visible. (1985: 65)

This “modest” writing thus carries a specific narrative ethos. The discourse of the it-narrator not only takes the shape of an autodiegetic narrator who by definition only provides a limited access to the textual world, but also repeatedly makes explicit the limitations that result from its embedded perspective. The explicit foregrounding of that which is not seen works as a means of endowing the observations of the object with additional reliability. Conceptually, negativity gains a positive existence as it forms a part of the scientific discourse that is foreclosed, but sustains the space of positive knowledge precisely by that lack. Everything not seen vouches for the reliability of everything that *is* seen (cf. Link 1980: 105). To quote again from Shapin and Schaffer:

Scientific instruments [...] imposed both a correction and a discipline upon the senses. In this respect the discipline enforced by devices [such as the air-pump] was analogous to the discipline imposed upon the senses by reason. [...] Just as the reason disciplined the senses, and was disciplined by it, so the new scientific instruments disciplined sensory observation through their control of access. (1985: 37f.)

The Adventures of MS Le Post-Chaise thus present a disciplined way of seeing,³⁸ in the same way as instruments used in the experiment work to discipline the senses by restricting the view to one particular element in the experimental setup. Instead of the potentially fallible observation of the human eye and the corresponding prejudiced conjectures of unguided reasoning that would lead to epistemic errors, the instrument opens a space that provides increased reliability through a narrowing

³⁸ We should recall how the narrator of *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* announces these limitations in the passage quoted in the second section of this chapter. Much like the post-chaise, it stresses these limitations when it changes owners or is put away and thus cannot continue to inform the reader (cf. Blackwell 2012: xiv).

down of the scope of observation. Consider this passage, in which the post-chaise relates its observations and how it derives conjectures:

[I]t is my Opinion his Lordship did not sleep much, for when the Priest promised to shew him the Nunnery, I perceiv'd an eager Impatience, which his Countenance bertay'd; his Eyes sparkl'd with unusual Lustre; his Cheeks glow'd; and, blushing, confess'd the wanton Wishes of his breast. (35)

The it-narrator is depicted as a reader of sensory data. Instead of having access to its passenger's inner life, it registers the bodily changes in the human subject and proceeds inductively, reading the colour of cheeks and the sparkling of eyes as signs of an emotional state that can only be inferred indirectly. The validity of these conjectures is guaranteed precisely by stressing the subject-position of the observer. The it-narrator is cautious enough to frame its observations as an "Opinion" and to lay out the means by which it arrives at them. Inductive reasoning, we have seen, rests on this kind of knowledge that is limited but reliable.³⁹ In *The Adventures of MS Le Post-Chaise*, the it-narrator is not portrayed as the instance from which unmistakable truths of the fictional world are derived, but instead shown actively in the process of knowledge production.⁴⁰

This conscious limiting of knowledge is not without consequence for the story as a whole. In the course of the narrative, the owner of the post chaise manages to establish contact with the young woman in the convent. Again, the narrator cannot confirm the fact but only approximate it: "by the wringing of her Hand and solemn Pace, I soon perceiv'd her Breast was overwhelmed with Sorrow" (*Post-Chaise* 36). Later on,

³⁹ This dependence of authority on epistemological limitation stands at the centre of Hume's *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (cf. Hume 1999), another core text of 18th-century empiricism.

⁴⁰ Viktor Link offers extensive observations on the topic of the restriction of knowledge in *The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise*, inspiring many of my readings in this section (cf. 1980: 117–127). As we will see, Link, by tracing these restrictions to empiricist scepticism, but not to experimentalism and the associated reliability of the object, understands these as sabotaging the aim of satire. In the last section of this chapter, I will argue against this position in more detail.

frustrated by the inept stumbling of its owner in what it takes for an amorous adventure, the post-chaise remarks how:

tho' he [its owner] seemed to have no Brains, I perceiv'd the lady had, for she took the Opportunity of dropping a Paper within a few Yards of where he was, and then disappear'd, which had the desir'd effect; for as soon as he trun'd about, he saw the tempting Scrole waiting to Kiss his Hand, and give him intelligence of what was most worthy his Admiration: he greedily snatch'd it up, and read it over with some surprise, then immediately repair'd to the Ambuscade, where I saw no more of him for near half an Hour. (*Post-Chaise* 38)

This short tableau functions as an experiment in the social space, with the it-narrator opening a perspective on an experimental setting. From the position of an unobserved observer,⁴¹ the elements in this setting are brought in a constellation that allows for observing their mutual interaction.

As the action unfolds, the post-chaise is surprised by the sudden escape that follows and for which it is the means of transport. Throughout, the reader's observations are of the second order, they are observing how another observes, and witnessing what is not seen as well as what *is* seen. Viktor Link holds that this strict adherence to perspective and the supplanting of positive knowledge by probable reasoning sabotages the aims of satire (cf. 1980: 121). As in many other it-narratives, primarily the ones that we will be examining in this chapter, details stay hidden, episodes unfinished, and entire stories remain fragments. However, precisely this narrowing down of the quantity of knowledge that can be acquired results in a narrative layout in which the object can claim a narrative ethos that suggests the reliability⁴² of its observations and, as we will see, provides these observations with additional satirical force.

⁴¹ The importance of not being seen while observing – by virtue of being an object – is emphasized repeatedly. In the example of *The Aerostatic Spy*, the human frame-narrator is asked to take precautions “in order that our Machine might not attract the eyes of the gaping multitude” (*Aerostatic Spy* 241), and is later, as shown above, implored not to reveal the object-narrator that grants him his epistemic superiority.

⁴² Viktor Link comments on this structure in *The Sedan*, but it is equally true for *The Adventures of MS Le Post Chaise* (cf. Link 1980: 105).

2.5 The Sedan

Published in 1757 as a novel but failing to make sufficient impact on the reading public as to warrant a second edition (cf. Lupton 2012: 79), *The Sedan* also features a vehicular narrator, a type of object holding specific interest for the satiric aim of the genre. Since vehicles are an important means for displaying status, contemporary writers commonly associate them with simulation, dissimulation, and deceit in general (cf. Lamberth 2013: 111). The sedan itself is a type of litter, that is, a portable chair that is operated by two people and can be hired off the street. Due to the material specifics of the object – it is after all a vehicle that transports different passengers – the narrative dynamics turn out to be similar to those of the post-chaise. The changing passengers are responsible for an episodic structure that strings together a number of largely unconnected narratives instead of providing an overarching plot. In relating the stories of its passengers, the sedan at first seems to adhere to the same empiricist paradigm as the post chaise. There are no metaleptic breaks with autodiegesis, and, just as in the case of the post-chaise, the narrowing of what knowledge can be gained serves to open the space for a knowledge that can present itself as reliable (cf. Link 1980: 103).

Among the many stock characters overheard by the sedan, there is a pair of housemaids who reminisce about the ways in which they cheated past employers. When they finally agree on a scheme for the evening that promises valuable rewards, the sedan laments the loss of further story-material: “[B]y this means I lost many further anecdotes of families, which I am sure the kind reader would have liked as well as myself” (*Sedan* 103). The narrator of this story thereby connects to a phenomenon that is common to many it-narratives stressing the embeddedness of their perspective. The narrator of *Aureus*, for instance, explains how it “can discern the progress of events with a steady and unprejudiced eye” (*Aureus* 416), yet does “not pretend to pry into futurity” (*ibid.*). It-narrators often stress the immanence of their perspectives by suddenly breaking off episodes when they are removed from the situations they observe. However, unlike in the case of the post-chaise, the episode is not immediately cut off by the occlusion of the

objects of interest in this case, as the sedan provides a short addendum on their story-arc:

I heard them say before they went, that they would first call at the distiller's, to take a glass, and also a bottle of the good creature to squench their thirsts at the play: and it was further agreed, on their honors, [...] that if any gentleman were to take fancy to them, they were to divide company instantly to carry the affair on better, and afterwards account fairly (as copartner or joint-traders) for the profits of the evening. (*Sedan* 103)

When the episodes are about to be interrupted, the it-narrator either closes the open story arc by overhearing the further stratagems of its passengers (as in the example above), or reflects on the behaviours and statements that it observed and extrapolates the conclusion for the reader. This second strategy is illustrated when a woman is disappointed by the poor state of the sedan that her lover ordered for their wedding and the it-narrator concludes:

[T]he lady seem'd to be more griev'd at her unfinish'd chair [i.e. the sedan], than the loss of her intended husband. Whether the match continued or broke off I can't say; but I imagine Miss lov'd splendor too well, to admire poverty and distress in her lover and intended help-mate. (*Sedan* 108)

Again, the knowledge of facts might be limited, but by reading outward signs, one can assure that the resulting extrapolation observes the rules of probability. As in the case of the post chaise, the material specifics of the object inform the mediation of its narrative.⁴³ For the sedan, this means that, as a means of transport allowing only space for one person, it generally cannot eavesdrop on conversations that would take place in its interior. However, as it is not only much slower than the post chaise

⁴³ The narrator of *Argal; or, the Silver Devil* (1794) explains how this influences its narrative structure: "I must also caution you against an impatience you may be liable to, on account of any anachronisms I may be under the necessity of commuting in the recital of the subsequent adventures, as my knowledge [is] [...] regulated by the adventitious appropriation of my various receptacles, by such persons into whose hands I [fall] [...]; so that a story will not always be introduced with the primary cause of its birth" (2, 78).

but also considerably smaller, it is more likely to enter into spaces where a carriage cannot. What may sound like a trivial observation at first proves to structure the layout of the episodes as a whole. As the sedan cannot provide the place for dialogue, it can only access its passengers' monologues. Sheltered from the public world, its passengers can afford to speak their private mind, not their public mask. This is accentuated by the liminal function of the it-narrator's body. The thing in question is itself a border between the public and the private spheres. Unlike a carriage that would travel by road, the sedan, carried on through the street of London, is used in a space that offers many possibilities for human interaction.

These streets, as Christian Huck observes in his expansive study of 18th-century fashion, give rise to a new type of urban experience in the second half of the 18th century (cf. 2010). The prevailing impression on these streets is one of intransparency – the onlooker can observe many different people, but only their surfaces (cf. Huck 2010: 61). Huck finds signs for this as early as at the beginning of the century, when in the preface to Ward's *The London Spy* (1703), the reader is presented a city that is full of deceit, calling for a trained eye that would be able to see through these deceiving surfaces (cf. *ibid.*). The narrator of *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782), encountering the human world for the first time, has yet to learn this:

I had now for the first time the opportunity of seeing the human form, [...] [T]he expression of the operations of the mind in the countenance struck me with wonder, and ignorant of mankind, I imagined that this was a never-failing index of the soul. (*Rupee* 34)

Soon, however, the rupee realizes that there is no indexical relationship that would connect the inner thoughts and outward demeanour of the subjects. It learns that this relationship is instead established by signs. Worse yet, those are signs that are often deceitful and have to be decoded. It-narrators are thus keenly aware of an observation that might seem like a truism but is not less significant for it: “appearances [...] are often deceitful” (*Watch* 148). In this sense, texts such as *The Sedan* can be understood as devices for letting the reader experience

the intransparency of contemporary urban life as an aesthetic effect occasioned by the quick succession of different characters, while at the same time providing them with a narrative means of seeing through these intransparencies at certain moments.

The sedan performs such operations repeatedly. One of its first passengers is a “very fat lady” (*Sedan* 84) who calls on the sedan for a tour in the park. During this tour, she complains about socially mobile women, repeating a number of anecdotes of women whose ‘true’ class identity betrays them even after they have climbed the social ladder through their husbands and lovers, when the it-narrator finally remarks:

All this, and ten times more was in the hearing of the chairmen at least, and often in that of strangers passing by. – But, ordering to go home, and drawing up the glasses, little thinking I had the faculty of hearing, she whispered – faith I was wise to take the 800l. in preference to the pension of 300l per annum. It must then have been known that I was his mistress [...]. I should have lost the pleasure in publick of railing against that part of the sex [...]. They might have then cry’d, look at home. (*Sedan* 84)

The sedan is here the means by which the passenger’s outward performance of disdain for social mobility is brought into an ironic constellation by a monologue revealing her to be a kept mistress herself. The liminal body of the it-narrator enables a very particular style of knowledge production. In its interior, it dramatizes the revelation of a private vice behind a public mask. The it-narrator here is uniquely suited for the satirist’s aim of staging the discovery of such vices, in that it performs an act of deciphering, thereby allowing the reader to partake in instances of satiric discovery. To this end, the it-narrator frequently observes the interaction of the public persona that is fleshed out by the person’s interaction either with other people on the street or the carriers of the sedan, in order to eavesdrop on the monologue of the private self that allows the reader to recontextualize whatever has been observed before. This movement of unmasking constitutes the basic narrative structure that is occasionally re-emphasized by a third position in which the passenger leaves the vehicle and re-instates the public mask, thereby confirming the act of deceit. Finally, by observing

narrators in the acts of deciphering these masks, the readers are encouraged to improve their own hermeneutical practice, showing a social functionality of literary texts that goes beyond the aesthetic (cf. Berensmeyer 2020: 183f.). In such acts, it-narrators connect to the aim of satire in general, and their observations show the essences hiding beneath deceiving surfaces

However, in the case of *The Sedan*, this effect of exposure hinges crucially on the integrity of the liminal space. Only if the border between the interior of private enunciations and the exterior of public discourse can be held up can the it-narrator gain access to an otherwise hidden truth. In this, the interior of the sedan is an analogy of the interior of the Boylean air pump. Both constitute an interiority in which the control of variables opens a space for the production of knowledge. While the experiments of the Royal Society are concerned with the right methods of acquiring natural knowledge, the satirical impetus of it-narratives claims a superior “social epistemology” (Hunter 2013: 7). However, this space can only secure such knowledge insofar as it is able to maintain the strict separation of the interior from the contamination with the infinite and unchecked variables of the exterior. Only if the globe of the air pump can indeed be shown to be an airtight container can it rule out the contamination through the exterior and confirm the reliability of the experiment.

Such an anxiety of contamination is spelled out in *The Sedan*. The only noteworthy break in the structure of a narrative consisting of practically interchangeable episodes occurs when the it-narrator’s physical integrity – and with it, its figurative integrity – is in question. As in the case of the air pump, it is a material body that is of concern here. In the course of the sedan’s frequent use, the frame that separates the passenger from the carriers and the other travellers on the street is being worn down (cf. *Sedan* 100). In *The Sedan*, this threat to the material integrity is accompanied by a failing of the personal integrity of the it-narrator in a peculiar shift of tone:

[S]o much business had been done within a few months, that we were forced to send our Sedan to the physicians, to order something for its relief, as it grew weak of body. We went immediately to the maker's in Coventry-street, where I was left for a week to be refitted. (ibid.)

When talking about its disintegrating body, the narrative 'I' is suspended for a brief moment. When the border between the interior and the exterior is in danger of 'leaking', the 'I' of the narrative is momentarily dissolved into the uncertain plurality of the "we", which seems to include the two human carriers, but partially exteriorizes the sedan itself, which is now referred to in the third person. Yet, this externalization of the object from the assemblage is only partial; the threat of the disintegration of the sedan's body is also a threat to the separation between the human and non-human. The intrusion of the anthropomorphizing metaphor of the "physicians" substituting the workshop labourers testifies to a conceptual shift from the sphere of the object to that of the subject. Nonetheless, this constitutes only a brief moment in the narrative, as the following sentence first carries on in the plural mode but re-establishes the narrative "I" after the first comma that follows the discarding of the medical metaphor for the literal referent, the "maker's at Coventry-Street." The barrier between the human and non-human is drawn up as firmly as ever.

Still, this threat of a breakdown of the material constitutes a caesura in the narrative, as the sedan cannot be used any longer and has to stay in the workshop in order to be repaired. This results in a change in narrative structure that replaces the episodes of revelation-through-monologue inside of the vehicle by the dialogues overheard by the sedan while it is refurbished. During this time, the narrator is relegated to a position in which it has to resort to judging dialogue that takes place in the public sphere.

After it is repaired and the integrity of the border between public and private is reinstated, the production of reliable knowledge can resume. However, the threat to the border between the private and the public, the human and the non-human, that is the body of the sedan, persists. When the sedan resumes its employment, it is acutely aware of the possible danger to its integrity when it takes in a particularly ungainly

passenger, “for his arms stuck out so horizontally, that I feared my little windows would have suffered from his elbows” (109). The glass of the windows is here figured as the part of the sedan’s body that is under the highest danger of suffering a breach. With this breach, the sound-proof interior would be fatally compromised. Hence, the glass surface of the windows is understood to hold open an interior space in which the monologues of the passengers can give voice to matters of fact. In this sense, the glass surface of the sedan’s endangered windows again connects to the glass globe of Boyle’s air pump; both are spaces of a privileged epistemology, sealed spaces, which, by being airtight and sound-proof respectively, promise to produce reliable knowledge. Yet, they are also precarious spaces, spaces that are ever threatened, ever under suspicion of a compromising leakage of the (discursive) matter that would corrupt its epistemological integrity and render the matters of fact that are voiced within unreliable. Like the *Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise*, the story of *The Sedan* fleshes out the fantasy of an experimental setting in the social sphere. In *The Sedan*, the air pump is the corresponding narrative metaphor for this process in which its it-narrator establishes a controlled interiority and, by being sealed off from the outside world, grants reliable knowledge about this world.

2.6 “A Naked Way of Writing”

The preceding sections have shown how it-narrators connect to the epistemological tenets of experimental science, both as the explicit content of their stories and the poetic structure of their texts. These homologies, however, are more complex than they might seem at first, and require that we examine another central aspect of their stories. Taking our cues from the way in which it-narratives stress the ‘plainness’ of their prose, we can trace these claims back to the “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318), a rhetorical doctrine central to the writing of the experimental philosophers. When it-narrators voice their claims to objectivity and relate their satiric observations, they tend to evoke a specific style. We’ve seen that the one-pound bank note dismisses the idea of “*emblazoning*” (*One-Pound* 231, emphasis in the original) its life story, while Thomas Bridges’ bank note wants to keep its facts

"plain", and free of "dissertations, observations, allegations, ratiocinations" (*Bank-Note* 23–25). The it-narrator, it seems, is promising not only a reliable, but also a plain prose.

In order to understand the ramifications of this language, we have to turn to the questions of how the idea of reliable objects relates to concepts of language. We have seen how the authority of the instrument in the discourse of experimentalism rests on its material properties and how it-narrators base their claims to reliability on their properties as objects, thereby asserting their difference from fallible human subjects. Nevertheless, while talking about their material bodies, they cannot escape the textual body in which they exist. In science – so the Royal Society's motto *nullius in verba*⁴⁴ warns us – we should not confide in words. Yet in writing, even one that awards objects such an unusual status, we never leave the domain of language. This relationship between words and things will point us to the central paradoxes that are operative not only in the discourse of experimental science, but also in the stories of it-narrators.

We can again find central clues for the problem of this communicative structure in *Chrysal*. Recall how the story is told by an object to the alchemist in his experimental laboratory. Yet the alchemist is transmitting the knowledge imparted to him in writing by a third party, namely the frame-narrator who finds the text and acts as the fictional publisher, claiming to be merely transmitting these facts to the public. This layout connects to a central problem in the discourse of empiricist experimental science, arising between the claim to scientific universality and its particular embodiment at the localized site of the experimental laboratory. The sophisticated machinery of the air pump, as well as its maintenance, costly upkeep, and complicated transport, sets a natural limit on the number of people who can witness the experiments first-hand. Thus, the task of communicating the findings of the experiments has to resort to alternative mechanisms. At this point, the experimental protocol steps in as a universalizing mediator of the non-human witness and

44 Latin for an expression such as "do not take anyone's word for it" ("History of the Royal Society"), taken from the line "nullius addictus iurare in verba magistri" in Horace's first epistle (Horace 1994: I.1.14; cf. Sutton 1994: 56f.).

its ventriloquist observer(s), the “men who converse with things” (“The Philosophical Transactions Abridged” 320), on the one hand, and the scientific community on the other. In specifying the layout of the experiment, the material properties of the instruments, and the succession of alterations to the initial constellation, it produces a virtual double of the particular experiment that lays claims to its validity through potential repetition. From this connection follows the imperative to repeat the experiment and convince a scientific audience of the integrity of both the glass globe and the experimental scientist.

The assemblage of the experiment is transposed from a constellation of physical bodies whose authority rests on its material integrity, to a textual body that relies on establishing its reliability on the level of linguistic signifiers. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Boyle takes care to describe the layout of the air pump and the experiments that are undertaken with it in extensive detail. This is the context in which we have to understand his publication of *New Experiments Physico-Mechanical* in 1660. They allow for a virtual witnessing:

The technology of virtual witnessing involves the production in a reader’s mind of such an image of an experimental scene as obviates the necessity for either direct witness or replication. Through virtual witnessing the multiplication of witnesses could be, in principle, unlimited. It was therefore the most powerful technology for constituting matters of fact. The validation of experiments, and the crediting of their outcomes as matters of fact, necessarily entailed their realization in the laboratory of the mind and the mind’s eye. What was required was a technology of trust and assurance that the things had been done and done in the way claimed. (Shapin and Schaffer 1989: 66)

Boyle’s *New Experiments* must be understood as a guide for the production of these facts, which can never be produced as single occurrences, but can only count as matters of fact if they prove iterative. As we can see now, the existence of such a description is not a contingent by-product of fact-production; it is its necessary precondition. In the case of matters of fact, representation and production are co-dependent. Only

if the experiment can be reproduced via its correct description can the knowledge that is produced by it constitute a matter of fact.

The resulting texts therefore prefigure a new mode of writing, pointing to the emergence of the scientific writing as a "hybrid between the age-old style of biblical exegesis, which has previously been applied only to the Scriptures and classical texts, and the new instrument that produces new inscriptions" (Latour 1993: 23f.). This is a new and reliable narrative that carries specific generic conventions, a "naked way of writing" (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318), in the words of Robert Boyle. In a situation in which the Royal Society seeks to legitimize itself, to move from private laboratories to public spaces, everything rests on a language that would convincingly suggest that the philosopher's arcana can be accessed by potentially everyone (cf. Stewart 1992: 101). The question of what constitutes this "naked way of writing", however, is far from settled.

In 1661, Boyle writes a short essay titled *Some Considerations touching Experimental Essays in General*, in which he puts forth an apology for the stylistics of his scientific writing. The reader is asked to acknowledge that the particularities of Boyle's style might make his writing less appealing to the audience, and "that by this plain and unadorned way of writing [Boyle might] unkindly deny [his] essays many embellishments which [he] might give them" (1772 [1661]: 1, 317) and to pardon any injury to decorum that might be occasioned "by this naked way of writing" (ibid.). However, the 'nakedness' of this prose is no whim of Boyle's. It is rooted firmly in a stylistic tradition of the Royal Society in particular and of empiricism in general.⁴⁵ This is a tradition that conceptualizes 'matters of fact' as essentially extra-linguistic entities, which have to be protected from corruption by language.

In the 18th century, we encounter a pressing preoccupation with this form of "virtual witnessing" (Shapin and Schaffer 1989: 66) not only in scientific prose, but also in travel writing, a field that might at first seem far removed from the concerns of the experimental laboratory. Yet this genre will allow us to shed light on some of the central conventions of it-narratives. We recall that these texts evoke forms of life-writing, but

⁴⁵ In a more abstract sense, Boyle's naked way can also be found in empiricism's humbling down of the horizon of knowledge (cf. Parageau 2012).

also the broader category of adventure writing, with some, such as *The Travels of MS Le Post Chaise* (1753) and *The Travels of a Pack of Card* (1754), alluding directly to travelogues.

Contemporary satire is certainly aware of a connection between experimental science and travel writing. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* first strikes the reader as a satire on travelogues, but we soon find that these travels are informed by a keen sense for the accumulation of scientific knowledge. Gulliver, having settled in Brobdingnag, immediately starts his examination of the local fauna:

I could see distinctly the Limbs of these Vermin [i.e. lice] with my naked eye, much better than those of a European Louse through a Microscope; and their Snouts with which they rooted like Swine. They were the first I had ever beheld; and I should have been curious enough to dissect one of them, if I had had proper Instruments (which I unluckily left behind me in the Ship). (GT 90)

Gulliver here shows a scientific gaze that is not only interested in the description of this new world, but in its figurative and literal dissection. His first thoughts go towards the missing instruments that would allow an impartial examination of this new world. Accumulating material proof of his explorations, he brings three Brobdingnagian wasp stings with him and gifts them to the Royal Society's repository at Gresham College once he returns.

This association between the traveller and scientist deepens throughout the second half of the 18th century. While it-narratives gain traction as a genre, scientific voyages become increasingly more common (cf. Illiffe 2003: 618). The case of virtual witnessing that probably imprints itself most clearly on the late 18th century's social imagination are the voyages undertaken by Captain James Cook. Scholars have repeatedly commented on the plain, non-rhetorical style of Cook's writing (cf. Currie 1994: 18f.). In the accounts of his travels, Cook, a fellow of the Royal Society, styles himself as particularly attached to objectivity, as a disinterested eyewitness to facts and thus a particularly reliable narrator (cf. Wall 2016: 134). In this, he aspires to the reliability of an object-witness that holds a particular authority in naval affairs: the logbook (cf.

ibid. 121). As a book that is kept for recording the 'naked' facts of a ship's journey, it embodies an ideal for travellers who want to approximate an 'uncorrupted' and non-rhetorical language.

When 18th-century travellers strive to present themselves as detached from the object of observation in order to emblazon their narratives with the marks of authority (cf. Pearl 2012: 76), purifying one's own language from the taint of subjectivity is the preferred method. Cook's journal achieves these authority-effects by resting on much the same conventions as other 18th-century travel writing that wants to be accepted as factual and reliable. The journal's main device for this goal is "first-person witnessing" (Ogborn and Withers 2007: 22), a narrative mode operating via "natural narrative" (Fludernik 1996: 10) and employing "plain descriptive language, and [...] strict chronology" (Ogborn and Withers 2007: 22).

The geographical description of the globe presents problems – of perception, of rhetorical style, of distance, of authorial credibility, and of audiences' credulousness – that cannot be ignored: Facts are not self-evident. Instead, they are dependent upon particular fictions, in the sense of fiction as 'something made' (cf. *ibid.*). Facts are the result of a careful presentation and the adherence to certain representational conventions. However, the conventions for this kind of prose do not emerge spontaneously; instead, I will argue that they can be traced to the development of a specific rhetoric of reliability.

As technological innovations and the expansion of the early British Empire lead to an ever-increasing number of exploratory and merchant vessels bringing back not only goods, but also information, travel literature and the evolution of science are intricately linked (cf. Adams 1983: 79ff.). From its beginning, the Royal Society, like many similar institutions of European powers, pursues a keen interest in participating in these voyages and profiting from the knowledge that could be gathered (cf. Carey 2012: 26f.; Stagl 1995). In this effort, the Royal Society encounters a problem that is all too familiar to scholars of early travel literature: the notoriously blurry line between what modern critics call the boundary between factual and fictional writing (cf. Hayden 2012: 10; Shapiro 2003: 71f.). In response to the proliferation of travel writing as a distinctively hybrid genre, characterized by ontological uncertain-

ties, great stylistic variety, and proliferous digressions, the Royal Society tries to impose its own system of order. From its very beginning, the Society publishes suggestions on the correct methodology for the compilation of travel accounts (cf. Pearl 2012: 71). These writings can be understood as a subgenre of the essays on the empiricist method that flourishes after the example of Francis Bacon's *On the Advancement of Learning*.⁴⁶ Again, it is Robert Boyle who is responsible for one of the most influential texts of this sort. The year 1692 sees the posthumous publication of *General Heads for the Natural History of a Country Great or Small*, in which Boyle puts forward a methodology for the acquisition of what nowadays would be classified as the geographic, ethnographic, and geological descriptions of a region (cf. Boyle 1772 [1692]: 6, 733–743). The object of the empiricist inquiry would thereby be significantly humbler than that of previous natural philosophy, the individual discrete event displacing the general type as the horizon of knowledge production (cf. *ibid.*). This foregrounding of the discrete and the singular brings with it an increased focus on the description of the most arbitrary detail. The mass of detail, what Shapin and Shaffer call “prolixity” (1985: 10), serves to produce an effect of reliability. Just like the experimental scientists employ this method to transform their observations into facts, the travellers “perform the key labour of ‘gathering’ and ‘bringing’” (Neill 2002: 7), that is, the accumulation of the raw data that can later be transformed into matters of fact.

This accumulative tendency of experimental philosophy and travel writing provides a first approach for understanding the structure of it-narratives. It is precisely this tendency in it-narratives, which provides the grounds for their dismissal in the 1781 issue of the *Critical Review*, which discusses *The Adventures of a Rupee*. The authors of it-narratives are said to be “throwing together all the farrago of public transactions, private characters, old and new stories, every thing,

46 Francis Bacon's influence on the discourses of empiricism and experimental philosophy cannot be overstated, yet while the long 18th century can be stretched to accommodate Boyle, Locke and others, Bacon clearly belongs to a very different cultural context and can only be mentioned en passant in this work. See for example the chapter on “The Rhetoric of Science”. For more on the influence of Bacon on Boyle and Locke, see Anstey 2002.

in short, which they can pick up" ("Novels" 478).⁴⁷ The reviewer here connects to the imagery of an author-gatherer, who collects indiscriminately. Instead of providing an overarching plot, these texts accumulate a variety of largely unconnected episodes. As we have seen, the episodes of it-narratives present particular instances of satirical observations strung together one after another and gathered into a mass of detail about their object of inquiry: contemporary society.⁴⁸ This society cannot be represented as a whole, but only approximated by the "prolixity" of different details.

In topological terms, this no longer happens according to the microcosm-macrocosm projections characteristic of premodern natural philosophy (cf. Oosthuizen Mouton 2010: 35) but rather according to what could be called *complexio partium* – a figure of addition along the syntagmatic axis, which can be thought of as representing a whole through the potentially endless chain of parts (cf. Stockhammer, forthcoming). Instead of taking one part as a representative of the whole, it-narratives, like experimental philosophy and travel writing, are tasked with gathering knowledge (cf. Hayden 2012: 10).⁴⁹ They aim at amassing, repeating, and replicating observations in order to guarantee the reliability of the knowledge they gather. The travel directives of the Royal Society provide the framework for this discourse of reliability and give rise to the specific poetics that we encounter in it-narratives.⁵⁰

47 It is important to point out that this accumulative tendency is not the equivalent of a concept such as Barthes' reality effect (cf. Barthes 1989: 141–148) – it is not an overabundance of circumstantial detail in a given scene signifying the reality of the represented, but the overabundance of episodes and topics included in the scope of one narrative.

48 The question of episodic structure and plot (or lack thereof) will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter.

49 In this, they connect particularly well to the structure of satire that often operates by amassing a series of individual observations (cf. Link 1980: 28).

50 To illustrate the multifaceted connection between empiricist methodology and travel writing, a look at an early 18th-century compilation of travel accounts is helpful. In 1704, the brothers Awnsham and John Churchill publish a compilation of international travel narratives that were composed during the previous century. The volume with the lengthy name *A collection of voyages and travels: some now first printed from original manuscripts, others now first published in English* for a long time offers the single most exhaustive and authoritative compilation of international travel writing. The Churchill brothers' compilation exemplifies a particularly striking personal connection of travel writing to Empiricist thought. Awnsham Churchill is the publisher of John Locke. Locke in turn is supposed to

However, the empiricist epistemology that is operative in these directions not only shapes the style and scope of it-narratives, but also influences their subject matter in another way. We have seen how it-narrators authenticate their narration by calling for the same “plain” (*Bank-Note* 23) language that Boyle’s “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318) proposes. This style is complemented by the ‘plainness’ of their subject matter. The coin-narrator in *Aureus* makes this point clear when it draws attention to the fact that “[its] scenes have not been laid in flowery meads and rugged mountains, but in the bustle of the world and in the stir of every-day life” (*Aureus* 15). The majority of the episodes that it-narrators witness are taken from the most mundane occurrences of daily life. They centre less on fantastical schemes and grand intrigues and more on petty theft and everyday vanity. Thus, the narrator of *The Adventures of a Pincushion* (ca. 1784) admits: “It is the repetitions of trifles which constitute the chief business of our existence” (69).⁵¹ The interest that it-narrators take in the mundane occurrences they witness in their travels is made possible by a new evaluation of the relationship of the extraordinary and the mundane prepared in the poetics of travel writing. As early as 1666 in the first volume of the Royal Society’s *Journal*, the *Philosophical Transactions*, Gresham College Professor of Geometry, Lawrence Rooke, publishes his *Directions for Sea-Men*, with the aim to:

set down some Directions for Sea-men going into the East & West-Indies, the better to capacitate them for making such observations abroad, as may be pertinent and suitable for their purpose; of which the said Seamen should be desired to keep an exact Diary, delivering at their return

be the author of the discourse prefacing *A collection of voyages and travels* (cf. Bachmann 2016). Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that we also find the travel-directions of Rooke republished in the anthology.

⁵¹ This also forms one of the vectors along with it-narratives are complicit in an attack on the distinction between levels of style, that can be traced in travel writing from 1650 onwards (cf. Adams 1983: 243). This question will be taken up again in the third chapter, where my work focuses on the circulation of it-narrators.

a fair Copy thereof to the Lord High Admiral of England, his Royal Highness the Duke of York, and another to Trinity-house to be perused by the R. Society. (Rook 1666: 140)

The short text then goes on to detail the contents that this "exact diary" is supposed to compile. These range from copying the logbook entries as to the latitudinal and the (notoriously more complicated) longitudinal position of the vessel, to "remark[ing] carefully the Ebbing and Flowing of the Sea" (ibid.) and observing the inclinations of dipping needles and the changes in weather (cf. Rook 1666: 140–143). In thinking about these instructions as giving rise to an early poetics of the novel, McKeon emphasizes the idea that, unlike in pre-modern natural philosophy, the empiricists of the Royal Society find the object of scientific interest not in the extraordinary, but in the mundane (cf. McKeon 2002: 68).

However, this relationship between the extraordinary and the mundane is more complicated than seems at first. In the case of the Royal Society's directives, the sailors (or rather sailing gentlemen), are explicitly asked to keep track of more unusual occurrences. In 1696, the geologist John Woodward publishes one of the best-known works in this genre, his *Brief Instructions for Making Observations in all Parts of the World*. While Woodward lists the numerous daily parameters that are to be recorded by the traveling scientist, he provides the same meticulous guidelines for the most uncommon and/or extraordinary events that a traveller can face. When observing the eruption of volcanos or earthquakes, one is to note down "all circumstances that precede, attend, and follow after them: e. g. the condition and temperature of the Air, as to heat and cold, wet or dry, thick or clear, calm or windy" (Woodward 1696: 7). The informed traveller is thus able to reduce the occurrence of the extraordinary to a set of quantitative parameters. Hence the effect of this specific poetics of empiricist knowledge-gathering is not 'only' a new valorization of the mundane, but the making mundane of the exceptional as a strategy of naturalization.⁵² Going back to Jonathan

52 The same strategies will be traced in the course of this chapter in the writings of Robert Hooke and Galileo Galilei.

Culler, ‘naturalization’ refers to the act by which readers make sense of otherwise inexplicable elements of texts by resorting to familiar interpretative patterns (cf. Culler 1975: 134). It can be understood as opposed to the effect of estrangement, in that it “domestic[ates] a potentially disruptive text by relating it to a frame deemed ‘natural’” (Culler 2018: 246). The directions the Royal Society provides offer a template for naturalizing strange occurrences in the narratives of travellers by framing them in familiar cognitive parameters.

Roughly a century later, the frameworks derived from these travel directives dominate the discourse of travel writing to the degree that James Cook still follows a rhetoric that is first codified at the end of the 1600s. In the late 18th century, British travellers traverse the globe, guided by the epistemological doctrines of the Royal Society. At the same time, literal (albeit literary) object-narrators collect vastly different fragments into stories, connecting to the same directives in their quest for satiric accumulation. Travel writing thus constitutes the link in the literary tradition by which it-narratives take up the “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318) and the accumulative project that lies at its core.

2.7 The Aerostatic Spy

While we have now shown that travel- and life-writing are the primary literary models for it-narratives, there is one particular text that is prototypical for the adoption of the “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318). By returning to *The Aerostatic Spy* (1785) and examining it in more detail, we will be able to better understand how the idea of an objective and detached observer is given literary shape. The narrative departs from the genre convention of portraying commodities and implements a creative form of second person narration for conveying the speech of the object. It introduces a human narrator from the former American colonies who constructs an air balloon in order to escape a desert island. This “aerostatic globe” (*Aerostatic Spy* 230) is soon infused with a spirit that guides its flight and directs the attention of the human traveller to the peculiarities of the foreign nations below. This intrusion occurs as the balloon unexpectedly rises above the clouds

and reaches the highest regions of the atmosphere, where the human frame-narrator can discern the earth as a globe and a totalized object of observation:

[T]he very clouds, which had rolled like an ocean beneath me, began to disappear, or rather to form part of the Globe around which they revolved, and which lessened as I arose, piercing the yielding aether. The reader may now perhaps conceive me verging fast towards the fields of light and heat and ready to be dazzled with their elementary splendour. But the case was quite different. I sustained a very great degree of cold; I found my breath heave short and quick, and saw the sun only as an orb of fire. (*Aerostatic Spy* 228)

This realistic depiction of the ascent into an upper atmospheric layer soon acquires a somewhat eerie character, once the narrator observes the changes in the laws of nature that have taken place in this hitherto unexplored region. Like a natural philosopher schooled by the directives of the Royal Society, he engages in a couple of experiments in order to derive matters of fact about this ethereal *terra incognita*. Among other things, he tests the gravitational pull that is exerted by discharging a couple of items, when he observes that “repeating the experiment, they remained *quiescent*, neither moving nor moved, neither attracting nor attracted” (ibid., emphasis in the original). The resulting metaphorical field of aerostasis⁵³ caters to a fantasy of a neutral space, in which a position that is “neither attracting nor attracted” provides the ideal axis along which the perspective of an unobserved observer can be plotted. The absence of disturbing and distorting motion, as would be found in aerodynamics, connects to the registers of stability and predictability and provides the imaginary content for the authority of this non-human perspective.

In this space between the globe above, the balloon, and the globe below, the earth, the it-narrator enters: “Whilst I was thus employed, a lucid body appeared over my head. [...] A moment brought the aerial

53 A subfield of hydrostatics and an antipode to aerodynamics, that is, the study of gases that are not in motion.

vehicle in sight, which proved not to be a cloud, but an emanation of fire lighter than air” (*Aerostatic Spy* 229). What may first appear as an intrusion of pre-modern understanding of natural phenomena is soon rectified. The “spirit of the Atmosphere” (*ibid.*) that enters and infuses the air balloon takes on a much less fantastic appearance on a second look. A late 18th-century audience familiar with contemporary discourse will have recognized the “fire lighter than air” as the “inflammable air” (Cavendish 1766: 144) that is systematized as a chemical element by Henry Cavendish in 1766. It receives its common name of ‘hydrogen’ by Lavoisier, two years before the publication of *The Aerostatic Spy*. By that time, the element itself has been available for more than a hundred years. In 1671, it was synthesized for the first time by none other than Robert Boyle.

This contextualization helps to explain the peculiarities of the text, as we find an it-narrator who seems to be identical with the balloon, but at other times has an outside existence of its own. Yet once we trace this “spirit of the Atmosphere” back to a material basis, a gas that is well known by the time the story is published, we can confirm the working hypothesis that in these texts one is dealing with narrators that are both radically immanent and materially embodied. In tune with this, the text itself plays on this suggested break with the genre tradition by fleshing out a metaphorical conflict between transcendence and immanence. Once high up above the clouds, the human traveller is reprimanded by the it-narrator for his hubris:

[A]rt thou now satisfied with roaming into the *Fields of Air*? Thus experienced, wouldst thou rather chuse to return to earth, or seekest thou any thing farther in these superior regions? I need not answer that the latter was my choice. (*Aerostatic Spy* 229, emphasis in the original)

The idea of transcendence proper, the possibility of a truly immaterial domain is thus dispelled as the human-narrator agrees to descend and again become part of the globe below. The resulting perspective that the it-narrator provides is detached by being a non-human one, yet remains materially embedded. This tension spells out the contradiction between a fantastically pre-modern structure (the ‘guidance’ by the spirit) and

the Enlightenment technology that disenchant its apparently miraculous properties, and integrates them in a scientific system, charting it as one amongst many chemical elements. The spirit of hydrogen that infuses the air-balloon announces its ability to serve as an instrument for the gathering of knowledge about the world below:

I have it in my power to give you a view of various scenes on earth below, which may tend to improve your heart, and to enlighten your understanding. I mean to shew you what is passing in various parts of the globe, and leave it to your reflection to draw from the whole applications suitable to wisdom and morality. (ibid.)

Following this announcement, the it-narrator and its human (co)pilot set out on a journey across the globe during which they will gather the matters of fact that can be induced from the “various scenes” they observe. In this accumulative enterprise, they behave much like the traveling gentlemen who, under the directives of the Royal Society, set out to expand the field of its knowledge. As envisioned in the directives of Boyle, Woodward, and others, they compile knowledge about the world by means of disciplined and meticulous observations. Following the empiricist paradigm, they aim not at the postulation of general truths, but proceed by the repeated observation of single occurrences: the “scenes” announced by the spirit above. In its need for iteration, the methodological imperative of empiricism intersects with the narrative method that is characteristic of it-narratives. In a world where deductive reasoning from a dogma that grants total cohesion is displaced by induction, causality cedes its terrain to correlation as the new and humbled horizon of scientific inquiry. Correspondingly, the story worlds of it-narratives are not structured by an overarching plot that would totalize the meaning generated in its constituent fragments, but instead string together single episodes.

In accordance with this scepticist fallout of empiricism, the scenes that are gathered do not show how things generally behave, but how one thing once behaved. Consider the example of the following scene in which the it-narrator draws our attention to what can be observed below:

[D]o you observe the Vezier there, who is attended by crowds. He is the patron of numberless suitors; he is the director of Counsels, and occasionally the commander of armies. Would you not expect he should have affairs of the most serious nature to employ his hours? On the contrary, they are employed in the most idle diversions. Though he can command the beauties of the East, yet at sixty years of age, he is the slave, the dupe of one favourite mistress. (*Aerostatic Spy* 230)

This observation of the foreign dignitary ties in with the satirical impetus of the genre; its structure follows the emphasis on the particular observation that is characteristic of the empiricist discourse. The general function of the vizier, the enormous political, economic, and military power associated with the position, is contrasted violently with the private conduct of the person occupying this role. This contrast plots the particularity of the individual person against the abstract social position he is to fulfil. In another case, the human traveller is asked to “[o]bserve those impatient travellers [...]. One of them is a Projector. Such men are generally esteemed poor; being made so by their projects; but with this man the case is different” (*Aerostatic Spy* 236), before he is informed about the various schemes that have led to this particular individual’s rise to wealth. The focus on the particular occurrence instead of the general validity thus goes hand in hand with the satirical impetus of ‘unmasking’ a moral fault in a character and dramatizing the gap between social appearance and private essence.

Thus, *The Aerostatic Spy* focuses on discrete experiences; on single historical occurrences, instead of a generalized statements, thereby confirming to the Royal Society’s imperatives for observation (cf. Dear 1985: 152). The epistemological access that such an observation grants is necessarily precarious and dependent on constant reiteration, much like the observations of travellers mentioned earlier. Hence, episodes such as these are strung together into a series of single observations, which are repeatedly broken off and taken up again, just as Robert Boyle’s experimental failures are recorded and the experiments themselves repeated (cf. Bender 2012: 29). As observed already in the case of *The Sedan*, the narration of *The Aerostatic Spy* is characterized by a series of observations that are interrupted and resumed with a new object.

About halfway through the story, once the Balloon approaches Britain, this structure receives an important reversal. Here, Ballaster's concept of the "reverse gaze" (Ballaster 2005: 149) becomes critical for understanding the effects of this peculiar narrative configuration. For one, the arrival in Britain is a "voyage in" (Said 1994: 216), the return of a (former) colonial subject to the imperial centres. The human narrator is introduced as coming from the recently independent colonies of North America, someone who "after having surveyed various nations of the extensive continent, [...] at least reached the metropolis of that country justly styled the Mother [of his]" (*Aerostatic Spy* 235), and whom it thus "becomes to respect her, though not in her faults or weaknesses" (ibid.). *The Aerostatic Spy* offers a virtual perspective on the metropolitan heart of the British Empire, a privileged perspective contingent on filial bonds that yet evokes a distance that allows for experiencing the empire from the vantage point of the other. In this, *The Aerostatic Spy* connects to a tradition of the narrative device of a foreign observer. In 1700, Thomas Brown's *Amusements Serious and Comical* begin their observation of contemporary life by asking the reader to "[i]magine what an Indian wou'd think of such a Motely Herd of people, and what a Diverting Amusement it would be to him, to examine with a Traveller's Eye, all the Remarkable Things of this Mighty City" (Brown 1700: 18). The function of the foreign traveller device – making the familiar strange – is amplified by its combination with the it-narrator. The frame-narrator, a foreigner to London, observes the city through the perspective granted him by his non-human counterpart. By means of the it-narrator, he assumes the epistemologically superior position of the unobserved observer, enjoying, as quoted at the beginning of the chapter, the "most pleasing sensation [...] [of] seeing, whilst unseen" (*Aerostatic Spy* 241). Soon, however, the sight below turns rather unpleasant:

We now passed over Temple Bar, famous for having been decorated with such ornaments as would better have become the *Man-Killers* of America, than the rulers of a civilized nation to affix here [...]. Let Britons hope to

see no more such sights in their days; nor ever enjoy such 'poor triumphs of low illiberal minds' over a vanquished enemy, even though the name of traitor be superadded. (*Aerostatic Spy* 242, emphasis in the original)

The “ornaments” below are the heads of executed prisoners convicted of treason, which are mounted on Temple Bar, where The Strand turns into Fleet Street, leading to the city centre of 18th-century London. The entry into the city is thus framed as a voyage into a heart of darkness, the discovery of a potentially ‘savage’ core at the very heart of the ‘civilized’ empire. The frame-narrator, as a former colonial subject, can thus turn the rhetoric of civilization against the ‘civilizing’ empire by a switch of perspectives that is brought about by a reverse gaze that engenders a strong effect of estrangement, when the reader first stumbles upon the ambiguous use of “ornaments”.⁵⁴ The it-narrator does not look at these sights with the notorious “imperial eyes” (Pratt 1992), but rather with a reverse gaze, confronting a culture with what it tries to forget (cf. Lachmann 2002: 9). The perspective of the object is here a uniquely powerful tool for literary estrangement, understood in Shklovsky’s sense of making the familiar strange, by suspending the automatism of understanding (cf. 1998: 6 and 12),⁵⁵ problematizing the established relationship between colonizer and colonized.

The reverse gaze as a means of engendering this sort of critique can already look back upon important predecessors by the end of the 18th century. I have already mentioned Ward’s *The London Spy* (1703), which features the observations a naïve country gentleman makes in the capital. However, the genre that employs such an outsider as a narrative device is inaugurated by *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, published by Robert Midgley between 1691 and 1694, itself a translation of *L’Espion Turc* (1684–1686) by Giovanni Paolo Marana. In this epistolary novel, the genre of the oriental tale is given a twist in that an Ottoman

54 There seems to be a curious reversal at stake as to the objects of curiosity. The severed heads upon temple bar could be read as distorted mirror images of the shrunken heads frequently brought back from colonial voyages and displayed in the first curiosity cabinets. For more on the collection of ‘curiosities’, see Benedict 2012.

55 Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement will be taken up in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

spy – Mahmut the Turk – comments on life in Paris and the French court. As in the case of *The Aerostatic Spy*, such a narrator is the means for estranging the familiar, in the fashion of the passage above. It offers the possibility of reversing the stereotypes about the other and making use of the language that established the relation between the self and the other for problematizing that which is taken for granted (cf. Ballaster 2005: 149).

In the same way that Marana's *Turkish Spy* uses its narrative position to critique political, cultural, and military affairs in France from a position safely removed, the it-narrator in *The Aerostatic Spy* digresses from its satirical observations in order to comment on current affairs. While the travellers continue their journey above London, the it-narrator notices the swelling of the metropolitan population:

The political ills which arise from the vast size of the Metropolis of Great Britain are evident. The inconveniences in civil government are many. It is complaint of long standing, that the quantity of provisions required, and consumed by the inhabitants, exaggerates the price of them; yet no steps are taken to prevent these evils [...]. The consequence of so many people being crowded together, in one place, is inimical to health. This is acknowledged; yet they flock from all parts hither daily [...], exchanging, for the mere sight of a splendour, of which most of them can hardly hope to partake, the seats of rural peace and tranquillity. (*Aerostatic Spy* 240)⁵⁶

In thus picking up the tradition of the reversed oriental tale, the narrator can comment on a contemporary controversy under the guise of neutrality and detached objectivity (cf. Ballaster 2005: 35). By being objects, such narrators can claim to be even less implicated in the society that they describe than the narrators of reversed oriental tales are. While the narrator of *Letters writ by a Turkish Spy* lives and reports

56 While the it-narrator attributes the swelling of the city to a fashionable whim, a student of 18th-century economic history finds the dynamics of primitive accumulation at work here, driving peasants from their rural seats and transforming them into urban workers in the wake of the first industrial revolution. The relationship of it-narratives to these processes is examined further in the conclusion to this work.

under constant threat of discovery and suffering a similar fate as the severed heads upon Temple Bar, the it-narrator of the *Aerostatic Spy* is safely removed from any such danger. The radicalization of the concept of the unobserved observer in it-narratives changes the narrative dynamics of the text. Unlike the *Turkish Spy*, whose prose is visibly tailored to every letter's recipient and ripe with personal concerns, expressing the constant threat of becoming the one who is looked at, instead of the onlooker (cf. Ballaster 2005: 138), the it-narrator in the *Aerostatic Spy* can speak from a position that sustains the fantasy of remaining untouched by human affairs. It does so by being detached from the human world below.

However, the narrative authority digressions such as the above mobilize can only be fully understood once we trace them back to the much more frequent episodes of direct (satirical) observation. These observations resume once the it-narrator "according to his usual custom, rouse[s] [the human traveller] [...] to the contemplation of new objects" (*Aerostatic Spy* 240). Hovering above the "various parts of the globe" (*Aerostatic Spy* 229), the it-narrator singles out a specific individual for closer observation by its human passenger. While that individual's story is related, second person narration is used as the human narrator is asked to pay attention to the details of certain aspects of that person. The presence of both the human subject and the it-narrator in the story could suggest that the metaphor of the instrumental witness has reached the end of its conceptual value at this point. However, upon closer examination, the opposite is the case; the narrative layout leaves no doubt as to how exactly perception is structured. The human subject's attention towards the scene is directed explicitly by the object. He is asked to "observe" (*Aerostatic Spy* 233), "see" (230), and "behold" (248), is "shewed" (248) numerous things, and told by the it-narrator what exactly it is that he "perceive[s] down below" (230). In this, the it-narrator is channelling the human subject's sensory experience. Throughout most of the story, the narrative configuration, although not monopolized by the discourse of the object, makes the observations that the human subject undertakes only accessible in the second person narration of the object.

This sort of guided observation through verbs of perception channels the sensory impressions of a human subject through the language of an object. The human subject is “perfectly happy in submitting [itself] to the will of [its] friendly conductor” (*Aerostatic Spy* 240). The it-narrator is a conductor not only understood as an agent of transportation, but also in the second sense of the word, as a medium through which something passes.

This observation suggests that *The Aerostatic Spy* might not be entirely a spy in the sense of Mahmut the Turk. In a gloss to his dictionary entry for “spy” in the *Dictionary of the English Language*, a text that is contemporary to *The Aerostatic Spy*, Dr. Johnson notes:

It is observed by a German, that spy has been in all ages a word by which the eye, or office of the eye, has been expressed; thus the Arimaspians of old, fabled to have but one eye, were so called from ari, which, among the nations of Caucasus, still signifies one, and spi, which has been received from the old Asiatick languages for an eye, sight or one that sees. (*A Dictionary of the English Language* s.v. *spy*, n.)

Following this alternative etymology, we might be dealing with another sort of spy – less a clandestine reporter for a foreign power than a medium of sight, something that conducts visual information. This observation resonates strikingly with the observations of a character in *The London Spy*, who is shown to be “so alienated from the everyday world that he has transformed his own body into an instrument” (cf. Benedict 2001: 94). Whereas such a transformation into an object of observation can be applied to the narrators in *The London Spy* or *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, I claim that it is radicalized in it-narratives. Not only in narratives that allude to such spies in their title, such as *The Aerostatic Spy* or *The Golden Spy*, but also in it-narratives as such, as they offer observers detached from human affairs.

This can be illustrated in the differences between these two genres. In her discussion of the foreign spy subgenre, Ballaster plots the spy narrative against the narrative of the traveller or the merchant. Whereas the first operates through a constrained eye chained to a specific purpose, that of the merchant and/or traveller is free to roam and explore with

curiosity (cf. Ballaster 2005: 158). It-narratives transgress this dichotomy. The genre's strong indebtedness to empiricist epistemology means that travelling and spying are no longer separate modes of relation to the world. As shown earlier, after reading the travel directives of the Royal Society, one cannot maintain the idea of a radical freedom of the traveller's eye. Instead, the empiricist discourse tries to impose order on it, by structuring what is to be seen and how it should be recorded. At the same time, this disciplining of the gaze is not a one-sided restriction of possible knowledge, but the necessary condition for the acquisition of reliable knowledge. The dichotomy is thus superseded in the self-disciplining of empiricist discourse; restriction and knowledge are not contradictions, but the latter is contingent upon the former.

The instruments that restrict, focus, and discipline perception in such a way, telescope and microscope, thus function as the second metaphor structuring the poetics of observation in it-narratives. If in the case of *The Sedan*, we understand the liminal space of truth production that its body constitutes an analogue to the Boylean air pump, then the corresponding metaphor for the narrative mediation in *The Aerostatic Spy* would be the artificial eye. When the it-narrator addresses its human counterpart, urging him to "look below" and "mark there," it is both restricting the view from above to one specific item among a potentially infinite multitude and making this item accessible over a distance.⁵⁷ Moreover, when the ornaments upon Temple Bar are focused on and found to be human heads, the it-narrator connects to a widespread practice of instrument use at the time, albeit one with a perspective *from below*: 18th century crowds can rent telescopes below

57 The peculiar position here evokes an unlikely parallel to a scene in *Paradise Regained*: In the fourth book of Milton's epic, Satan, on top of a high mountain, shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world, trying to tempt him with worldly power. Interestingly, the scene talks both of a telescope and of Satan's "aerie microscope" as Satan – like the "spirit of the Atmosphere" (*Aerostatic Spy* 299) – describes what one sees below in the second person (cf. *Paradise Regained* IV.42-57). Satan, like (as we will see at the end of the chapter) the Devil in Alain-René Le Sage's *The Devil on two Sticks*, has the power of offering an unnatural perspective. Yet this perspective is associated with deceit and illusion (cf. Partner 2018: 253), connecting to the accusations that are brought to bear on these optical instruments by contemporaries. Le Sage's text is taken up again in the last section of this chapter.

Temple Bar to observe the severed heads high above them more clearly (cf. Harris 2004).

Thus, whereas the air pump offers an image for the construction of sterile semantic spaces, the optical instruments focus on particular objects of observation that are singled out by zooming in. Both are operative in it-narratives with varying emphases, *The Sedan* tends to fashion its narrative by metaphors of enclosed spaces, while *The Aerostatic Spy* gravitates towards metaphors of focused sight. Both operations essentially refer to the same process: the experimental philosopher's construction of an observable object by means of exclusion. As in the case of the air pump, microscope and telescope are instruments that serve as the focal points for some of the main epistemological debates of the long 18th century. The writings of the Royal Society teem with the metaphorical uses of these instruments. In his *Certain Physiological Essays and Other Tracts*, Boyle likens the use of the "florid style" in writing to the "painting on the Eye-glasses of a Telescope" (1, 304), when arguing for the "naked way of writing" (1, 318).

The role that the spying-glass or telescope plays in the scientific imaginary of the long 18th century cannot be overestimated.⁵⁸ Popularized by the use that Galileo made of a Dutch prototype, the instrument comes to be emblematic of the new epistemological paradigm of experimental science. In the hands of Galileo, the telescope becomes a powerful tool of estrangement, playing a central role in the fall of the Ptolemaic system. Although not the first one to introduce geocentrism, Galileo plays a crucial role in its popularization.⁵⁹ In the British context, Joseph Glanvill, a clergyman and fellow of the Royal Society, writes enthusiastically about the telescope. He emphasizes that this instrument shows things that would be considered unnatural or plain crazy

⁵⁸ For more on the effects of the telescopic imagination on late 17th-century discourses, see Nicolson 1962.

⁵⁹ The Copernican attack on the Ptolemaic system derives its inspiration not from observation but in the deductive mode characteristic of pre-empiricist natural philosophy, by readings of Plutarch and Cicero. Galileo, on the other hand, voices a challenge to dogma by means of the experimental observation through an instrument. The telescopic observations of the orbit of Venus provide the first tenable proof of the Copernican system. This instrument becomes representative of the experimental mode of knowledge production like none other.

before its invention (cf. McKeon 2002: 70). A close relative of this kind of artificial eye, the microscope, receives an extended laudation by a fellow man of the church and colleague of Glanvill's, Thomas Sprat:

In the large space of the *Air*, in the Caverns of the *Earth*, in the Bowels of *Mountains*, in the bottoms of the *Seas and in the Shades of Forest*: which have hitherto escaped all *mortal senses*. In this the *Microscope* alone is enough to silence all opposers. [...] [B]y means of this excellent *Instrument*, we have a far greater number of different kinds of things revealed to us, than were contained in the visible universe before. [...] To the *eies* therefore may still be given a vast addition of *Objects*: And proportionally to all the other senses. (Sprat 1959: 384f., emphases in the original)

The observations made by this “excellent *Instrument*” are popularized by yet another member of the early Royal Society and a technician to Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke. His *Micrographia: or Some Physiological Descriptions of Minute Bodies Made by Magnifying Glasses* sets new standards when it is published in 1665. It compiles the descriptions of 60 largely microscopic⁶⁰ investigations into different specimens, ranging from pieces of cork and fabric to patches of mouldy leather and a dead flea. They single out mundane objects such as these and provide a radically new perspective on otherwise well-known items. By showing these specimens in ways in which they were never before seen, *Micrographia* teaches the reader to distrust human sight and rely on the reliability of the instrument (cf. Jack 2009: 196).

In it-narratives such as *The Aerostatic Spy*, the object-perspective of these artificial eyes not only serves to voice claims to objectivity and dismiss the reliability of human narrators, but also offers a perspective through which the well-known is defamiliarized, prefiguring Tretyakov's hopes for a kind of writing that can challenge the “Ptolemaic system of literature” (2006: 59).

⁶⁰ Although it is chiefly remembered as the work that popularized microscopy, it also contains telescopic experiments and discussions of theoretical concepts.

2.8 Problems of Perspective

The “artificial eyes” provide the imagery for the narrative mediation of *The Aerostatic Spy*, connecting to the perspectives of telescope and microscope that fashion themselves as reliable, yet show deeply estranging sights. The claims to reliability that are voiced by these instruments are thus frequently contested. The voice of evidence speaking through the microscope fails to “silence all opposers” (Sprat 1959: 384), as Thomas Sprat hoped. Artificial eyes might bridge the distance between observer and observed and provide images that the human eye cannot access on its own, but those are the images of a world that seem unnatural and marvellous, maybe even “plain crazy” (McKeon 2002: 70). This is a contradiction that can best be understood through Henry Power’s⁶¹ poem *In Commendation of the Microscope*, written in 1661:

Of all th’ Inventions, none there is Surpasses
 the Noble Florentine’s Dioptrick-glasses.
 For what a better, fitter, guift Could bee
 in this world’s Aged Luciosity.
 To Helpe our Blindnesse so as to devise
 a paire of new & Artificall eyes.
 By whose augmenting power wee now see more
 than all the world Has ever donn Before.
 Thy Atomes (Brave Democritus) are now
 made to appeare in bulk & figure too.

⁶¹ It is crucial to note that Henry Power is a Cartesian who seeks to prove Cartesian doctrines by his microscopic experiments and thus contrasts sharply with Hooke who observes an inductive approach (cf. Lawson 2015: 93). One has to be cautious of technological reductionism here: The new epistemologies of the telescope and microscope do not follow deterministically from the invention of these instruments but are the product of a nexus of empiricist thought, experimental practice, and technological development.

[...]

Nay then yow pretty sprits & fairy Elves
 that hover in the aire, Looke to your selves.
 For with such prying Spectacles as these
 wee shall see yow in yr owne essences.
 Then shall I see a soule just when tis gone
 as cleere as now I doe our Will & John.

(Power 1661 in Cowles 1938: 71f., no lines provided)

The “noble Florentine’s” – Galileo’s – invention is here presented as a prosthetic eye that will guide humanity out of a state of ignorance. The hyperbole of Power’s claim of being able to see atoms, or what he believes are atoms,⁶² serves to stress the microscope’s claim of being able to validate received ideas about the composition of the physical world that could hitherto only be argued for by means of speculation. In a turn that would nowadays be understood as deeply ironic, the instrument does not disprove the existence of “pretty sprits & fairy Elves” but finally offers the means of seeing them. Precisely the instruments that purport to increase our knowledge about the physical world are called upon to prove the existence of fantastical beings. The same is true for the theological concept of the soul in the last line of the poem. Science is used not in order to dispel but to prove the existence of the hitherto speculative.⁶³ Understanding the microscope, according to a late

62 The first microscope that could show an atom in the sense of modern physics was developed in 1931.

63 This marks the beginning of a long line of attempts not only to reconcile the findings of experimental science with religious dogma, but also to make use of the former to advance the latter. As late as 1907, the American physician Duncan MacDougall seeks to prove the weight of the human soul (cf. Fisher 2011 15-20). Attributing a secularizing agenda to early experimental science constitutes an anachronism. Again, the work of Robert Boyle proves instructive. His *Occasional Reflections upon Several Subjects* (1665) centres on theological considerations, and *The Christian Virtuoso* (1690) lays out the ideal of a Christian scientist. For more on the relationship of experimental science and the Royal Society to theology,

Enlightenment framework, as a tool for demystification, would constitute an anachronism (cf. Stevanović 2020: 9). Instead, Power's poem points to the microscope as the centre of a paradoxical social imaginary that connects to fundamental ontological debates.

In the long 18th century, spyglasses are tools of wonder, potentially providing marvellous and unnatural images, and simultaneously the instruments that offer to dispel the marvellous by bringing its object closer to the observer, thus closing the space of ambiguity that is the realm of speculation.⁶⁴ This paradox is rooted in the fact that the telescope and microscope are instruments that "show[...] things exactly as they are not" (Lawson 2015: 98). The sights that they present are more accurate than what the naked eye could see, but precisely by being more accurate, they also seem increasingly unfamiliar and often wondrous (cf. Jack 2009: 196).

This problem is at the heart of the public and scientific reception of the telescope since its popularization in Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius*. In England, it is John Wilkins, founding member of the Royal Society and its first secretary⁶⁵, who quickly picks up on Galileo's telescopic observations. Wilkins' *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* takes the idea of the discovery of 'new worlds' through the spy-glass literally and uses Galileo's findings to speculate about the possibility of other habitable worlds. Unsurprisingly, this is an endeavour that seems highly fantastic to the contemporary scientific audience (cf. Marchitello 2012: 170), and Wilkins is well aware of the fact that he is under pressure to defend the speculations he brings forth.⁶⁶ Far from rejecting Wilkins as an eccentric, I argue that he touches upon an epistemological problem inherent to the discoveries made by the artificial eye. Wilkins' treatise literalizes

see Rabb 1962. The section "The Hand of God and the Wheel of a Clockwork" in the third chapter deals with a similar intertwining of theological and economic concepts in the long 18th century.

⁶⁴ This tension is precisely what is expressed in the last lines of Power's poem that frames the supernatural as just another object of scientific inquiry.

⁶⁵ It might have been Wilkins who first introduced Robert Hooke to microscopy (cf. Lawson 2015: 75).

⁶⁶ His work is prefaced by an apology for his speculations. Wilkins' "Proposition I" argues plainly that "the strangeness of this opinion is no sufficient reason why it should be rejected" (1638: 1).

the metaphor of the discovery of a new world that is often applied to describe scientific breakthroughs associated with the epistemological innovations telescopes and microscopes make possible.

These debates show that, in the discourse of experimental discovery, the space between epistemology and ontology is notoriously blurry. The epistemological effect of the telescope cannot be separated from its ontological implications. John Harwood is aware of this conflation when he writes about the work of Robert Hooke:

One of the central arguments of *Micrographia* was that the world was not what it seemed. The plates documented that (1) many 'invisible' things actually existed, and that (2) seeing objects microscopically disclosed radically new appearances. (Harwood 1989: 136)

On the one hand, the instrument shows the familiar in a new light, proving that things are not necessarily what they seem. It is precisely this premise from which the satire of it-narratives proceeds, contrasting the deceitful appearances of the social world with the *true* characters of its subjects. Instruments such as the microscope and the telescope thus provide a suitable imagery for it-narratives, functioning as the means for looking behind deceiving surfaces and discovering what lies underneath. In this process, the superior epistemology of instruments reframes the familiar in a new light. A new and objective⁶⁷ perspective allows them to present things in ways in which we are not trained to see them. However, in adopting these new perspectives, they show not only familiar things in new perspectives, but also radically new objects.

The discovery of the Jupiter moons and a large number of 'new' stars by Galileo, for instance, cannot be framed as merely testifying to a new and improved way of seeing. In a very direct sense, their discovery means a vast ontological expansion. Hence, telescope and microscope are necessarily agents in a process of ontological proliferation – they continuously expand the sphere of being. After the invention of the telescope, there is not only a new way of looking at stars, but there are

⁶⁷ This concept itself derives in the 18th century from the *objectif*, the lens of the artificial eye (cf. Daston 1992: 601).

also *more stars* themselves. Likewise, the microscope's perspective does not only show more details of well-known objects but discovers a new multiplicity of being(s) below the naturally visible world.

A fellow natural philosopher, albeit one who does not partake in the enthusiasm for experimentalism,⁶⁸ Margaret Cavendish is sceptical of the Royal Society's findings on precisely these grounds. She criticizes the fellows, who, she argues, "busy themselves more with other Worlds, than with this they live in" (Cavendish 2001: 4). This observation might sound counterintuitive to a modern reader, but in the early stages of experimental science, the connection of the physical world as experienced by the senses and this other world that is only accessible through the mediating instrument, is not necessarily a given. A popular anecdote taken from one of the Royal Society's meetings illustrates this point. When Cavendish is invited to witness an experimental presentation organized by the Royal Society, we learn from the diary of Samuel Pepys FRS, that she "was full of admiration, all admiration", and that "[a]fter they had shown her many experiments, and she cried still she was full of admiration, she departed" (Pepys 1971: 243). What at first sight might seem like a positive reaction is nothing less than an insult to the work of the Royal Society. As Ian Lawson observes, Cavendish ideally could have agreed with the experimental findings that were shown, or, still an acceptable reaction, could have criticized them, showing an intellectual engagement with their problems. However, by "admiring" the experiments, the Duchess is treating the Fellows as entertainers (cf. Lawson 2015: 112f.), understanding their experiments as providing not scientific advancement, but aesthetic pleasure.

A contemporary reader would recognize a satirical critique of Royal Society experimentalism in Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666/1668), a science-fiction travel narrative *avant la lettre*. Interestingly, *The Blazing World* is only one part of a volume that also contains *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, a 'serious' text on experimental philosophy.

68 The example of Margaret Cavendish, who, like the character of the exciseman in *The Aerostatic Spy*, is a conservative force in the debates on experimental science serves to remind one that the doctrines of the Royal Society rising to dominance in the 18th century are the product of a very specific coupling of Baconian (pre-)empiricism and the experimental method.

phy. The text is partly written as a response to Hooke's *Micrographia* and the *Observations* contain Cavendish's critique of optical instruments (cf. Berensmeyer 2020: 111; Linden 2001: 614). This critique is expanded on in *The Blazing World*, which features a sect of talking animals engaging in experiments. Amongst others, they experiment with optical instruments, which, "instead of delivering the Truth, delude [their] senses" (Cavendish 1668: 27). These "false informers" (ibid.) are said to "never lead [...] to the knowledge of truth" (ibid. 28) and are only rehabilitated on the condition that the observations made with their help stay secluded in the schools of the experimental philosophers (cf. Berensmeyer 2020: 111; Cavendish 1668: 28). However, the centre of this critique lies not only in this satirical portrayal of the Fellows, but in the separation that is enforced between what is considered natural philosophy and what is supposed to be fictional discourse. This is an operation that is enacted in the volume itself, which sets *The Blazing World* hierarchically apart from the 'serious' writing of the *Observations*, but is also mirrored in the *Blazing World* itself, when the would-be experimental philosophers are judged to produce not truth, but delusions (cf. Berensmeyer 2020: 110–113). The underlying implication is that *The Blazing World* would claim the same ontological status as the experiments of the Fellows; both showing imagined worlds, the "romantic" (Sprat 1959: 331) musings against which Sprat polemicizes in his *History of the Royal Society*. The full title of the work, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World*, after all, connects to the idea of the new world and its problematic implications of ontological expansion.

Going back to Joseph Glanvill's enthusiastic appraisal of the telescope quoted above, one can trace this conundrum in the ontology of spyglasses. The "imaginary [...] and fantastical" (Sprat 1959: 194) sights are not naturalized yet. The burden of proof still rests heavily on the artificial eye. It could turn out to have been painted over with marvellous images, like the telescope that Boyle uses as a metaphor (1772 [1661]: 1, 304). The new worlds discovered might be found to be imaginary worlds after all.

This threat is better understood when we consider that even when they are not bringing previously non-existent things into being, telescope and microscope can be suspected of bearing false witness. These

early artificial eyes are notoriously prone to distorting the appearance even of things that would otherwise be recognizable as everyday objects. The microscope of the time often suffers two types of visual effects, chromatic and spherical aberrations. Chromatic aberrations are caused by the splitting of light into different wavelengths that then tinted the fringes of the lens in different colours, while spherical aberrations were occasioned by the rays of light receiving a different curving at the centre of the lens than at its periphery, resulting in a distorted version of the original image (cf. Bardell 2004: 81). Hence, it comes as no surprise that an instrument known for producing optical illusions such as these is under constant suspicion of not producing matters of fact, but senseless visual effects, ceding its epistemological function to a 'merely' aesthetic one – being reduced from microscope to kaleidoscope.

When it-narratives emerge at the beginning of the 18th century, these debates are still shaping the public imaginary of experimental science. Again, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* can illustrate this. Particularly the first two books abound with references to optical instruments. Books I and II can be read as presenting a series of controlled laboratory experiments, in which differences in size are conducive to the construction of parallel situations, contrasting physical size with pretentious ambition (to beauty, power, wisdom etc.) (cf. Patey 1991: 825). Lilliput and Brobdingnag literalize the visual operations of the artificial eyes, showing how differences in scale transform everyday objects into fantastical sights. Wasps become dangerous monstrosities in Brobdingnag and lice are magnified to a scale where they can be observed in detail and call for a new metaphorical register that links them to other animals, parodying Hooke's *Micrographia* (cf. Lynall 2012: 89). In Lilliput, on the other hand, the effect of the spyglass is reversed, turning familiar objects into new microscopic entities.

These new worlds pose a serious threat to religious dogma. The discovery of new and microscopic life forms, for instance, clashes with Genesis 2: 19–20, which establishes that Adam has already named all creatures. More generally still, scholasticism holds that no objects can exist below the threshold of human senses (cf. Patey 1991: 839). The new worlds of Hooke's microscopy thus radically challenge the philosophical and theological "doctrine of the completeness of our senses"

(*ibid.*). It is precisely these theological tenets, which the exciseman in *The Aerostatic Spy* defends, arguing “from mere dogma” (250).

In opposition to this, Swift satirizes the new worlds that the artificial eyes give rise to, but employs a mimetic author-persona, the human narrator Gulliver.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, even Swift’s metaphorical and parodistic take on the new instrument’s wondrous visual landscapes is enough to discredit his work in the eyes of contemporaries. In a letter from 1727, Voltaire dismisses *Gulliver’s Travels*: “[T]hat continued series of new fangled follies, of fairy tales, of new inventions palls at last upon our taste. Nothing unnatural might please long” (Voltaire 1953: 48). The taint of the “unnatural”, it seems, is too contagious.

Faced with such levels of scepticism, experimental philosophers attempt to manufacture verisimilitude in the discursive rendering of their findings. They ‘naturalize’ them, in the sense outlined earlier in the chapter, that is, by making the exceptional mundane. Already Galileo himself is careful enough to refuse the metaphor of the ‘new world’, arguing that this new world discovered through the telescope is merely discovered for the human senses, while it existed all along (cf. Marchitello 2012: 162). When a similar problem of defending against the accusation of providing fantastical sights arises in the case of the microscope, Hooke employs a very similar strategy of naturalization. Felicity Henderson points out the peculiar lack of neologisms in the *Micrographia* (cf. 2019: 418). Instead of coining new terms for newly discovered details, Hooke’s frequent deployment of analogies reframes the unknown in the familiar and naturalizes observations that could otherwise easily be discarded as fantastic (cf. *ibid.*). Interestingly, the scientist Hooke draws on ‘artistic’ technique for this task. Not only are the metaphors he employs to naturalize his findings characterized by particularly strong visual elements (cf. *ibid.*), but, as Meghan Doherty

⁶⁹ The text makes use of fictional publisher device in order to add plausibility to this layout, with the author of a letter in the preface, the supposed Gulliver himself, correcting the publisher’s printing of Brobdingnag as a corruption of the original Brobdingrag, thereby stressing the distinction between author and publisher. However, Gulliver himself is as fallible as a human narrator can be. Despite the prolixity of his account, Gulliver remains an essentially unreliable narrator (cf. Hunter 2003: 223-226): Not only does his account of the voyages tend towards contradiction, the language in which he relates these voyages oscillates between that of trustworthy report and ironic detachment (cf. *ibid.* 226).

illustrates, Hooke uses the visual vocabulary of contemporary portrait painting to provide his readers with a frame that helps them understand his findings (cf. 2012).

As Henderson points out, the core argument of *Micrographia* is that “the world is not as it seems” (2019: 421). There is a defamiliarizing aspect to the findings of experimental philosophy, since it is able to show its specimens in ways that radically question our understanding of them. Yet, for this end, Hooke relies on techniques of naturalization to render his findings acceptable and claim the superior reliability of the experimental epistemology. The new science needs to make things both strange and familiar if it wants to succeed (cf. Henderson 2019: 429). From this perspective, we can understand the ‘naked way’ not as the ideological whim of a group of scientists, but as the specific rhetorical strategy of naturalization that is the crucial precondition for claiming the reliability of the experimental findings.

Having outlined the directions from which the epistemology of the experimental scientists is contested, we can use *Gulliver’s Travels* as a foil against which the relationship of it-narratives to the discourse of experimental science can be contrasted. While Swift parodies the “naïve empiricism” (McKeon 2002: 266) of experimental science,⁷⁰ it-narratives take a different approach. They are not simply parodying the experimental philosopher’s trust in the wondrous sights that the instrument provides but raise the issue of perspectival reliability to the level of literary form. Gulliver’s absolute inconsistency proves a stark contrast to the detached objectivity of it-narrators. Whereas Swift takes up the controversial epistemology of the new sciences in the content of his tale, it-narratives incorporate it in their poetic structure. They do so not by depicting the wondrous sights that these instruments portray, but by

70 Chrysal speaks of the present time as “this skeptic age” (1, 13), alluding to the rise of philosophical scepticism in the 18th century, through the work of scholars such as Berkeley and Hume and particularly the latter’s critique of the inductive method. When Hume’s reputation grows from the 1750s onwards, the optimism characterizing much early empiricism and its quest for reliable knowledge is somewhat curbed (cf. Popkin 1992: 8ff.). In the course of the 18th century, the dominant position of the basic tenets of empiricism is certainly solidified, yet its most radical epistemological implication – the “naïve empiricism” (McKeon 2002: 267) completely negating the idealist model of epistemology – is certainly not beyond critique.

translating the reliable perspective of the instrument into the perspectives of their narrators. The world that they show is mimetic – it is the narrator who is “unnatural” (Voltaire 1953: 48).

2.9 The Rhetoric of Science

As seen in the travel directives issued by the fellows of the Royal Society, the contradiction between the motto’s claim to extra-linguistic fact and the need for linguistic communicability leads to the emergence of a specific rhetoric that tries to naturalize the matters of fact that seemed too wondrous to be true. The “naked way of writing” fashions itself as a decidedly non-rhetorical practice, dismissing the “florid style” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 304) of old. However, the history of this conundrum reaches much further.⁷¹ In a chapter of *The Advancement of Learning* titled *On the Vanity of Words without Matter*, written as early as 1605, Francis Bacon polemicizes against those who:

hunt more after words than matter; and more after the choiceness of the phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their works with tropes and figures, than after the weight of matter. [...] It seems to me that Pygmalion’s frenzy is a good emblem or portraiture of this vanity; for words are but the images of matter, [...] to fall in love with them is all one as to fall in love with a picture. (221)

Tropes and figures are denounced as decadent ornament that scientific prose must be stripped of in order to register the proper material weight of its argument. The relationship between lofty, “falling” clauses and the steadfast “weight of matter” is a representational one: “[W]ords are but the images of matter”, Bacon writes, and hence “to fall in love with them, is all one as to fall in love with a picture”. The sin in question is idolatry and it comes as no surprise that the author of florid scientific

⁷¹ To be more precise, it can be traced all the way back to Plato’s polemics against the Sophists (cf. *Sophist* 216a-268d). This is a debate that is taken up again and elaborated on in the fourth chapter, in the section “A Naked way of Writing and the Voice of Objects”.

prose is likened to the figure of Pygmalion. Avoiding Pygmalion's error, for Bacon, means avoiding to fall in love with (and thereby recognizing the autonomy of) the mask that one has put over the plain matter of fact.

These tenets are still in place when Thomas Sprat decries the "trick of metaphors" (1959: 112) half a century later in his chapter on a *Simple and an Ornate Style*, lamenting the "many mists and uncertainties these specious tropes and figures [...] had occasioned" (ibid.), while Wilkins is even more drastic and fears that things are being eaten up by words (cf. 1668: 18). Against the deceiving ornament of rhetorical devices, Sprat plots the return to a phantasmatic state of direct referentiality. He wishes to:

return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men delivered so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of artizans, countrymen, and merchants, before that of wits or scholars. (1959: 113)

This fantasy of a primordial state of direct referentiality wishes for an economy of language in which the potential inflation of phrases is checked by a direct reference between words and things. It is embedded in a critique in which one can still trace sharp lines of demarcation towards both medieval scholasticism and the emerging culture of witticism. Instead, the fellow of the Royal Society should be able to resort to a language before the Fall, one that is yet untainted by the aberrations of culture.

We find a clue towards this restorative desire in *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782), where the narrating object is "surprised to hear the innocent and learned inhabitants of that country [...] communicate their ideas by sounds" (34). The linguistic communication of humans is presented as the precondition for deceit (cf. ibid.). As we have seen, objects become crucial for imagining a communication beyond human language. However, what Alan Gross diagnoses for all of science carries particular consequences for the Royal Society – namely, that it is

through nothing else than through a specific style in language that it creates the impression of describing a world that exists outside of these linguistic formations (cf. 1990: 17). A language where clarity is ‘naked’ and ‘natural,’ and through which a noble *savant* can achieve an immediacy of transmission, aspiring to the non-human transparency of a non-rhetorical language.

This infatuation with direct referentiality is not the private whim of a few individuals, but the well-known stance of a highly visible ideological faction that is formative of the central debates of the 18th century. Again, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* offers a glimpse of the cultural ubiquity of this ideology. After Swift sends his protagonist to Lilliput and Brobdingnag, Gulliver arrives at Laputa, a flying island that rules over the Kingdom of Balnibarbi. From the onset, it is portrayed as a society obsessed with natural science. When Gulliver enters the palace, he first notices the experimental equipment: “Globes and Spheres, and Mathematical Instruments of all Kinds” (GT 133). His voyage through the island leads him to the Academy of Lagado, a scientific institution that teems with allusions to the fellows of the Royal Society and where he is presented with a number of implausible schemes for the improvement of society or the advancement of knowledge. Arguably the most ambitious of these is a “Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words altogether” (GT 158). Its rationale proceeds thus:

[S]ince Words are only Names for *Things*; it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such *Things* as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on. [...] [M]any of the most Learned and Wise adhere to the new Scheme of expressing themselves by Things; which hath only this Inconvenience attending it, that if a Man’s Business be very great, and of various Kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater Bundle of Things upon his Back [...]. But for short Conversations a Man may carry Implements in his Pockets and under his Arms, enough to supply him, and in his House he cannot be at a Loss; therefore the Room where the Company meet who practice this Art, is full of Things ready at Hand [...]. Another great Advantage

proposed by this Invention was, that it would serve as an universal Language, to be understood in all civilized Nations. (GT 158f., emphases in the original)

In this ridiculous proposition, Swift satirizes the Royal Society's mistrust of language – from Bacon's dismissal of "tropes and figures" (1999: 21) to the "naked way" (1772 [1661]: 1, 318) of Boyle and the motto *nul-lius in verba*. The idea of the object as the only reliable means of transmitting knowledge is literalized. Not only does language lose its figurative aspects, but it is replaced by things altogether. The substitution of words by things is an attempt to bring about the return of reliable communication. As in the case of *The Aerostatic Spy*, the imagery for this is essentially religious: the tower of Babel. The language of things is supposed to bring back not only a time of direct referentiality, but also of universal mutual understanding. Bacon, writing of the dangers of "fall[ing] in love" (1999: 21) with words, echoes his own evocation of the Fall of Man as an image for the loss of direct linguistic referentiality (cf. *ibid.* 189). Swift's satire here connects to an idea that is anything but ridiculous for Bacon: the idea that empiricism is the means by which the effects of the Fall can be reversed. For Bacon, the loss of human dominion over nature can only be restored by the empirical philosopher (cf. Harrison 2008: 262; Bacon 1999: 189).

2.10 Prosopopoeia

From the writings of Francis Bacon to the *Micrographia* of Hooke and the *Experiments Physico-Mechanical* of Robert Boyle, all the way up to the directives published by Woodward and Sprat, a strong anti-rhetoric connects the writings of different authors. However, it has become evident at this point that for all the polemics against artfulness, the transmission of empiricist and experimental knowledge is no less dependent on a certain form of artistry. Brian Cowan stops short of calling the Royal Society "England's first royal academy of art" (Henderson 2019: 418), yet concedes that the Fellows have a substantial part in setting aesthetic standards (cf. Cowan 2004: 170). Robert Hooke, for instance, urges scientists to "avoid [...] all kinds of Rhetorical Flourishes, or Ora-

torical Garnishes” and to express themselves instead in “the greatest Plainness and Significancy” (1705: 63), but his practice speaks a different language. As shown above, Hooke’s microscopic observations, denouncing any form of abstraction or distortion, are themselves the result of close attention to artistic technique and the problems of representation that preoccupy the representative arts. Dealing with a diverse readership, Hooke knows of the importance of being able to *entertain* his audience, in the literal sense of holding their attention (cf. Harwood 1989: 130). The Fellows’ fears of being associated with entertainers in the narrow sense notwithstanding. Yet, his own indebtedness to techniques of pictorial art puts the distinction between science and art that the Fellows stress in question time after time. He uses images and rhetoric to persuade and appeal not only to reason, but also to the passions (cf. Henderson 2019: 421). As Harwood argues, his achievement is both scientific *and* rhetorical (cf. 1989: 120).

In this sense, Hooke’s visual style and language provide the blueprint for the figures of speech of experimental science, as a way of achieving *enargeia*. This Aristotelian concept is understood as that “which makes us seeme to see the thing before our eyes” (Hobbes 1986: 116), connecting to the vividness of presentation that is needed in order to allow for virtual witnessing (cf. Shapin and Schaffer 1989: 66). The embedding and limiting of perspective, which we have traced in influence of the writings of the Royal Society in its narratives, can be understood not as a spontaneous style of representation, but as a conscious artistic strategy for claiming reliability and naturalizing the emerging discourse of experimental philosophy.

However, the Fellows’ appropriation of artistic technique does not stop here. The aspiration to cut out the ambiguity of language and the fallibility that comes with the prismatic distortions occasioned by human subjectivity relies itself upon a specific rhetorical strategy. The preceding sections have outlined the importance of instrumental observations in this endeavour. Where human witnesses are prone to sensory shortcomings, the instrument provides objective certainty; where human witnesses have to resort to always-ambiguous processes of signification, the instrument indicates unequivocally. As shown first in the experimental layouts of Boyle and later in the microscopic descriptions

of Hooke, the ethos of the experimental philosopher's argument rests on the claim that, in the scientific discourse, we are not listening to the scientist who imposes his preconceived notions onto the natural world, but to the instrument that reports objectively. The ideal of the 'age of reason' that would later draw on Bacon's ideas stands at odds with the idea of persuasive rhetoric. In order to convince, a proposition must disavow the use of rhetorical strategies (cf. Berensmeyer 2020: 26).

As the case of *Gulliver's Travels* has shown, this irony is not lost on the contemporaries of the experimental philosophers. In his comedy *The Virtuoso* (1676), Thomas Shadwell mocks this rhetorical strategy explicitly, when one of the characters refers to a thinly veiled parody of Robert Boyle:

Not a creature so inanimate to which he does not give a tongue, he makes the whole world vocal; he makes flowers, nay, weeds, speak eloquently and by a noble kind of *Prosopopeia* instruct mankind. (Shadwell 1966: I.1.270–274, emphasis in the original)

In the experiment, the scientist's subjectivity aims at erasing its trace, much as the scientist's language tries to erase its status *as* language. In their stead, the instrument speaks. However, as Shadwell understands, the way out of the subjective distortion associated with the rhetoric of human language follows a purely rhetorical operation – the trope of *prosopopoeia*. Deriving from the Greek προσωποποιία, it is coined by the nominalization of the verb *prosopon-poiein*, 'giving a face/mask' (cf. Gzregorzewska 2013: 5). It is the act of giving a face/mask to a voice that is not yet embodied. When we read of the "soft silver sound" (*Silver Shilling* 211) of a shilling or the "gentle, but peculiar voice" (*Ostrich Feather* 271) of a feather, we are witnessing the trope of *prosopopoeia* at work, embodying voices behind which the (mostly anonymous) authors of this genre disappear. *Prosopopoeia* is the central trope of it-narratives, providing these tales with masks that can claim particular narrative reliability.

However, it is also central to what I have called the ventriloquism in which the speech of the instrument supersedes that of the scientist. I argue that this *prosopopoeia* of the instrument is the specific tropo-

logical strategy of the “nonrhetorical rhetoric” (Bender 2012: 68) the experimental scientist must implement. In this discourse, *prosopopoeia* is a master trope.⁷² In the process of giving a voice to the instrument, the experimental scientist must behave as if he were a modern Pygmalion in the Baconian sense. By putting forth the image, he falls in love with it through accepting the autonomy of this mask; it is, after all, this very autonomy on which the authority of his discourse depends. Only the fantasy of the autonomy of the mask guarantees impartiality and sustains the space of instrumental witnessing that would be unaffected by the scientist’s subjectivity.

Thus, the specific function of *prosopopoeia* in general, and that of the speaking instrument in particular, is precisely the preclusion of this disruptive kernel. In giving a face/mask, *prosopopoeia* actively disguises its own work as a trope (cf. Menke 2000: 152),⁷³ presenting itself as always already constituted. *Prosopopoeia* is a figure of naturalization for Menke in the sense that it erases the process of its becoming (cf. *ibid.*). In this, the trope connects to the strategies of naturalization integral to both the rhetoric of experimental science and travel writing, assuring that their reports can claim reliability. In the same way that these reports frame the new in the language of the already known, *prosopopoeia* disavows its creative aspect in disguising its own functioning as a trope.

When the experimental philosophers of the Royal Society defer authority to non-human witnesses, they give a face/mask to their instruments. In the transmission of their findings, these instruments are the placeholders around which the fantasy of a non-rhetorical language is constructed. However, in this process, *prosopopoeia* itself is necessarily precluded; it forms a disavowed core that holds open the space of instrumental witnessing by being the rhetorical device that sustains the fantasy of the non-rhetorical. As we have seen, this labour of disavowal can be traced throughout the writings of the Royal Society. It is constantly at work in the strategies of naturalization, disavowing both ontological expansion and the subjectivity of the scientist.

72 I am using the concept in the sense of Kenneth Burke’s seminal essay “Four Master Tropes”, that is, I am referring to tropes not only for the figural usage, but also in their function for a truth procedure (cf. 1969: 503).

73 For the connection between face and voice, see IO IX.2.32.

In the example of Robert Hooke, naturalization operates via the metaphoric operation of substitution. It is an epistemological tool that replaces one description of a phenomenon with a more accurate description of the same phenomenon, avoiding the impression of producing radically new and fantastical objects, thereby neutralizing the defamiliarizing effects of Hooke's findings.

Here, we should recall that Viktor Shklovsky opens his seminal study on the effect of literary defamiliarization with precisely this problem. He cites Aleksander Potebnya's common sense theory of poetics, which holds that in poetry, "the unknown is explained through the known" (Shklovsky 1998: 1). In the case of the microscope, we have seen the epistemological equivalent to this poetic dictum. The instrument must be defended against allegations that the images it produces are the results of a subjective creative act that would show only the wonderful but meaningless images of a kaleidoscope. Hence, while Bacon must warn his followers against "Pygmalion's frenzy", the double character of *prosopopoeia* makes a Pygmalion of every experimental philosopher. There is art at the centre of experimental science, but "ars adeo latet arte sua"⁷⁴ (Ovidius 1984: X.2.52).

Having thus found *prosopopoeia* as the central trope of both it-narratives and experimentalist science, we can finally specify the unique relation between these two types of writing. Proceeding from these observations, I will argue that it-narratives not only take up the discourses of experimental philosophy and the corresponding epistemological deliberations, but that they unravel the constitutive paradox of the latter's knowledge production through the non-rhetorical rhetoric of *prosopopoeia*.

As we have seen above, the operation of *prosopopoeia* erases its own status as a trope in the writings of experimental philosophers. While it employs rhetorical means to give a face/mask to an otherwise mute entity, it simultaneously effaces this function. In it-narratives, however, the case is more complex. We have started the chapter by proceeding

74 Here, in the sense of 'art conceals its artfulness.' In the original phrase translated by Frank J. Miller: "So does his art conceal his art" (Ovidius 1984: 83). Note that the Latin and the English quote refer both to the same (bilingual) edition.

from the most distinctive generic features of these texts. Many of their narrators profess their truthfulness with self-confident plainness, such as the coins that “would not lye” (*Golden Spy* 175), the honest watch that “should always speak the truth” (*Watch* 148), or Helenus Scott’s rupee, whose instrumental eyes can “penetrate with the same ease the shade of antiquity, and the prejudice that surrounds the modern day” (*Rupee* 70). Others, like *Chrysal* and *The Aerostatic Spy* include empiricist debates in their stories and argue in favour of an epistemology that proceeds by inductive reasoning. The latter joins *The Sedan* and the *Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise* in modelling its narrative mediation after the epistemological structures of the experimentalist’s instruments. *The Sedan* follows the metaphor of the air pump’s hermetically enclosed space of knowledge production, while *The Aerostatic Spy* tends towards disciplining the gaze and singling out individual instances of the observed world according to the logic of the “Artificall eyes” (Power in Cowles 1938: 71), that is, microscope and telescope. Looking back at the first text, *The Travels of MS Le Post-Chaise*, we find the epistemological tenets of empiricism, by which the conscious narrowing down of the scope of knowledge production vouches for its reliability. What unites them is the structure of *prosopopoeia*, the reliance on a trope that gives a voice to a previously mute entity.⁷⁵

We can recall how it-narratives draw upon frameworks characteristic of both autobiography (in the stories of the lives of things) and biography (in the stories of their owners’ lives). In this, the claims to reliability found in it-narratives were shown to transform the experimental philosopher’s claims to exact observations into a literary genre, in which they take the shape of biography’s claims to exact observation. By uncovering the central importance of *prosopopoeia* for this

75 In a broader sense, *prosopopoeia* is the necessary condition for the figuration of all literary narrators and thus for literature in general. Joseph Hillis Miller and Bettine Menke have written seminal studies that revolve around this function of *prosopopoeia* (cf. Miller 1990; Menke 2000). Yet only few texts draw attention to their grounding in *prosopopoeia* in the way that it-narratives do. Although my own observations make use of central concepts from the abovementioned scholars, my focus lies on *prosopopoeia* in the narrow sense of the concept, i.e., on the instances where the trope is not naturalized to such a degree as in most literary texts. This topic is discussed in more detail at the end of the fourth chapter, when I elaborate on Jan Alber’s concept of literary naturalization.

genre, we can finally understand the paratextual devices suggesting autobiography through the contradictions at heart of the experimentalist discourse.

The vast majority of it-narratives include titles that allude to the autobiography of a specific object. They thereby connect to precisely the genre of life-writing that Paul de Man takes as the basis for tracing the tropological niceties of *prosopopoeia* in his theory of autobiography (cf. de Man 1979). The paratextual devices of the found manuscript and the fictional publisher can now be recognized as tools in service of this trope that allow it to give a face/mask to a narrative 'I'. We recall that these texts continue to employ claims to autobiographical identity at a time when the novel has already established the legitimacy of non-referential literary discourse; a process, the completion of which scholars date to the 1740s (cf. Poovey 2008: 104; Gallagher 1994: 154–202 and 257–327). Mary Poovey understands this process as driven by attempts at “factualization” (2008: 103), in which natural philosophers – such as Boyle, Hooke and others – “devise writing conventions that clearly [...] signal apolitical or disinterested *facts*” (ibid., emphasis in the original). This is complemented by a process of fictionalization, which carves out a realm in which non-factual statements can differ from lies: imaginative writing (cf. ibid.).⁷⁶ Proceeding from the insights in this chapter, I will argue that it-narratives play a hitherto underexamined role in these processes.

In 1719, Charles Gildon demands that Daniel Defoe reveal whether the recently published *Robinson Crusoe* is fiction or indeed, in Defoe's words, “a just History of Fact” (RC 3), pointing out the many inconsistencies in the story (cf. Gildon 1719: 1–29). As Mary Poovey notes, he is thereby imagining a distinction that is not possible as long as the fact/fiction continuum persists (cf. 2008: 104). What to us nowadays must appear as an error in reading, a failure to understand the function of the found manuscript device by taking it literally, is better understood in its historical context. At the time *Robinson Crusoe* is written, we are

⁷⁶ Frow recognizes that the material for this can already been found as early as in the Renaissance, in Sir Philipp Sidney's famous dictum that “the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth” (Sidney 1890: 35), yet points out that the fact/fiction continuum considerably outlives these insights in practice (cf. 2016: 96).

still at a moment of “epistemic ambiguity” (Frow 2016: 97), lacking a clear-cut differentiation between fiction and non-fiction.

However, we remember that Gildon’s own it-narrative, *The Golden Spy* (1709) is published already a decade earlier. Like *Robinson Crusoe*, Gildon’s text features a found manuscript device claiming the factuality of the text. Yet in this case, the anti-mimetic narrator immediately points the reader to its fictionality. Gildon, critical of the ambiguity expressed in works such as Defoe’s, can thus be understood as partaking in the process of factualization *ex negativo*. The it-narrator puts emphasis on the work of the found manuscript device precisely by staging its impossibility and thus foregrounding the fictionality of the narrative.

This emphasis ties in with the function of *prosopopoeia* in it-narratives. As the found manuscript/fictional publisher device survives in it-narratives long after it has lost its importance for other genres of literary texts, it becomes a means for foregrounding how *prosopopoeia* gives the author the face/mask of an anti-mimetic narrator. Following Miller, we can understand the construction of these impossible objects via *prosopopoeia* as an error in reading (cf. 1990: 13), that is, taking a figure of speech literally. From this perspective, the discourse of experimental science is the institutionalization of this error. It depends on the idea that things can serve as witnesses by talking back to the scientific community. This idea hinges on the non-rhetorical rhetoric of *prosopopoeia*, which lies at the core of the fantasy of a ‘naked’ language.

As seen earlier, the Fellows yearn for a golden age of referentiality, a time of “primitive purity, and shortness, when men delivered so many things, almost in an equal number of words” (Sprat 1959: 113). The primordial relationship between *les mots et les choses* is upstaged by *prosopopoeia*. As Bettine Menke notes, *prosopopoeia* is the trope that severs the connection between thing and meaning (cf. 2000: 12). This violent aspect of *prosopopoeia* marks the arbitrariness and independence of linguistic signifiers in general (cf. Müllder-Bach 1998: 219) and is precluded in the discourse of empiricist experimental philosophy.

It-narratives, on the other hand, show the conscious restaging of *prosopopoeia* as error. By making an object speak, they literalize the trope in the same way that Gildon understands the device of the found manuscript literally in Defoe’s text. In restaging this error through the

structure of the autobiography of an object, they perform the work of autobiography in the sense of de Man, not in producing a certain knowledge as the empiricist discourse of experimental philosophy would have it, but in “demonstrating the impossibility of closure and totalization [...] of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (de Man 1979: 922). Looking back at the beginning of this chapter, we now see how the autobiographical theory of de Man can serve to supplement the theories of Lejeune that first helped us identify the formal peculiarities of this genre. The way in which it-narratives evoke autobiographical and biographical forms is thus shown to follow a logic deriving from their poetic transformations of the contradictions at heart of the discourse of experimental philosophy.

Thus, where the discourse of experimental philosophy glosses over the rhetorical force that it needs to mobilize in order to produce reliable knowledge, it-narratives point the reader towards the impossibility of their narrators. This layout provides the screen on which the impossibility of *prosopopoeia* is constantly foregrounded, repeatedly pointing the reader towards the work of this trope. Literature offers the space for the effect of estrangement as art becomes a means for experiencing the artfulness of an object, the creative element in its construction (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 18). At this point, we must recall the quotation by John Locke that precedes this work: “The understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself: and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance and make it its own object” (Locke 1975 [1690]: 43). We have now seen that literature can achieve for experimental philosophy what Locke demands of understanding in general, namely to “set it at a distance and make it its own object”. When Locke admits that it takes “art and pains” (ibid.) for this endeavour, we can understand the first term literally, it is the translation of a rhetorical operation into a poetical structure that defamiliarizes its work for the reader.

The specific use of *prosopopoeia* in it-narratives brings about a two-fold literalization. First, this happens by the adoption of an autobiographical mode that takes the process of *prosopopoeia* to its logical end, suggesting the total consummation of the trope in the literal ‘life’ of a narrator. The reader is presented not only with a speaking object,

but also with one whose story, from the paratextual markers of autobiography to its textual structures and semantic innuendos, emulates the conventions of life writing. Secondly, the narrator is present as a physical object in the storyworld. The homodiegetic it-narrator is embodied in a specific object and the nature of that object determines the it-narrator's story, that is, the content of its satiric observations and the type and scope of its circulation. The it-narrator is not a contingent stand-in for a narrative position nor an allegory for an abstract principle, but an everyday object.

Yet, at the very same time, it-narratives are asking the reader to suspend the consequence of this realization and to believe that a thing can tell a story. Its logic is that of an *as if*. As we have seen, to treat something inanimate *as if* it were alive is an error in reading (cf. Miller 1990: 11). However, it is not a question of literary hermeneutics alone. As has become clear in the course of this chapter, tropes are never only operating on an aesthetic terrain alone; their aesthetics are deeply intertwined with ideology. Faced with this complicity, the rhetorical study of texts allows for examining the extrinsic relations of literature, its relations to "history, politics, and society" (Miller 1990: 13). From this vantage point, *prosopopoeia* is not only an aesthetic technique, but also the ideological backbone of experimental philosophy through which the new science mobilizes witnesses that are not prone to the epistemological shortcoming of human scientists, and, hence, make less vulnerable targets for critique than the Fellows who claim to speak with their voices.

Miller's remarks resonate with the findings of this chapter, when he notes how "tropes tend to materialize in the real world in ways that are ethical, social, and political" (1990: 1). In the course of this chapter, we have seen how the ideas of experimental philosophers are not only formative of a new epistemology, but also complicit in the political project of British expansionism in the long 18th century.⁷⁷ Thus, if reading *prosopopoeia* literally is an error, it is an error that receives an ethical and political dimension by virtue of defamiliarizing the central tenets of this discourse. By drawing attention to the work of *prosopopoeia* and

⁷⁷ This connection will be expanded on in the next chapter, which focuses on this nexus from the perspective of economic ideology.

suspending the techniques used in order to naturalize it, laying bare the defamiliarizing potential of the discourse of experimental science, it-narratives can uncover the deeply rhetorical (and thus subjective) kernel at the heart of the new objectivity.

2.11 Counterfactual Spaces – Reliable Perspectives

We have seen how it-narratives invite the reader to repeat the literary experiment of *prosopopoeia* through the logic of an as if. This structure is epitomized in stories such as *Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol*, where the reader is explicitly asked “to believe it possible that a Gun may speak” (1).⁷⁸ This structure is central to the operation of experimental science, connecting to a fictionality at the core of a factual discourse. However, while many textual forms in the long 18th century are either influenced by the language of the Royal Society (such as travel writing), or consciously satirize it (such as the works of Cavendish and Swift), it-narratives repeat the structure of their experiments in their formal traits. They put forward the hypothesis of a narrating object and play through its implications in the course of the story, thereby translating the epistemological problem of experimental science into the poetological problem of the object-narrator.⁷⁹

Following Mark G. Lee, such a setup can be understood to reflect the structure of the counterfactual conditional. The underlying conditional sentence is separated into an antecedent, the first part of a hypothetical proposition that sets up a hypothesis, and a consequent, its second part, which realizes the implications of the antecedent. In claiming that everything is “capable of Proof, both from History and living Witnesses” (*Pocket-Pistol* 1), the frame-narrator relies on the antecedent to this consequent, namely on “believ[ing] it possible that a Gun may speak”

78 To recall, while all literature is non-actual, it-narratives are essentially anti-mimetic, and thus non-actualizable.

79 Given this relationship, one could argue that it-narratives propose a certain homology of literature and experiment, long before such ideas became manifest in Naturalist poetology. However, pursuing this idea lies outside of the scope of this work.

(*ibid.*). Since the it-narrator is an anti-mimetic device, the antecedent is counterfactual, or, non-actualizable. From the standpoint of formal logic, the consequent is always trivially true if the antecedent is false, and the antecedent to a counterfactual statement is per definition false. Yet, as linguists observe, this is not the case in pragmatic language use (cf. Lee 2010: 125; Comrie 2010: 80). In practice, counterfactuals are either accepted or dismissed, depending on the contentability of their proposition, that is, depending on the fact that their propositions do not contradict the antecedent (cf. Lee 2010: 127–128; Goodman 1947: 137). In the words of Lee: “Certain counterfactuals are treated as reasonable if they can be verified by showing that if the antecedent was indeed true then the consequent would follow” (Lee 2010: 135). This means that the counterfactual does not depend upon any knowledge of the extratextual world, but only on internal consistency. As called for in *Aureus* (1826), the work must “bear[...] internal evidence of its authenticity” (vii). As long as its contentability is guaranteed, it can open up a consistent counterfactual space.

In it-narratives, this internal consistency is guaranteed by a number of devices that we have already examined. Looking back, the title structure of it-narratives, the signing of the object’s ‘name’ at the end of the text, and the found manuscript device all contribute to the consistency of the idea of a speaking object. Most importantly, however, this consequent depends on the poetics of reliability, which we have traced throughout the texts. The restriction of knowledge through the embedded perspective of the object, the framing of sterile experimental spaces, the accumulation of episodes, or the observations modelled after the visual operations of microscopes and telescopes all work towards this goal. As we have seen, it-narrators lift these devices from the rhetorical repertoire of experimental science.

However, the influence of experimental science on the poetics of it-narratives is not only found in the rhetoric by which they establish the contentability of their storyworlds, but also in a deeper structural homology. In the *Occasional Reflections Upon Several Subjects*, Boyle uses the structure of the experimental method in order to give form to a number of meditations on different subject matters. Interestingly, he talks about the structure of this work in terms of the relation between

“protasis” and “apodosis” (Boyle 1772 [1665]: 2, 328), terms that mirror the relationship between antecedent and consequent.⁸⁰ Taken from rhetorical theory, these two terms present an alternative terminology for conceptualizing the two parts of the conditional sentence (cf. Comrie 2010: 78). In Boyle’s words, protasis “display[s] and consider[s] the minute particularities of the Theme”, for the “application” of its content in the apodosis that follows” (1772 [1665]: 2, 328). Protasis is thus equivalent to the antecedent of a conditional, while apodosis refers to its consequent. Boyle’s observations follow the logic of the conditional, repeating the structure that informs not only experimental science, but also the genre of it-narratives.

This highly stylized form of writing soon draws the attention of contemporary satirists, most importantly, Jonathan Swift, who writes his *Meditations upon a Broomstick* (1710) as a mockery of Boyle’s style in the *Occasional Reflections* (cf. Lynall 2012: 23). In the *Meditations*, Swift takes up Boyle’s method of focusing on an everyday object and deriving speculative conclusions from it. In examining a household broom in such a manner, Swift exaggerates the speculative method of *the Occasional Reflections* and ridicules the objectivity that Boyle’s meditations strive for (cf. Lynall 2012: 24). In this, Swift’s satire centres on the analogy between human and object. Man is first likened to the broomstick and then more generally to “a Tree standing on its head” (Swift 1973 [1710]: 421). These operations achieve their satiric effect by stretching the space between protasis and apodosis too far (cf. Lynall 2012: 25). If the underlying conditional is ‘If Man can be thought of as an upside-down tree, he must be like a broomstick’, then Swift stages a spectacular failure at proving the contentability of the consequent. In stretching this speculative space too far, the text draws attention to – and ridicules – the rhetorical operations of Boyle’s *Reflections* (cf. *ibid.*). At the centre of this attack stands a conflation of the human and the non-human.

⁸⁰ Courtney Weiss-Smith points out the intricate relationship between the ‘method’ of the observations and empiricist epistemology but focuses on the deployment of analogy (that we have already seen at work as a strategy of naturalization in Hooke) (cf. Weiss-Smith 2016: 33-69). I, on the other hand, will focus on the crucial importance of the counterfactual structure for these observations and thus link them to the poetic structure of it-narratives.

This conflation resurfaces as a theme in *The Tale of a Tub* (1704), published six years before the *Meditations upon a Broom-Stick* but three years after its composition. The scope of *The Tale of a Tub* is much broader than that of the *Meditations*. It aims its satire at the contemporary schisms in theology but is also ripe with digressions into the controversies of politics, the literary marketplace, and a host of other topics, always centring around Swift's epistemological distrust, his "extreme skepticism" (McKeon 2002: 165).

Interestingly, *The Golden Spy* alludes prominently to Swift's satire. Its preface is titled "Epistle Nuncupatory to the Author of A Tale of a Tub" (*Golden Spy* i). Gildon sets his own work in the tradition of Swift, alluding to numerous contemporary influences, thus spanning a wide intertextual net. For instance, the preface cites not only the *Tatler*, the weekly periodical that will publish Joseph Addison's it-narrative *The Adventures of a Shilling* one year later, but also the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (cf. *Golden Spy* ix). Finally, Gildon attributes Alain-René Le Sage's *The Devil on two Sticks* (1708), a prominent precursor to it-narratives (cf. Blackwell 2012: xiii), featuring the device of the unobserved observer, to the influence of *The Tale of a Tub* (cf. *Golden Spy* vi), implicitly suggesting Swift's work as a missing link in the development of it-narratives.

Christopher Flint goes further and takes Gildon's endorsement of *The Tale of a Tub* as a hint that the conflation of story, object, and author in the title of Swift's text forms the conceptual foundation of the genre of it-narratives (cf. Flint 2007: 166). Particularly the equation of object and author is of interest here. King takes the tub itself for a narrator, who exhibits some of the characteristics of the later it-narrators (cf. 2014: 452). In this sense, the narrator of *The Tale of a Tub* could be a precursor to those found in it-narratives, its "wooden brain" (ibid.) being decidedly curious in accumulating bits and pieces of cultural life.⁸¹ More importantly however, Flint points out that Swift's text repeatedly alludes to the transformation of the modern author into an object, a process of reification brought about by society's saturation with print

81 Another point of influence would be Swift's liberal use of *prosopopoeia*, conferring a host of masks and voices in order to satirize different positions (cf. Namba 1974: 39).

media (cf. Flint 2007: 166). In the conclusion, Swift returns to questions of authorship and proposes:

trying an Experiment very frequent among Modern Authors; which is, to *write upon Nothing*; When the Subject is utterly exhausted, to let the pen still move on; by some called the Ghost of Wit, delighting to walk after the Death of its Body. (Swift 1973 [1704]: 370)

Flint understands this autonomous pen as foreshadowing a process of alienation whereby things become narrators (cf. Flint 2007: 166). The present chapter has shown that such a process can be found not only in tales in which the narrators are literal instruments of writing, such as in *The Genuine and Most Surprizing Adventures of a Very Unfortunate Goose-Quill* (1751) and *The Adventures of a Pen* (1806), but across the genre as a whole. As we now see, this trajectory leads from the writings of experimental philosophers to the adventures of coins, coaches, and air balloons by a detour of early 18th-century prose satire. We also understand how what Flint sees as a process of authorial alienation is functional in the development of a literary device that is framed positively. As an unobserved observer and an objective witness, the it-narrator sets itself apart as more reliable than its human counterparts. Thus, while in only focusing on the empiricist structure of it-narratives, Link can find it to be detrimental to the narrator's aim of deriving objects for satirical observation (cf. Link 1980: 121f.), we will show how the experimentalist idea of the reliability of the object equips the it-narrator with a new ethos for precisely this task.

In this, the device addresses one of the formal challenges preoccupying 18th-century prose satire, that is, convincing the audience of the satiric narrator's ethos and the reliability of their perspective (cf. Weinbrot 2005: 24f.).⁸² At the beginning of *The Tale of a Tub*, Swift introduces three figures for raising the orator above the common rabble below, the pulpit, the ladder, and the stage-itinerant (cf. 1973 [1704]: 292). These

⁸² It is important to note that while this is true for most 18th-century satire, Griffin, by applying a Bakhtinian (i.e., polyphonic) theory of satire, argues that texts can also achieve satiric effects with unreliable narrators, citing some of Swift's own writing as evidence (cf. 1994: 41). *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal* would certainly be fitting examples for this.

can be read as the central figures for the prose satirist's endeavour of equipping narrators with an ethos of impartiality and objectivity, setting them apart from the vices they describe (cf. Paulson 1967: 21). Le Sage's *The Devil on Two Sticks* literalizes this metaphor of a reliable position by letting its narrator, who, by help of the devil, is raised high above the city, look into different houses and witness human vices that would otherwise be hidden from sight.

However, when Gildon publishes *The Golden Spy*, the detached perspective that his predecessors draw on is no longer figural, as in *The Tale of a Tub*, nor outright fantastic, as in *The Devil upon Crutches*. Instead, the narrating coins embody the reliable narrative position of the satirist and act as unobserved observers of human vices. The ending of *The Golden Spy* confirms this epistemological privilege, when the human frame-narrator assures his object(ive) counterpart that "there can be no Intelligence like what you can give" (*Golden Spy* 304). The anti-mimetic narrators of this genre are thus uniquely conducive to the satirist's aim of showing the "reality" (Paulson 1967: 20) of the vices they attack. In this, the claims to reliability and factuality in it-narratives serve for upholding a structure Paulson finds as early as in the Roman *satira*. The fiction of satire "is that there is no fiction, that the vice in action and the exposure of the vice is actually happening" (Paulson 1967: 20).

Yet, we recall the privileged position of the narrator itself not being safe from the sting of satire. Already Swift is keenly aware of the problematic nature of the ambitious new epistemology of the Royal Society (cf. McKeon 2002: 165). Gulliver's episodes in Laputa and earlier works such as the *Meditations upon a Broomstick* ridicule such ambitions. In *The Tale of a Tub*, the Fellows are mentioned explicitly. The Royal Society is introduced as a threat to Grub Street, its textual output rivalling that of the hack writers. This comparison culminates in the assertion that thousands of works could not be confidently assigned to one group or the other by the uninformed reader (cf. Swift 1973 [1704]: 297). The underlying assumption being, that the empiricist's writing cannot constitute an objective epistemology, but merely a "new romance" (McKeon 2002: 348).

This problem is taken up in Gildon's preface, when he playfully links the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* to contemporary writ-

ing that deliberately evades “seriousness” and is instead celebrated for its “Genious in Merry Trifling” (viii-ix). He thus connects precisely to the dismissal that the Fellows fear from Margaret Cavendish and other critics. The rhetorical means by which they claim objective knowledge are laid bare, thereby exposing their texts as the products of careful craftsmanship and not the ‘naked’ matters of fact, devoid of human intentionality, as which they seek to present them. The genre Gildon inaugurates will follow this trajectory. It-narratives consciously dramatize the central paradox of an impossible narrator claiming the reliability of its narration.

Finally, these observations allow us to consider the question of narrative perspective in the broader context of the development of the literary form. The central problems of perspective that it-narratives negotiate throughout the long 18th century can be traced to a historical point where satire’s need for an impartial and reliable narrative authority not stained by the vice it derides intersects with a rhetorical strategy deriving from the writing of experimental philosophers. In taking up this device, it-narratives make use of it as a tool for satirical commentary and simultaneously lay bare the rhetorical strategy sustaining it, making this narrative perspective a new means for inquiring into society’s vices, but also for problematizing the way in which readers confront claims to reliability.

Fittingly, Skhlovsky’s first example of the effect of estrangement in *Art as Device* (*Искусство Как Прием*) (1929) is none other than a non-human narrator. Shklovsky cites Tolstoy’s *Kholstomer/Холстомер* (1886), in which a horse-narrator tells the story of its life (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 1). Albeit a living being, its story revolves around the fact that it experiences itself as an object in relation to the human world.⁸³ In the passage that Shklovsky chooses, the horse centres its defamiliarizing narrative on the processes of commodification and reification that have led to it being owned by different people (cf. Skhlovsky 1998: 7). This forgotten it-narrator thus becomes a device for an issue that is central

83 Tolstoy’s autodiegetic horse is a prime example for animal-narrators who are reified to a degree that they effectively function as objects in the storyworld. For more on the relationship of animals and it-narratives, see the introduction to this book.

to the discourse of experimental philosophy – the narrator complains how “the human species is guided, above all, by *words*, while ours is guided by *deeds*” (ibid., emphases in the original). Not only do we find an it-narrator standing at the very beginning of the theory of estrangement, but also an echo of the Royal Society’s motto: *nullius in verba*.

3 Circulation and its Discontents

3.1 Tying and Untying

3.1.1 Entrelacement and Multi-Strand Narration

I was paid to a wool-stapler; he paid me to a long-legg'd hosier; the hosier paid me to a Nottingham weaver; the weaver changed me with the landlord, at the Bull in Bishopsgate-street; the landlord paid me to the one-eyed Norwich warehouse-keeper; from him I went to a ginger-bread-baker [...] all this was performed in less than three hours. (*Bank-Note 1*, 142f.)

This passage from Tomas Bridges' *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* (1771–1775) is emblematic of a defining aspect of it-narratives. The quotation shows how the it-narrator ties together not only the different geographical spaces, but also the social spheres that it traverses in a dazzling string of occupations and toponyms. In doing so, it epitomizes a structure that is found in all it-narratives. Through its circulation, the it-narrator accumulates episodes that present not only an individual life, but the structures of a society. The narrator points out the advantages this mobility offers for stringing together vastly different material: “Who would not be a bank note to have such quick succession of adventures and acquaintances?” (*Bank-Note 2*, 25)

This rhetorical question by Bridges' bank note will provide the starting point for thinking about what is a hitherto underexamined aspect of it-narratives. This section has begun by showing the prototypical mobility of the narrator in Thomas Bridges' *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*. Yet, the quick succession of owners in the excerpt of Bridge's text presents the mobility of its narrator as a given. In order to understand it, we must focus on an it-narrative that draws closer attention to the ways in which such mobility is established. At the very beginning of *The Adventures of a Cork-Screw* stands a purchase preceded by a dialogue between Mr. Polish, a steelworker, and Lord Darling, a prospective customer:

Mr. Polish, (says my lord) that is a very elegant cork-screw you have in your glass, upon my word. I am glad it meets with your honour's approbation (replied Polish), for it is one of my own invention and construction, no one has attempted the pattern but myself; [...]. Upon my word, (said the peer) it is extremely handsome, and entirely a novel construction; I never saw a more beautiful piece of steel in my life, nor so highly polished and curiously contrived. (7f.)

At the beginning of this exchange, which is linguistic (a conversation) and economic (a purchase), stands the appraisal of the physical form of the narrator. Acknowledging the material specificity of the object, the prospective buyer provides a detailed account of the "curious workmanship" (*Cork-Screw* 160) that produced this it-narrator. The novelty and ingenuity of construction serve to stress the uniqueness of the object the dialogue revolves around. The passage thus evokes a shared desire for the material body of the narrator. At first, this seems to fit in quite well with the thesis put forward earlier. The speaking objects in it-narratives are not mere stand-ins, allegories, or abstractions. Instead, the narratives emphasize their specific materiality. Lord Darling and Mr. Polish relate to the "elegant" corkscrew as an object, a "handsome", "beautiful piece", "so highly polished and curiously contrived." The language with which they marvel at the "curious construction" suggests an essential incommensurability. The it-narrator is presented as a unique object.

However, the narrator is not only presented as a beautiful, but also as a useful object. The ways in which a corkscrew is put to use invade the extradiegetic discourse, when, "in order to give [the] [...] reader some necessary respite to draw a cork or so himself" (*Cork-Screw* 13), the narrator relegates the introduction of a new character to the next chapter. The corkscrew's usefulness is thus mirrored in the narrative organization, as the text links the intra-diegetic narrator to an extradiegetic object – one that the reader most likely owns and might well make use of. The connection via the everyday purpose of the it-narrator, the suggestion to "draw a cork" evokes a material presence beyond mere description. During the narrative this propensity for practical use is demonstrated time and again, reminding the reader that it is still an object that tells this story, and a very specific one at that.

The episode quoted above ends with the purchase of the corkscrew, which thus begins its adventure, being transferred from one owner to the next. Later in the narrative however, when the corkscrew finds itself in the possession of a lady and goes from hand to hand once more, it becomes apparent that the exchanges of the it-narrator are not motivated by its usefulness alone. The following series of exchanges takes place after the corkscrew's owner, a gentlewoman called Lucy, leaves it on a dressing-table:

Here I was perceived by the chambermaid, who immediately made me her property, and deeming me a proper object for a present to a favourite waiter, I was transferred to his care; but in his possession, I remained not many days, for he ungratefully sold this token of his mistress's love to a half-pay officer who was travelling to Newport. (*Cork-Screw* 78)

The officer in question, as the indefinite article suggests, does not stand in any personal relationship to the seller, there is no particular signification at work in this exchange. Its owner necessarily abstracts from the usefulness of the corkscrew in the act of selling. Thus, where the preceding exchange is the result of a specific relationship between two people, the act of selling it is not dependent on either the identity of the donor, now a vendor, or the recipient, now a customer. It is no longer the value of its practical use as an object that is at the centre of the exchange.

The question of what values operate in such an exchange is raised by one of the founding texts of political economy, published when it-narratives reach the apex of their popularity. One year after the publication of *The Adventures of a Cork-Screw*, Adam Smith differentiates two types of value in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*:

The word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called 'value in use;' the other, 'value in exchange.' (Smith 1976: 1, 32, emphasis in the original)

The shift between these two types of values is dramatized in the scene above, when we see how a token of love is ‘profaned’ on the marketplace. As the name suggests, use-value only defines the relationship of the commodity to the subject that puts it to use. Use-values are thus defined positively, but exchange-values are inherently negative. They are differential relations, in that this value is ‘only’ “the power of purchasing other goods”. The movement from use-value to exchange-value is thus a move from a set of positive qualities to a quantitative expression. The narrative of the corkscrew explicates this process of abstraction in the scene where an undertaker meets with his customer, a well-off heir, who comments on the fine workmanship of the corkscrew:

The undertaker, who could not refuse so good a customer, immediately begged him to accept of me, if his honour approved of me, being firmly resolved to make an additional figure on his bill, as a recompense for this piece of complaisance. (*Cork-Screw* 99)

From the outset, this scene again invokes the semantics of the gift, only to show how it is reframed immediately as an exchange by the undertaker who adjusts the price of his services to include the supposed gift. What is more, the quantification that comes with exchange-value is spelled out. As the corkscrew is added to the price, the material object of a certain quality is directly equated with a numerical value, the added “figure” on the bill. As Christopher Flint observes, every time that the corkscrew’s owners complete a social transaction, they feel the material presence of the it-narrator in their pockets and are reminded of its economic value, exchanging it, rather than putting it to use (cf. 1998: 216). The story thereby draws explicit attention to the commodity-character that guarantees the mobility not only of the cork-screw, but of the vast majority of it-narrators.

This is clearest when we consider how most it-narrators present commodities or money (a type of commodity with no distinction between use-value and exchange-value, as we will later see). However, this circulatory dynamic is equally operative in the texts in which the narrators are means of transport (as most of our examples in the second chapter). These narrators are manufactured goods, themselves commodities, but

generally do not circulate by being exchanged themselves. Rather, their use-value is realized in the service they offer: transportation. The transportation that these narrators offer is equally dependent on its exchange value. By being equated with a certain sum of money, the service is sold to a series of customers, which become the subjects of the it-narrator's story, in the same way as the 'owners' of commodities do.⁸⁴

The transformation from concrete object to abstract commodity it-narrators go through means not only that their concrete characteristics become irrelevant in the act of exchange, but also that they are now potentially useful to everyone and for everything.⁸⁵ This is the transformation which makes some narrators "wander the most distant quarters of the habitable globe, whilst others [...] circulate through thousands of different channels at home" (*Aureus* 20). As bearers of exchange-value, these narrators are universally mobile and connect the lives of their owners across vast social and geographical space.

Alexander Beecroft proposes the concept of "entrelacement" (Beecroft 2016: 195) for describing the narrative technique that engenders this aesthetic effect. He introduces this concept in the scope of his broader work on literary ecologies, appropriating the conceptual framework of the ecology in an attempt to rethink the interrelationships of literary texts on different scales. Literary ecology comes to describe how texts interact both with other literary texts and with their non-literary

⁸⁴ The only exceptions to the commodity-character of it-narrators are found in *The Aero-static Spy* (1782), which we have already examined in the second chapter, and in Smollett's *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769). The latter is omitted here as a text that does not belong to the core of the genre, not only because it is not a commodity, but also because the text is less a satire than a complex *roman à clef*, and the atom is largely stationary while making its observations in Japan (which stands in for contemporary Britain). As mentioned already in the introduction, animals that are reified to the degree of being considered it-narrators are likewise often traded as commodities.

⁸⁵ In the lyrics to *Geldschein*, German punk band Schleimkeim exemplify this in taking on the perspective of a banknote:

"Ein Geldschein sein, ein Geldschein sein, ein Geldschein sein,
heißt in gute und in böse Sachen verwickelt sein.

Heute kauft man mit mir Blumen für die Liebste ein
Doch morgen schon kann ich der Lohn für eine Untat sein".

(Schleimkeim 1995)

"Being a banknote [...] means being involved in good and evil things. Today you'll use me for buying flowers for your sweetheart, yet already tomorrow I can serve as payment for an evil deed." [V.S.]

surroundings – the political, economic, social and religious frameworks in which this literature is produced (cf. Beecroft 2015: 19). Transferring these concepts to the realm of literature, we can posit the existence of literary ecologies that are spread out over different historical and/or geographical spaces, but nevertheless encounter similar ecological backgrounds. They respond to these backgrounds in different ways, but according to common strategies, addressing the common challenges of the ecological systems in which these literatures thrive.

Beecroft proceeds to develop a framework of six major literary ecologies. They range from the “epiphoric” ecology of the Greek polis, which is characterized by the “emplacement” of literary texts in a local community, all the way to the “global” ecology of English literature as a world literature that transcends the borders of the nation state (cf. Beecroft 2016: 33–36). It is in this last ecology that Beecroft situates the literary device of entrelacement. It forms the antithesis to the emplacement that is typical of epiphoric literatures and rises to the task of “representing the intricate and problematic ties that bind us together in the age of globalized capitalism” (cf. Beecroft 2015: 195). Emplacement and entrelacement are thus two literary devices that are the effects of certain ecologies (cf. Beecroft 2016: 195). They can be understood as the specific features that literary texts employ in order to thrive in their ecological niches (cf. Beecroft 2016: 198). Crucially, as much for Beecroft’s endeavour as for my own project, these devices can be discerned in close readings of particular texts. As the above quotation suggests, Beecroft understands entrelacement as the device uniquely fit for the literary ecology of globalization, a phenomenon that he assigns to the 20th and 21st centuries. However, he does not fail to point out the long history of entrelacement as a literary device outside of this specific ecology. While the term itself goes back to the study of medieval French romance (cf. Lot 1918; Beecroft 2016: 200), the narrative device it refers to can be found in a wide variety of literary texts.

The alternative term that Beecroft uses for entrelacement, “multi-strand narration” (ibid.), points more clearly to the phenomenology of this narrative technique. It is employed for a number of different effects, “from simply allowing the joining together of many disparate stories into a single text [...] [,] to thematizing a community as a microcosm,

rather than focusing on an individual protagonist” (ibid.). Thus, we can find this device in literary works as diverse as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Thousand and One Nights* and *Middlemarch* (cf. ibid.).

What is more interesting, however, is how Beecroft differentiates the specific form that multi-strand narration takes in the global ecology from its iterations in those literary ecologies in which it does not rise to the status of a defining structure. In the global ecology, Beecroft argues, multi-strand narration serves to “project onto the level of form the paranoiac interconnectedness of life in a globalized era, and the expansion of the scale on which these narratives are interwoven” (ibid.). He goes on to cite examples, mainly from contemporary film and literature, for instance Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2666* (2004), Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy (*A Sea of Poppies* in 2008, *River of Smoke* in 2011 and *Flood of Fire* in 2015) as well as the film *Traffic*, directed in 2000 by Steven Soderbergh. Even though these cultural products differ greatly in genre, setting, and content, they share certain stylistic features that are a direct result of the way in which their narratives aim at evoking a sense of interconnectedness. In the example of *Traffic*, this is done by what Beecroft calls an “anthology narrative”, that is, a narrative that consists of shorter tales whose interconnections only emerge gradually (cf. Cameron 2008: 6–16; Beecroft 2016: 200).

I argue that entrelacement in Beecroft’s narrow sense (as anthology narrative) is inherently transgressive. Its narrative layout transgresses borders between formerly distinct spheres of life. Anthology narratives thus provide solutions to a spatial problem, namely the problem of how to represent processes happening in different parts of the world

In Beecroft’s example, the concept of a world is taken literally. Anthology narratives are the preferential mode of representation for contemporary processes of globalization. They allow for showing how actions that are distributed across geographical space interfere with each other. The spatial problem that globalization poses for narrative form, the question of “how events in one place can be related to events taking place elsewhere” (Beecroft 2016: 200), is embodied paradigmatically in the vagaries of global trade. Accordingly, when we go back to Beecroft’s examples for modern uses of multi-strand narration, we find that despite their thematic diversity all three are related in one

way or another to global trade. Bolaño's 2666 is largely set in Santa Teresa, a fictional Mexican city plagued by the consequences of international drug trafficking, while Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy deals with the complex dynamics of British opium trade in Asia in the early 19th century. Finally, the transparently named *Traffic* by Steven Soderbergh employs multi-strand narration for portraying the direct and indirect effects of international drug trade on a number of people in Mexico and the US. The telling title of the last work, 'traffic', understood in the broad sense of "the transportation of merchandise for the purpose of trade" (OED s.v. traffic, n.) can thus serve as an umbrella term for what all of these narratives address.

3.1.2 Chrysal; or The Adventures of a Guinea

As mentioned already, *Chrysal* tells the story of the narrator of the same name, a golden guinea. The story is presented through a found manuscript device that is framed by a human narrator: This unnamed narrator finds the text as the transcript written down by an alchemist, who succeeds in summoning the gold coin that then proceeds to tell the story of its life, as laid out in the second chapter. In the last volume, the narration of the object is suddenly interrupted, as the Alchemist fails to obey Chrysal's order of silence. The episodes contained in between these points tell the life-story of the guinea and span different continents, bringing the narrator from the Peruvian mines to the upper-class-circles of London and the Battlefields of the Seven Years War. The ensuing 'adventures', that is, the different lives that the narrator observes by changing owners is motivated by the acts of exchange that were analysed in the example of *The Adventures of a Cork-Screw* earlier. However, unlike the cork-screw, the narrator of *Chrysal* circulates much more widely, profiting from the networks of international commerce.

The preceding section has started the exploration of the significance of such commercial activity (or, in the title of Soderbergh's film: traffic) for the narrative structure of it-narratives. Incidentally, in one of the first scenes of *Chrysal*; we meet an eponymous character. Once the reader is past the framing-device, in which a human narrator discovers the writings of an alchemist who has written down what Chrysal has

told him, the piece of gold tells the story of how it is first found in a Peruvian gold mine by a young man named Traffic (cf. 1, 17). The aptly named Traffic, we soon learn, is the only son of a wealthy British merchant and serves as a paradigmatic example for the vagaries of British trade. Against the wishes of his father, who accumulated enough wealth as to grant his son a comfortable life, Traffic sets out to succeed him in his profession and multiply his fortune by trade. The father sets out rules that should regulate and safeguard his son's business ventures, but Traffic chooses to ignore them and invest his fortune in a variety of risky trade schemes.

Traffic thus "entered into every project which [his] own brain could invent, or artful imposition suggests to [him]" (*Chrysal* 1, 22). These controversial investments tell the story of how a new type of social relation supersedes previous forms of exchange, thereby giving form to entrelacement as its aesthetic effect. His father's inheritance first promises a life of financial independence for Traffic, his father remarking that it can serve to leave him "free from every entanglement of life" (*Chrysal* 1, 19). Hence, he implores him to cherish his advice and "hold fast the clue it offers to guide [him] through the labyrinths of trade, in which the vivacity of [his] genius may, otherwise, lose its way" (*Chrysal* 1, 20). The father's prudent advice is imagined as Ariadne's thread – a thread that can serve as a guide, but only insofar as it remains one single strand that is not entangled with other threads. The idea of such an entanglement in a convoluted network looms large and threatening. In a world where economic and social relations are already anything but clear, holding fast to a code of conduct that is genealogically transmitted promises stability.

The story of Traffic thus starts out as a fantasy of self-sufficiency and emplacement that is characteristic of the epiphoric mode and its emphasis on local community ties. Traffic is supplied with the means of self-sustenance through his inheritance and enjoys a stable relationship with his childhood love, Amelia. He is firmly embedded in both a genealogical relationship and an 'organic' community. The first problem for this self-sufficiency comes when Traffic decides to invest his capital in more ambitious schemes and for this purpose cheats Amelia out of her inheritance, abandoning her before the marriage he had promised.

He invests large sums of his now considerable capital and his “fortune [falls] prey to every sharking projector, who flatter[s] [his] vanity with promises of success” (*Chrysal* 1, 23). These business connections cast a net in which Traffic is soon bound up and which he tries to escape in increasingly desperate terms:

Sporting upon private adventures, *taking in* unwary confidence flinging the fair trader, by eluding the restrictions of law, were now too small a game for me: I was entangled, and must cut the Gordian Knot by some bold stroke. (*Chrysal* 1, 23, emphases in the original)

In an attempt to disentangle himself, to cut loose the knot, he invests his remaining fortune in ever greater and riskier endeavours:

I therefore threw off all restraint, and entered into measures the most injurious to my country, which was then engaged in a just and extensive war. I insured the effects of its enemies and of consequence gave them information how to avoid its forces: I carried on their trade with other countries. (*Chrysal* 1, 23)

The “just and extensive war” that Traffic alludes to, is the Seven Years’ War of 1756–1763. In this truly extensive conflict, a British- and Prussian-led coalition faces an alliance of (amongst others) Austrian, French, Russian, and Swedish forces. This war is unprecedented not only in the sheer scale of the confrontations and the numbers of parties involved, but also in the sense that it is considered by many as the first truly ‘global’ conflict. The confrontation of the leading European powers means that a vast number of colonial subjects are drawn into a conflict that sees fighting on three continents (cf. Anderson 2007). The narrator of *Chrysal* is not engaging in hyperbole when it claims that “when England is at war, the consequences are felt at the extremities of the globe” (1, 195). The result of this is not only a new balance of power, but also a new modality of international relations. France can no longer hold on to its status as the predominant European state and becomes one of several rivalling powers. In this sense, the war presents

a period in which global interconnectedness is experienced as increasingly dynamic and shifting.

Traffic's investment behaviour mirrors this process of decentering. It transcends the national ecology that assigns all citizens to one nation state. Traffic does not show financial fidelity to his warring 'motherland'. Rather, he actively engages in trade with its rivals and the broader network of their trading partners. Instead of providing him with the financial means that would allow a return to the self-sufficiency consonant with emplacement, the globalization of his trading schemes marks the irreversible entry into the space of entrelacement – having borrowed large sums on the domestic market in order to support his foreign business partners, their defaulting leaves him destitute. Bound up as he is by debts and liabilities, Traffic sees no other option than flight, "the equivocality of [his] character having made every honest man, who was able to assist [him], afraid of being concerned with [him]" (*Chrysal* 1, 23f.). His entanglement goes so far that others are cautious of being drawn into the net of obligations that entrap him. He sees no alternative but to escape to the Jamaican colonies as he feels the pull of yet another string:

I therefore immediately raised all the money I possibly could, and embarked secretly in a ship of my own for Jamaica; heaven, to make its justice the more signal, using my blackest guilt as a chain to draw me to the vengeance I deserved. (*Chrysal* 1, 24)

The news of Amelia's capture by the Spanish draw him off course (figuratively and literally) as he ends up as a privateer, raiding Spanish colonies and ships. While engaged in a fight, he manages to find Amelia but is overpowered by a Spanish nobleman, now her husband, and charged with attempted rape. When the loose strands of the narrative thus once again entangle him, the metaphorical language of binding is literalized, as he finds himself "chained on the ground in a dungeon" (*Chrysal* 1, 33), awaiting execution. However, a last ironic twist on his global investments is yet to come. Traffic is condemned to death, but the ties of old love are still in effect. Amelia intervenes on his behalf, and he is instead shipped to Spanish Peru, where he is forced to labour in a mine.

In the episode of Traffic, the concept of entrelacement is given shape in the metaphoric language of ties, threads, and strands: The single thread is an image for order, but the accumulation of threads brings the threat of entanglement. Thus, Traffic becomes a paradigmatic example of the expansive trading-endeavours of British merchants in the 18th century – a time when British commerce “collects the produce of every climate under heaven” (*Chrysal* 2, 168). The contemporary reader certainly recognizes a rhetorical question when one of Chrysal’s later owners picks it up far from the British Isles and asks: “Is there no corner of the earth, [...] where the wealth of Britain is not dispersed?” (*Chrysal* 2, 97). Traffic, as the embodiment of this extensive reach, ends up being put to work at the economic heart of the rivalling empire. The Peruvian mines are amongst the main sources of the enormous wealth in precious metals that the Spanish Empire amasses in the centuries following the colonization of the Americas. Here, Traffic becomes the first of several of Chrysal’s owners.

3.1.3 Weaving the Leyenda Negra

The guinea in Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal* is not the only it-narrator tracing its origins to the South American mines. The theme of colonial extraction is raised time and again in those it-narratives that are concerned with precious metals. As early as 1710, Joseph Addison’s it-narrator in *Adventures of a Silver Shilling* remarks that it “was born [...] on the side of a mountain, near a little village of Peru, and made a voyage to England in an ingot, under the convoy of Sir Francis Drake” (*Silver Shilling* 210). At the other end of the century, a frame-narrator in Richard Johnson *The Adventures of a Silver Penny* (1786) tells the reader how “[t]he materials of which this Penny was composed were dug out of a mine in Peru, in South America, distant from our own country upwards of five thousand miles” (79).

We have already seen how it-narrators embody the stories of those that use them. In *Dialogues Upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals*, a numismatic essay written some years after *The Adventures of a Silver Shilling*, Addison posits that “[a] fresh coin [is] a kind of Gazette, that publishe[s] the latest news of the Empire” (1726: 147). Circulating coins

provide a point of access to imperial infrastructure, in which knowledge travels alongside commodities. In Addison's text, such as in those of Johnstone and Johnson, the insights the reader derives by means of these coins are at first centred on the imperial rival. The Spanish pieces of silver trace their origin to a place far away from the metropolitan centre of British society where they will be circulating.⁸⁶

In portraying the networks of Spanish colonial trade, it-narratives criticize them. The working conditions and the lives of the enslaved workers are a recurrent theme for this kind of critique in *Chrysal*, *The Adventures of a Shilling*, and *The Adventures of a Silver Penny*. We recall that Chrysal's first owner is precisely not its owner in a legal sense. Enslaved in the Peruvian mines, he spends his days "in raising that gold for the use of others" (1, 36), sharing the grim fate of the enslaved natives who are 'employed' in the same manner. Much like Chrysal, Johnson's silver penny points the reader to the violent history of its extraction. This history of violence and suffering invades the domestic setting of a middle-class English family, when the narrator asks its children to consider where the silverware they are using came from:

Only think what sad thing it must be, to be condemned for life to work underground, without ever seeing the cheerful light of the sun, or breathing that free and sweet air, which we so happily enjoy who live upon the surface of the earth. That nice silver spoon, with which you eat your milk for breakfast, and the pretty silver cup, out of which you drink your beer at dinner time, originally came from that distant place, I have just mentioned, and were dug out of the bowels of the earth, at the expence of the death of thousands, and the slavery of many more. [...] The mines are at a great depth under the earth, and the people who work in them generally live and die there; for it is so unwholesome, that it kills them in a short time. (*Silver Penny* 80)

⁸⁶ When talking about these silver mines, the three texts are most likely referring to *Potosí*, then part of the Spanish *Virreinato de Perú* and located in modern-day Bolivia. *Potosí's cerro rico* ('rich mountain') may have produced 60% of all the silver mined in the world in the second half of the 16th century (cf. Cross 1983; Flynn and Giráldez 1995: 209). From the establishment of the Spanish settlement in 1545 onwards, *Potosí* becomes one of the main assets of Spanish colonialism.

The violation of the body of the earth is paralleled with the violence that is done to the human bodies who are engaged in this process of extraction. This twofold violence is directly embedded in the material that can tell the story of its extraction, as the sufferings of the enslaved miners underground are contrasted with the scene of domestic tranquillity of those “who live upon the surface of the earth” and “breathe the free and sweet air”, anecdotally deemed free enough to liberate a slave.⁸⁷ England and the Spanish colonies are here plotted along the axis above/below – the former being associated with abundance and freedom (the world of the English kids), and the latter with toil and slavery. Time and again the penny directs the attention of the reader towards the grim conditions below and the plight of the indigenous laborers who were enslaved to mine its precious metal:

See how hard the poor slaves are at work with it. [...] you must allow, that upwards of five thousand miles is no small distance, consequently it is far fetched; and dear bought it must be, since the Spaniards, to whom this gold and silver country now belongs, in order to get possession of it murdered innumerable thousands of innocent Indians, and made slaves of those they did not murder. (*Silver Penny* 79f.)

Geographical distance here translates into human suffering. While the silver is fetched from afar, the accusations against the rivalling Empire can be shown to be anything but far-fetched. It-narratives present a contrast between the two imperial projects that is epitomized in Alexander Pope’s *Windsor-Forest* (1711), where England offers itself as a corrective to the crimes of the colonial rival, offering a bright future of trade without “Conquest” or “Slav’ry” (Pope 1969: 402 and 408; cf. Kibbie 2007: 245). In the *Silver Penny*, the vastness of the Spanish trading network is shown to be intricately connected to the brutality of extraction that feeds it. The resource is “dear bought” by the Spanish, as its extraction is only possible at the price of the lives of the enslaved natives. One

⁸⁷ See the comment on a court case from 1595, in which “one Cartwright brought a Slave from Russia, and would scourge him, for which he was questioned; and it was resolved, That England was too pure an Air for Slaves to breath in” (Rushworth 1721: “April 8”).

can trace the rhetoric of reciprocal trade here, reframing a process of extraction as an exchange, albeit a gruesome one. As a genre whose narrative capacity is predicated on its narrator's propensity to go from hand to hand, it-narratives use the scenes of exchange for moral judgment. The satirical impetus of these narratives lies in denouncing the de-facto exchangeability between two items that should be incommensurable. In this instance: precious metals and the human lives that 'buy' them.

The narrator is quick to imply that this brutality is no accident, but the logical consequence of the inherently corrupt system of Britain's imperial rival. After the golden material of Chrysal is mined by the slave, it goes through several hands in the process of refinement and ends up in the possession of a native Peruvian. Chrysal refers to this person as its "absolute owner" (1, 37), in contrast to the slave Traffic who manages to steal some of the gold. However, the stolen gold (i.e. the it-narrator Chrysal) is soon brought back into Spanish possession as the Christianized native offers it to a Catholic priest. During confession, the man admits to a number of trivial transgressions to which the priest reacts with ever increasing fury, threatening his parishioner with the inquisition. In the scene of this confession, a system of exchanges is made visible. It becomes clear that the native had already surrendered his daughter to the service of the Jesuits, as recompense for past transgressions. For the first sin he confesses, the eating of meat on a fast day, he is 'sentenced' to pledge two days of free labour to the church. The second sin, the beating of a Jesuit's dog, triggers such an angry reaction from the priest, that the penitent is compelled to give him the piece of gold that is the it-narrator. Lastly, he confesses to having discovered a Jesuit in bed with his wife. This last confession evinces such a fury, that the 'sinner' is compelled not only to give the priest all the gold that we learn was intended for the ransoming of his daughter but gives his son into Jesuit slavery as well. As in the question of giving lives for gold, the it-narrator's critique here focuses on a series of unequal or unjust exchanges: outrageous punishments for minimal transgressions.

The scene of this bizarre confession caters to an anti-Catholic fantasy of auricular confession. The position of the it-narrator as an "unobserved observer" (Benedict 2001: 144) allows the reader to penetrate the secrets of the confession booth and thereby report from inside a space

which is said to produce truth. When the protestant reformation attacks the practice of granting absolution, the controversial status of auricular confession in the Anglican Church and the continued use of confessionals by Anglo-Catholics prepares the ground for auricular confession to become a prime object of anti-Catholic fantasy (cf. Peschier 2005). The confessional booth constitutes a space where secrets are spoken that neither the state nor its subjects can access, yet money does. It is thus another space in which, much like the interior of the it-narrator in *The Sedan* or the globe of the air pump, truth is produced. But in this case, it is not only a personal fault that is uncovered by the privileged perspective of the it-narrator, but the systemic moral corruption of a rivalling power and its religious and cultural systems. Mediated by the perspective of the it-narrator, the reader can discover the corruption of the Catholic sacrament of absolution. On a structural level, corruption is rendered in terms of the expansion of equivalents. By equating items that should be incommensurable, religious transgressions of different orders are equated with a certain quantum of labour, gold, or even the lives of one's children.

This satirical attack on what is deemed a false reciprocity in sacral matters resonates with the protestant critique of the late medieval practice of granting indulgences against monetary recompense and its fascination with what happens inside the Catholic confessional. But it also connects to the general refusal of the reciprocity that lies at the centre of the Catholic doctrine of works righteousness. This idea that righteousness before God depends on the good works of the believers, as compared to faith righteousness, is a concept that becomes problematic in Protestantism.⁸⁸ Compared to the Reformation emphasis on the radical incommensurability between the divine and the profane that lies at the heart of the doctrine of *sola gratia*, the idea of works righteousness appears as another example of an exchange. It establishes an equivalence between things that should not be exchangeable: in this case, God's Grace and the particular deeds of human subjects. This

⁸⁸ For the distinction between the two concepts see, for instance, Luther's treatises *On Good Works* (1520) or *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525) (cf. Luther 2019 [1520]; Luther 2019 [1525]).

violence that is enacted by the proponents of this corrupt faith in the colonized territories is thus fashioned as something that is particular to one European colonial power. In this, it-narratives connect to a long history of anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic sentiment.

In the 16th century that sees the political and military dominance of Spain on the European continent, the *leyenda negra*⁸⁹ that is born out of these sentiments serves as the ideological framework for contextualizing military, economic and religious confrontations. While the direct political significance of the conflict with Spain decreases over time, the tale of a particular Spanish backwardness gains new traction as it is used as a negative foil during the Enlightenment in the 18th century: European powers can fashion themselves as progressive in contrast to the idea of an intellectual and political backwardness.

At this point, we see a certain ambiguity in the concept of the reverse gaze that was introduced in the preceding chapter. The status of the it-narrator as a globally circulating commodity engenders a new ideological trajectory. It can not only function for laying bare the moral shortcomings of the self, but also offer a presumably uninterested third position from which to pass judgment on the other. This third position is all the more authoritative because it pretends to be impartial. In this case, it sets itself as an impartial alternative to the imperialist rivalry between the Spanish and the British. By not using a British or a Spanish subject as the narrator, but an object (especially a commodity that is at the centre of struggle between the two empires), it-narratives can offer their readers an apparently disinterested perspective. They are both far removed from the private interests of imperial subjects and thoroughly implicated in the acts of exchange that establish relations between these subjects across political borders. The necessary condition of this ideo-

⁸⁹ Alfredo Alvar Ezquerria dates the emergence of the 'black legend' to the turn from the 16th to the 17th century, when – from the English perspective – Spain changed from an unrivalled superpower to an antagonist one could hope to defeat (cf. Alvar Ezquerria 1997: 6f.). The term itself is coined by Julian Juderías, who sums up the concept as the idea “de que nuestra Patria constituyete, desde el punto de vista de tolerancia, de la cultura y del progreso político, una excepción lamentable dentro del grupo de las naciones europeas” (Juderías 1997: 24) (“that our motherland constitutes, from the point of view of tolerance, of culture and of political progress, a lamentable exception among the group of European nations’ [V.S]).

logical function is the narrator's mobility, which allows it to seamlessly cross the borders between the self and the other. This is only possible, because the it-narrator is fed into circuits of global trade. Thus, the multiple strands that constitute the conflictive economic ties between the rivalling powers turn into narrative threads as the it-narrators weave this *leyenda negra*.⁹⁰ The result is an ideological patchwork that fashions Spanish colonialism as exceptionally brutal and the result of a luxurious and morally corrupt society, with Catholicism as its appropriate religious correlate that engenders general corruption by fostering systems of un-ethical equivalence.

3.1.4 From Economics to Aesthetics

As we have seen, the economic entanglement between the rivalling empires results in considerable numbers of commodities travelling across their political borders, in both directions. The extraction of precious metals not only transforms Spain into a major power but has profound effects that reach far beyond its colonial regime. The multi-faceted ties of the Spanish economy with other European powers mean that these transformations affect local demand and supply in various, often unforeseen, ways. For the purpose of giving a sense of the proportion of these imports, we should consider a few numbers. Between 1500 and 1800 the Spanish *Flota de Plata* (literally "silver fleet") brings 150,000 tons of silver from the American mines to Spain, comprising up to 80% of the world production at that time (cf. Flynn and Giráldez 1995: 214; Cross 1983: 397). After a decline in shipping during the second half of the 17th century, the Bourbon Dynasty who rules Spain in the 18th century manages to increase imports from the Americas (cf. Walton 2002: 177), once again having a decisive impact on the European markets. In the period of 1781 to 1790, Spanish shipping from the Americas reaches a peak of more than 820 tons of gold and silver per year (cf. Morineau 1985: 578). The influx of gold fuels not only the cultural pro-

⁹⁰ The it-narrators are in the position of what Juliane Vogel and Erika Greber, citing Sappho, call the *Mythoplokos*, the weaver of myths (cf. Vogel 2008: 207; Greber 2002: 10): Poetic labour is understood as the weaving of myths. Sappho refers in "Fragment 188" to Eros as the "weaver of tales" (Sappho 2007: 40).

ductivity of the Spanish *siglo(s) de oro*, but also the numerous wars that the Habsburg monarchy wages, particularly against France and Britain. At the same time, however, it has various and often complex effects on the economies of several European and Non-European countries.

The bulk of international demand for silver at that time is not located in Europe, but in Ming China.⁹¹ As 150 tons of the silver extracted in the Spanish colonies in Middle and South America ends up in China during the 17th century (cf. Attman 1986: 78), the Chinese demand holds up the silver prices for the better part of the century, thereby allowing Spain to continue realizing surpluses that are spent on the European continent, increasing local demand. The “silverization” (Flynn and Giráldez: 208) of China is directly responsible for the dramatic changes of the European economy during the early modern period (cf. *ibid.*: 210f.). Flynn and Giráldez thus assert that “[t]he singular product most responsible for the birth of world trade was silver” (1995: 201). While people engaged in interregional trade since antiquity, “there is no doubt that it was not until the New World exports of silver and gold began to generate large transatlantic and transpacific trade flows that the full circle of global commerce was joined, making world trade a reality” (Marichal 2006: 26). Flynn and Giráldez propose to speak of global trade only once the volume of traded goods is high enough to effect crucial impacts on the economies that engage in this trade (cf. 1995: 201).

A system of world trade in the emphatic sense thus depends not on the fact that sporadic trading links exist, but that the consequences of these links can manifest themselves in substantial changes to the trading economies. In the wake of the emergence of such a truly global economy, those consequences are oftentimes increasingly harder to delineate. In the early 18th century, for instance, British trading ports suffer shortages because of an accident that affects Spanish colonial

91 In the 15th century, its paper money system suffers continuous devaluation which results in its practical collapse (cf. Chen et al. 1995: 273). In 1570, the state passes a tax reform, which results in taxes only being accepted in silver (cf. Flynn and Giráldez 1995: 208). The fact that not only the internal tax system but also the Chinese tribute system is dependent on silver means that the world’s biggest economic power and its direct economic and political dependents use this metal as their main instrument of transaction. In the West, the bimetallic ratio (the rate of conversion from silver to gold) remains – for centuries – much lower than in China (cf. *ibid.*).

shipping and that is only possible because of a delay caused by a war originating on the European mainland.⁹² This economic interdependence testifies to a deep interlinking of local history with world history (cf. Flynn and Giráldez 1995: 212). Developments that were imagined as contained to a specific region can be found to be already substantially affected by affairs on the other end of the globe.

Here, I propose to take seriously the metaphors of threads and nets that permeate *Chrysal* and which, as Beecroft implies when writing about multi-strand narration, connect entrelacement as an economic fact to a specific aesthetic strategy. It is revealing that *The Adventures of a Silver Penny*, *Adventures of a Shilling*, and *The Origin and Adventures of a Hull Eighteen-Penny Silver Token* all tell their stories as detours from the smooth functioning of the Spanish silver trade route. The silver penny is intercepted on its way to the Iberian Peninsula by none other than Francis Drake (cf. 210) while the piece of silver in *The Origin and Adventures of a Hull Eighteen-Penny Silver Token* reaches Britain as the share of plunder that falls to British soldiers “in the vicinity of Buenos Ayres, in the year 1807” (216). The precious metal in *Chrysal* suffers the same fate. After it is cast into a golden crucifix and sent back to Spain as part of the personal treasure of a Spanish dignitary, the vessel is threatened by the close-knit raiding network of English ships that look to intercept enemy trade. Keen on avoiding such confrontation, the crew of the Spanish vessel succeed in reaching a mutual agreement with their adversaries:

The refinements of modern politeness having softened the natural ferocity of a state of war, and admitting an intercourse of courtesy between parties who profess to seek each other’s destruction, the Spanish governor sent out a boat with his compliments to the English captain, with a

92 In the 1710s, the South Indian trading ports suffer sudden shortages of silver. The English Council at Madras analyzes the situation and proposes hypotheses on the causes of the shortage, the first one being the interruption of the silver trade route via the Pacific Ocean, from Acapulco to Manila. The second one is the fact that the annual *Flota de Plata* on the Atlantic silver route to Europe is delayed as it waits for the hostilities in the *War of Spanish Succession* to cease. In July 1715, finally, it sets out from Havana, only to lose all but one ship in a storm seven days later (cf. Chaudhuri 1994: 263f.).

large supply of fresh provisions, fruits, wine, &c. This necessarily produced return of civility from the well-bred captain and in this intercourse were the terms of his connivance settled, as the seal of which I was delivered to him among a very large number of my fellows, who honourably punctual to his promise, at the appointed time, sailed away from that station *in quest of some ships of the enemy's which he expected to meet elsewhere*, and did not return till the Spanish treasure was beyond his reach. (*Chrysal* 1, 50, emphases in the original)

Even though the two powers are officially at war, the allures of commerce help to turn what could have become a military confrontation into a profitable trade-deal. The it-narrator is thus cast into a “dubloon” (*ibid.*) and changes hands as it is paid as a bribe to the captain of the English ship. The threat of confrontation is reframed as an act of reciprocal exchange. When the enemy ship sails away under false pretenses, the bribe that the it-narrator belongs to is used to tear a hole in the maritime net of British trade raiding.

Hence, British rivalry to colonial Spanish hegemony is imagined as the rerouting of commodity flows. British colonialism here fashions itself as an agent of the untying and retying of the trade network of its imperial rival. What first (in keeping with *Traffic's* metaphors) appears as the cutting of the Gordian knot of the trade routes of the Spanish Empire, is soon seen in a different context. The strings of this web are only loosened in order to be connected again as part of an alternative net. Raiding secures an alternative entry point for commodities into the networks of British trade. Thus, even in a state of open hostility, commodities travel between the two powers, as networks of colonial extraction, maritime trade, and naval raiding intersect, constantly loosening and tying together the strands by which the rivalling empires connect the circulations of subjects and objects.

Juliane Vogel explores these acts of tying and untying – *desis* and *lysis* – as figures of poetic structuring (cf. 2008: 271–273). She argues that the overlap and accumulation of different strands evoke an unsettling situation of directionlessness, by postponing the narrative resolution (cf. *ibid.* 271f.) – precisely the situation that *Traffic* is troubled by. The Gordian Knot of such a narration, just like the Gordian Knot

of Traffic's economic dependencies, seems to invite the bold stroke of the sword. Yet, as Vogel notes, the severing of the knot calls for a force that would be greater than the force of the network itself (cf. *ibid.* 207). It-narratives reject such an abstract negation of entrelacement, not only on the level of their content, for example when *Chrysal* portrays Traffic's failure to break free in such a manner, but also on the level of their form, which is dependent on the progression epitomized in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. As we have seen above, the four stories that start with the extraction of precious metal, *Chrysal*, *The Adventures of a Silver Shilling*, *The Adventures of a Silver Penny*, and *The Origin and Adventures of a Hull Eighteen-Penny Silver Token*, all point to the rerouting of resources as the motor of the narrative progression of their stories. The aesthetic effect of this operation cannot be separated from its very specific ideological function. The colonial resources that arrive at the heart of the British Empire remain tainted by the history of colonial subjugation that is materially embedded in them, but this violence is framed as the violence of the other. Instead of cutting the knot and exerting narrative (and real) violence, it is untied and fastened again as part of a new network.

3.2 Reading the Social Fabric

3.2.1 A New World

As the spoils of colonial extraction are brought back into the capital of the empire, the foreign metal is fed into the national circuits of commodity exchange. The frame-narrator of the *Adventures of a Silver Penny* recounts this process:

The gold and silver were conveyed to the Mint, and there my Silver Penny received the stamp of royalty it now bears. From the Mint I conveyed it into the Bank of England, and there left it in the most reputable company. (81)

The "stamp of royalty", the face of the sovereign, serves to naturalize the cosmopolitan commodity that the precious metal is, and turns it into a

signifier of the British Empire. A similar process is recounted by Addison's silver shilling when it is brought to Britain, providing a blueprint for the "voyage in" (Said 1994: 216) that many future it-narrators, such as *The Aerostatic Spy*, will follow:

I was, soon after my arrival, taken out of my Indian habit, refined, naturalized, and put into the British mode, with the face of Queen Elizabeth on one side, and the arms of the country on the other. Being thus equipped, I found in me a wonderful inclination to ramble, and visit all parts of the new world into which I was brought. (*Silver Shilling* 211)

The characteristic language of anthropomorphism equates the metal with the colonial subject, who is 'civilized' as it is integrated into British society. The face of the sovereign, the representation of political power, is here accompanied by the reverse side of the coin: The "arms of the country", signifying military prowess and testifying to the intricate connection of economic and imperial expansion for which this silver acts as the catalyst. This process is imagined via the metallurgic metaphor of refinement that is performed to render the silver passable in this new national economy. *Chrysal*, too, "change[s] [its] Spanish appearance for the fashion of the country" (1, 62), as it is cast into a guinea and is now ready to resume its circulation in this 'new world'.

Indeed, it seems that the moral debauchery and corruption that the narrators encountered in that other 'new world' are left behind when they traverse the Atlantic. Yet, they soon encounter a very similar subject-matter for their satirical gaze. In *Chrysal*, this is foreshadowed from the very start. Its passage to Britain is secured by the fact that it is paid to a British captain, so that he might look the other way and abandon the position from which he should lay in wait, ready to raid Spanish shipping. In this exchange, the first contact with a representative of the British Empire already establishes a transgression of the system of equivalents. The payment that is made is not a socially sanctioned exchange, but a bribe (cf. *Chrysal* 1, 50). As the captain returns to London, the crew of the ship grow unruly by the thought of the plunder they have missed and plot to report his conduct to the admiralty. Consequently, the it-narrator is paid as another bribe, this time for saving

the captain's reputation at home (cf. *Chrysal* 1, 53). From the very start, British society thus figures as less violent than its colonial rival, but certainly not as less corrupt.⁹³

As the ship reaches the harbour, Chrysal is given to the captain's purser, who is tasked with delivering the bribe, and travels with him to London. In the further course of this delivery, the it-narrator enters the public offices and encounters an intricate network of corruption. The purser meets with a clothes-merchant, whose personal friendship with him allowed him to become the only supplier for the ship's last voyage (cf. *Chrysal* 1, 56f). During this meeting, the it-narrator eavesdrops on a conversation between the purser and his business partner in which they talk about the state of affairs at the offices:

I was [...] quite surprised at the gay appearance of every clerk in the offices. – Our midshipmen on the paying off of a ship, are nothing to them! So, thought I to myself: this is very well! Such fine gentlemen as these will never stoop to take the little perquisites which their shabby predecessors were so eager for. (1, 56)

The apparel and demeanour of the clerks are taken as a sign that they would be independent of the bribes that their less-fortunate predecessors were eager to demand – Chrysal is even led to remark on the happiness of a nation, “whose lowest servants are gentlemen” (1, 55). As in the case of *The Aerostatic Spy* discussed in the preceding chapter, the it-narrator is here turned into a vehicle for a “reverse gaze” (Ballaster 2005: 149), a gaze of the colonial other that is imagined as free from the preconceived notions that the metropolitan self might harbour. But this position of a privileged epistemology must soon show the gentleman-like appearance of the clerks to be deceptive. The two friends realize that the vast net of corruption in which they themselves are entangled also ensnares the clerks at the public offices. As is consistent with the

93 During its travels, Chrysal will become the means for several unethical exchanges, foregrounding the corrupt nature of the society it passes through (cf. Alber 2016: 7). In addition to the corruption cited above, it is also used in numerous instances of bribery (cf. *Chrysal* 1, 130; 2, 194; 3, 129) and prostitution (cf. *Chrysal* 1, 118 and 158; 2, 43; 3, 227).

satirical impetus of the genre, this process of disillusionment shows how appearances are misleading:

[T]he principles set them such an example of extravagance[,] [...] for though their own exorbitant salaries enable them to live with the luxury of aldermen at home, and make the appearance of courtiers abroad, how can they think, that their hackney underlings shall be able to change their dress with the court, and appear with all the precise foppery of pretty fellows, if they have not clandestine ways of getting money: and that this is the case, I can give you an instance not to be contradicted. [...] [N]ay, more than all this, [...] there are [...] clerks who keep footmen and horses, and have routs and concerts at their houses, as regularly as people of the first rank; and all by the perquisites of a place of fifty pounds a year. (*Chrysal* 1, 57–59)

Far from signalling an economic status that would make them independent of the bribes that they can earn in their positions, the gentlemanlike attire they sport is the very reason for their dependence on this type of income. Yet, this deceitful appearance is represented not as an individual vice, but as a systemic problem. Instead of showing a vanity particular to them, the clerks and servants strive to emulate their social superiors, who in turn adopt the styles of those further up in the social hierarchy. The problem is thus no longer one of individual corruption (i.e. localized acts of exchanges that should not take place), but a general structure of deceit, by which social positions are no longer legible. What first appears as a problem of economics becomes one of semiotics. In an expansive study of 18th-century discourses on fashion, Christian Huck provides an insight into a century that is infatuated with the observation of the self and others (cf. 2010: 31–97). In the 18th century, fashion becomes a central field in which social positions are signalled and negotiated (cf. *ibid.*). The clothes merchant in *Chrysal*, for example, illustrates the need for dressing above one's class in the story he tells of a youth that he took care of and tried to place in a position at the public offices (cf. 1, 58). Despite having successfully intervened on behalf of his protegee, the head-clerk insinuates that the boy's education and connections are no sufficient conditions for the position. In order to

fit in with his colleagues, he must display the adequate luxury, even if it be far above his (and the other clerks') means. Despite working in a simple administrative position, he is to be fashioned with a French wig, a gentleman's sword, and various pieces of expensive clothing (cf. 1, 58). The means for this dislodging of social referentiality is the consumption and display of commodities that signal certain class positions.

As we have seen already in the second chapter, what Christian Huck says of Ward's *The London Spy* is equally if not more true for it-narratives: their world is one of confusing signs, waiting to be deciphered (cf. 2010: 70). Whereas the "Old Sartorial Regime" (Kuchta 2002: 17) treated clothing as an index of one's social position, the Modern Sartorial Regime that replaces it in the 18th century understands them as arbitrary signs, whose referentiality is always potentially suspicious (cf. Huck 2010: 19–22). If commodities function as such signs in the semantic field of social status, then the referentiality of this system (that is, its ability to generate effectual meaning) hinges on the regulation of their circulation and consumption. If anyone can look like a gentleman, then looking like one does not mean anything. Therefore, this apparently coincidental observation in *Chrysal* connects to a question that is central to it-narratives as a genre. If such narratives are structured by the circulation of its commodity-narrators, then the question of what determines the form of this circulation becomes crucial. The rest of the chapter will address this problem and ask how this circulation is regulated: What – if any – are its limits?

3.2.2 The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality

To a modern reader, the fact that a commodity is equally available to a variety of people might seem a trivial observation. Yet at the beginning of the long 18th century, this is a phenomenon that only just starts to become a hegemonic social reality. To understand the effect that such commodity mobility has on contemporary readers, we must remind ourselves that possession of goods is not only limited by the financial means that individuals dispose of. Instead, the access to late-medieval and early modern commodities is restricted by a plethora of boundar-

ies – political, cultural, social, and economic. Those boundaries restrict the movement of commodities and render the quick and indiscriminate exchanges that are portrayed in *The Adventures of a Cork-Screw* and are radicalized in *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, impossible. However, by the mid-1600s, this nexus of impediments to circulation is in great disarray. With the rejection of the last appeal for the restitution of sumptuary laws in 1656 (cf. Hunt 1996a: 323), there are no more qualitative impediments to the consumption of commodities. Thus, boundaries of one kind disappear, as new discourses (e.g. on consumption, luxury and trade) make them obsolete, while others survive and transform, readily taking on new vocabularies of regulation. For the purpose of understanding the material and ideological limits to commodity circulation, I will turn to sumptuary laws as one of its central regulatory discourses.

In the late Middle Ages, there is an intricate system of sumptuary laws in place to regulate the possession of goods that are deemed luxuries (cf. Hunt 1996b: 410f.). These luxuries are commonly items of clothing or apparel that are reserved to mark social status, such as the commodities that the office clerks in *Chrysal* take pride in displaying. It is hardly a coincidence that many of the objects we find in it-narratives are historically subject to such laws. Whereas *Chrysal* describes these commodities with regard to the effects they have on the legibility of the social fabric, in *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* (1812), one such object itself tells its tale. A reviewer picks up on a convenient pun, accusing the novel of lacking moral grounding and being as “light as a feather” (“The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality” 434). Yet the narrative was popular enough with the reading public as to warrant a second edition in 1819 (cf. Lupton 2012: 267). In the course of this narrative, the ostrich feather recounts its various ‘adventures’ without the support of a frame-narrator: Plucked from an ostrich in an unspecified part of Africa, it is traded and shipped to England where it adorns the wardrobes of a number of different people. It moves from owner to owner in a particularly striking manner, combining episodes from different social groups, but also tracing global trade networks. It can do so, because ostrich feathers are particularly implicated in global trade being a highly valued commodity that is traded across both to Europe and America (cf. Lupton 267f.).

At the time, feathers are considered highly valuable symbols of rank and authority, communicating the social status of the person that wears them. It comes as no surprise then, that sumptuary laws reserve them for the elites and ruling classes (cf. Doughty 1972: 4). However, in the course of the 17th century, such laws wither away and have finally disappeared by the beginning of the 18th century. Precisely when official regulation ceases, ostrich feathers become something of a fad amongst the British nobility (cf. Doughty 1972: 6). Another it-narrative, *Aureus* (1824), shows how such feathers work as a means of social distinction, when it comments on a courtly ball, where “[e]very lady who had ostrich-feathers in her dress [...] [is] accommodated with a seat in a carriage” (170). It is in this time, at the end of the long 18th century, that the ostrich feather tells the story of its circulation. At first, it keeps strictly to Doughty’s observation. Soon after being plucked from the unfortunate ostrich, the feather comes to grace the face of a noble ruler. It is acquired by the prince of a local tribe, the “Nimiquois” (274), in order to adorn a piercing in his nose. On this royal face, it incites the desire of an English captain, who acquires it in exchange for the miscellaneous odds and ends European merchants and colonizers employ as instruments of barter (cf. 275). As the feather reaches British shores, it first seems as if its class-character as an ornament of the nobility is preserved. Although the captain designates it as a present for his betrothed, Caroline, it does not reach its intended destination. When the captain is invited to court, the feather catches the attention of the Queen herself and protocol demands that it is given away as a present to her (cf. *Ostrich Feather* 278). From this advantageous seat at the centre of political power, the it-narrator’s privileged epistemological position allows it to dwell on the gossip of high society. It can:

hear what lady had a tiff with her lord, and who was likely to be the happy man that would succeed in making her forget her marriage vows; who staked their last guinea on an odd trick; or who bilked their tradesmen; whose carriages were famed for elegance, and who was going to be married. (279)

At this point, it appears that the feather, as an object of luxury, would be confined to telling the tales of royal life, and that “[a]ffairs of gallantry, intrigues of the cabinet, views of the opposition, taste in dress, who is in debts, and who expects favours” (ibid.) would constitute the subject matter of its narration. Yet, soon afterwards, the feather is stolen and is brought on a very different trajectory. In its course, the feather, which was just now boasting of itself that it carried “so much sway in a court like the English” (274), is far removed from upper-class society.

The feather experiences this abduction from its appropriate social position as a traumatic dislodgment. For the it-narrator, this act falls “little short of sacrilege” because “[i]t was touching, and taking, from sacred royalty; therefore it was sacrilege; for, who will be bold enough to affirm, that kings and queens are not holy, or are not sacred” (279). While parliament gives a rather polemical answer to the question of the holiness of the sovereign’s body in 1649, the disappearance of sumptuary laws strips the objects with which such nobility was associated of their ‘sacred’ aura. Hence, the feather appeals to a legislation now obsolete as it goes through various hands in the criminal underworld. It finally resurfaces at a shop and is ready to be sold to whoever can come up with the requested price. The it-narrator thus connects to what Christian Huck has identified as the contemporary interest in observing mobility in the capital (cf. 2010: 73) – both physical and social.

As it is introduced into the flows of a free market, the class-signifying character of the feather becomes precarious. In the absence of sumptuary legislation, the purchase and use of this luxury item is only regulated by a quantitative (instead of a qualitative) relation. Whereas formerly, the exchange would be particularized by exactly defining the social position of the subjects who could wear it, now the commodity is (theoretically) available to everyone. What appeared to be an index, referring unambiguously, has become an arbitrary sign. The transition from the old to the new sartorial regime thus hinges on commodification. The process of deregulation follows the dynamics of abstraction that we have seen in the case of the corkscrew. A set of positively defined qualities (in this case the specific social status of the wearer) is displaced in favour of a negatively defined quantity (the amount of money it is exchanged for). Only in this process of abstraction does

the ostrich feather become a commodity. The traces of the pre-modern qualities are erased, and the object enters the smooth space of commodity circulation in which negatively defined exchange-value becomes the motor of its mobility. This historical process in the development of commodity circulation is repeated and dramatized as the content of *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality*. The title itself becomes an ironic comment on a process of abstraction that engenders the disappearance of the only quality that characterized the feather – quality itself.

As the narrative progresses, the mobility that comes with this process of abstraction, that is, the loss of quality, is radicalized. At first, it seems that the feather is not falling much beneath its social rank. It is sold at a shop and ends up in the possession of a duchess. But it quickly becomes apparent that even the nobility is not safe from the vagaries of the market. When the duchess gambles away a large sum, the diamonds adorning the feather are stripped from it and pawned, while the feather ends up in the possession of the duchess's maid (cf. *Ostrich Feather* 282). Its social descent continues, as it ends up at the feather-shop again, where it catches the eye of a “celebrated lady of pleasure who lived with the Marquis of –” (*Ostrich Feather* 286). The feather shows a keen sense of status and propriety, as it laments its new lot: “I who had graced one of the first duchess's heads in England, – to be, by the misfortunes and vicissitudes of life, degraded to wave on the head of a –. Oh! it was insupportable!” (287) However, we soon see that moral nonconformity does not necessarily translate into a lack of access to higher social circles. In its new position, the it- narrator gains even more insights into political affairs than it had as part of the Queen's own wardrobe:

I knew what supplies were to be sent to the army in Spain even before the king himself; – how the loan was to be managed before the gentlemen at the Stock Exchange knew it was to be bid for; – in what manner all the money appropriated for secret services was disposed of; – who was to be promoted; – and who to be thrown into the black ground; how the Catholic question was to be managed; – and what was to be done about the Orders in Council. (286f.)

This position at a much lower rung of the social ladder, that of a kept mistress, shows a discrepancy between epistemological and social privilege. There is an immediate transition between matters of the most private and the most public concern. As this curious commodity “has a thirst for knowledge and loves politics” (*Ostrich Feather* 287), its new position allows for passing satirical judgment on affairs at the very top of the social hierarchy. But despite of this privileged position, the feather itself preserves a keen sense of social class. Even though the kept mistress delves in luxury and is granted access to the highest political circles, the feather in her wardrobe cannot but “reflec[t] on the disgrace of ornamenting a woman of so low an origin, and so abandoned a character” (ibid.).

This tension does not last, however, as the vagaries and whims of London fashion make the feather obsolete, and it is once again returned to the shop. Soon, it issues forth once more, and ends up in the hands of Lady Susan. When this woman, whose family recently became part of the nobility, obtains the feather, she is said to be “haggling very uncourtously about [its] price” (*Ostrich Feather* 287). It is important to take seriously the choice of words here. As the feather fantasizes about a return to court in the preceding sentence (ibid.), the haggling contrasts a courtly ideal of financial disinterestedness with the bourgeois desire to cut the best deal. This theme continues with Lady Susan’s mother-in-law, Mrs. Wadwell, who, despite a recently acquired title, fails to leave behind her bourgeois background and to emulate the manners and character ideals of the nobility she desires to be part of.

As the realms of international politics and high finance are now foreclosed, the feather informs on the family affairs of its new owners, putting particular emphasis on the lacking manners of people who are presented as clichés of the *nouveau riche*. The it-narrator describes Lady Wadwell as a “mean, selfish, avaricious, ill-tempered, and malicious” (*Ostrich Feather* 292) person, dwelling on her mistreatment of servants and her disavowal of paternal authority. Her abundance of wealth and lack of moderation takes physical form. She is painted as “a fat coarse woman, with her head stuck so close between her shoulders, that you might almost fancy she had no throat” (288). Musing on the possibility of some positive character traits, the feather finds that “if we analyse

these amiable qualities, we should find that the former preponderated only when she had a point to gain, or a wish to appear amiable” (289). Whatever is given by Lady Wadwell is not given as a gift, it is always already calculated for in a supposed relation of exchange. This display of commensurability, as we have seen earlier, is the privileged device with which it-narrators pass satirical judgment. The emergent middle class, they show us, sees everything under aspects of instrumentality, its archetype for all social exchange is the successful trade deal: “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2009: 4).

Accordingly, Lady Wadwell marries a man who embodies the ideal of social mobility. Having worked his way up from a humble background, he secures his ascent by marrying into her fortune. It comes as no surprise that this marriage is itself figured in the language of exchange:

He wanted money, and she had a plentiful measure and running over; she wanted a handsome man, and Mr. Wadwell was particularly handsome: she wanted a husband, and Mr. Wadwell was ready to lead her to Allhallows Church, in that capacity, as soon as the lawyers had finished, and the marriage articles were signed. (*Ostrich Feather* 290)

The passage illustrates the instrumental relation to the other. The lawyers and marriage articles, guaranteeing contractual security, take precedence over the antiquated ritual that the church has to offer. The last half-sentence takes on the form of an addendum to a contract, qualifying and reframing what was said before. The rationale for marriage is given by the unequal distribution of assets: a surplus at one point shall satisfy a lack at the other. This image spells out a central fantasy of classical political economy, the myth of the origin of barter.⁹⁴ In the first book of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith writes about such a supposed primal state:

⁹⁴ On the fantasy of primitive barter, cf. Humphrey 1985.

One man, we shall suppose, has more of a certain commodity than he himself has occasion for, while another has less. The former consequently would be glad to dispose of, and the latter to purchase, a part of this superfluity (Smith 1976 1, 26)

The unequal distribution of assets that can satisfy each other's wants frames the marriage between two partners as a profitable act of barter. This instrumental remodelling of interpersonal relations is consummated quite literally when this husband comes to call her "my wife, my property" (*Ostrich Feather* 291, emphasis in the original). Thus, in entering this genuinely bourgeois sphere, the feather (like numerous other it-narrators) bears witness to a process of reification. The anthropomorphized object encounters reified subjects. As the commercialization of society in the 18th century frames interpersonal relations in terms of commensurability, subjects relate to each other as objects.⁹⁵

However, this detour to the sphere of the affluent *nouveau riche* comes to a sudden end as the feather is lost at a house of Mrs. Wadwell's acquaintances and found by a servant. The man marvels at this piece of high-society fashion and brings it back home, wondering "how [his] dame would look with such a thing stuck in her mob cap" (*Ostrich Feather* 293). But while this thought amuses the husband, the wife soon fears their daughter wearing the feather in earnest and gives it away. Even in the absence of strict legislation, an informal sense of decorum renders the thought of a servant girl sporting such an item ridiculous – the feather is given to an acquaintance of the mother.

Contrary to the initial impression however, this exchange does not mark the feather's return into more respected social circles. The acquaintance is the daughter of a Mr. Levi. Even though he is a "Tripoli merchant and money lender, more rich than Croesus" (*Ostrich Feather* 293), his name unmistakably identifies him as Jewish, and thus places him at a very precarious position in early 19th-century Britain. Consequently, the feather comes to report on issues that are unique to the social imaginary of the Jewish experience of that time: conversion and

⁹⁵ The theory of commodity-fetishism, implied in this observation, will be addressed in the conclusion.

assimilation. The feather, now part of Miss Levi's wardrobe, draws the attention of Mr. Dudley, a Christian, who falls in love with her (cf. 296). The daughter now stands in the centre of a tragic romance plot. An avid reader of theology, she comes to question Jewish dogma while at the same time falling for her gentile suitor. The episode stages a reversal of the anti-Semitic trope of the convert Jew, who appears to be a Christian in society but is practicing the mosaic religion in secret. Miss Levi secretly converts and plans to marry Mr. Dudley. Soon, the devoutly religious father discovers the plot and tragedy ensues as the family is split apart and both father and daughter die of grief, leaving the feather behind to be stolen by a Jewish servant girl.

The feather that incites Mr. Dudley's attention is here the catalyst of the entry into gentile society. As a luxury item, formerly under 'negative' sumptuary laws, it stands in contrast to the history of 'positive' dress regulations used to actively other European Jews from the Middle Ages onwards.⁹⁶ These laws are not only used to strengthen the social hierarchy, but also to draw the borders of this hierarchy itself. Transgressing these borders, the feather shows, can be fatal.

Social descent continues as the feather is brought into a pawn shop. From there, it circulates amongst numerous lower-class customers. The social background of its temporary owners here serves as a means to increase the speed of its circulation, as their poor finances mean that it is always brought back and pawned again. The problem of outward appearance and inner essence that is central to sumptuary laws is finally radicalized when the feather is bought by an actress who incorporates it into her acting wardrobe. The feather makes numerous appearances in different roles on the stage before its owner parts with it. Here, the feather as a signifier of status is detached from its anchoring to a spe-

⁹⁶ In the English context, this is done most prominently by the Statute of Jewry, enacted by Edward I in 1274. In the three centuries of official Jewish absence, that is, between the expulsion in 1290 and the return in 1657, the legal situation concerning Jewish life is relatively unspecified, or at the very least ambiguous (cf. Endelman 2017: 949 and 962). After the repeal of the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753, the Jews Relief Act of 1858 is the first meaningful improvement in the legal situation of Jews, being situated well beyond the historical scope of this work. During the long 18th century, there persists a cultural hostility towards Jews, even though their general status might be better than on the continent, as Endelman notes (cf. 2017: 965).

cific referent. The it-narrator becomes part of a costume that produces a multiplicity of meaning:

I have decorated the hats of Falstaff and the Prince of Wales, in Henry the Fourth; I have graced the tyrant Richard; waved on the head of Portia; and nodded, in time, on the *capitals* of the most scientific and most admired singers in their bravura airs. – In short, I know not in what character I have not appeared. (*Ostrich Feather* 297, emphases in the original)

In the space of the theatre, the sumptuary anxiety latent in 18th-century England is manifested. This anxiety connects the question of sumptuary law to the antitheatrical discourses that decry the destabilizing effects of the signifiers it produces.⁹⁷ Its signifiatory arbitrariness is foregrounded, not by the feather being in the position of the person most removed from the social position that it should signify, but by being brought into a context in which its signifying potential as such appears to be unhinged. The episode of the actress is the last one. At the end, the feather ‘returns’ to the place it was meant to occupy before accidentally being gifted to the Queen. Being bought by Caroline’s mother, the feather ends its story with witnessing the happy marriage between Miss Caroline and the captain.

The narrative episodes in *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* thus tie together very different social strata. From the Queen of England to a delinquent Jewish Maid, the feather gives insights into social milieus that would otherwise have no connection with each other. At first, the fact that this it-narrator is a much sought after and expensive colonial good, one of *quality*, as the title emphasizes, suggests that it will only circulate amongst the most wealthy and socially prestigious circles of London. However, the total absence of sumptuary laws by the beginning of the long 18th century means that there are no absolute (i.e. qualitative) barriers to its circulation. The ostrich feather provides a framework for the vast majority of it-narratives that use the circula-

⁹⁷ This caution of the subversive power of mimesis in theatre goes back all the way back to Plato (cf. *Republic* 595a–608b). It re-enters the discursive stage in England when the first theatres are opened in the 1660s.

tion of a commodity for weaving together stories from different social spheres.⁹⁸ It-narrators thus realize what Tretyakov envisions for the biographies of objects, they “cut [...] across classes” (2006: 61).

Yet, we are still left with the question of how to explain the servant’s reluctance to give the feather to his wife, or the feather’s constant pre-occupation with being owned by members of the wealthy elite. There is no law that would pass sentence on a servant daring to wear this feather, yet the social divisions to which these laws refer are still very much in place.

3.2.3 From Laws to Ethics

To explain the persistence of sentiments of sumptuary propriety, we have to point out that the revocation of sumptuary laws in the 17th century does not entail the disappearance of what Alan Hunt calls more generally the “sumptuary ethic” (Hunt 1996a: 359), that is, the idea that certain social classes should be distinguishable by their apparel. I follow Hunt’s objection against a traditional understanding of the sumptuary ethic as a largely pre-modern relic. Instead, it is itself already a first index of the transformations of the social sphere that comes with modernity (cf. 1996b: 413). To make sense of this transformation, one must consider the economic and social context in which it is embedded. The disappearance of the sumptuary laws that vouched for the legibility of social positions comes not as a sudden change in public attitudes but is linked to a fundamental change in material conditions. The apparently paradoxical tension that lingers on in the sumptuary ethic is elucidated when we consider the socio-economic transformation that follows the abolition of these laws. Freudenberger gives a sketch of this process.

⁹⁸ Notable exceptions are found in the first two it-narratives. Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709) portrays exclusively aristocrats, while Addison’s *The Silver Shilling* (1710) circulates amongst the lower classes (cf. Blackwell 2012: xli-xlii).

The rise of a broader section of the population, most significantly the urban bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, brought conspicuous consumption within a wider reach and thus rendered attempts at restraint ever more difficult to secure. At the same time the general rise of the social, moral and economic force of individualism stripped away the very basis of the sumptuary project. (1963: 43)

The specific conflict around sumptuary ethics in it-narratives can thus only be articulated in a society that provides the material means for widespread consumption and the ideological framework of a liberal individualism that makes this consumption desirable, while at the same time still being haunted by the remnants of an order in which social difference was mediated qualitatively, not quantitatively. Only under such circumstances can the sumptuary ethic arise as a question of ethics in the emphatic sense, that is, as an individual choice that can become subject not of legal reprimands, but of moral judgement.

Thus, only a few years before the last appeal for a restitution of sumptuary legislature fails, a writer such as William Prynne can complain about how people, “Proteus-like, are always changing shape and fashion, and like the Moone, appear from day to day in different formes” (1974: 218), connecting to the implied idea that fashion endangers morals – a notion going back all the way to the Middle Ages (cf. Huck 2010: 143). Prynne is decrying a development that the feather satirically condenses in the scene of the actress, that is, the process whereby the connection between signifier and referent becomes arbitrary. The danger lies thus not only in the static mismatch of signifier and referent, but in the dynamic possibility of a radical openness that the theatre scene suggests.

It comes as no surprise that we find Francis Bacon among the proponents of sumptuary laws.⁹⁹ The breakdown of the official sumptuary system is homologous to the loss of direct referentiality that Bacon and the fellows of the Royal Society imagine to follow the confusion

⁹⁹ Alan Hunt calls Bacon “an influential figure who continued to urge the desirability of sumptuary laws upon the attentive ear of James I in 1616 and went so far as to suggest the reintroduction of the long dead alimentary rules to restrain ‘excess of diet’ as well as the more typical seventeenth-century protectionist measures” (1996a: 359).

of words for matter.¹⁰⁰ The stylistic vanity that he decries – the ornamental crime of tropes – is mirrored in the vanity of those individuals who fail to dress according to their social position.¹⁰¹ They too commit Pygmalion’s error: In aiming for a higher social status through mere appearances, they “fall in love with a picture” (Bacon 1999: 21). From this perspective, the trope that governs Robert Boyle’s insistence on a non-rhetorical language is finally elucidated. The metaphor of a “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318) draws from the imaginary of a sumptuary order. If clothing is a means for deceit, then nakedness is the ultimate escape from a world of misleading signification.

The threat of an illegible social text gives rise to an anxiety that finds a wide resonance in public discourses. Literature, and specifically satire, proves one of the grounds on which the problems of the legibility of social position are negotiated during the long 18th century. To understand on what kind of imagery it draws and what structures it uses, I must temporarily broaden the horizon of this study and consider the wider cultural context. For this purpose, we need to take a step back and recall how we first encountered the it-narrative’s preoccupation with the problem of social legibility. When the it-narrator in *Chrysal* observes the paradoxical situation of the clerks at the London public offices, it connects it to a problem in social hierarchy. The particular focus lies on the way in which servants emulate the dress style of their masters and thus connects to a problem that contemporaries are keenly aware of. In 1725, Daniel Defoe complains that “[i]t is a hard matter to know the mistress from the maid by their dress; nay very often, the maid shall be much the finer of the two” (1725: 2).

100 See the section “The Naked Way” in the second chapter.

101 For the semiotics of Bacon’s theory of language, see the section “The Rhetoric of Science” in the second chapter.



Figure 2: *Blunders in Style*. Print by George Moutard Woodward, 1800

The above print, finished in 1800 by George Moutard Woodward, is emblematic of this fear of social confusion. The unnamed plate, catalogued by the British Museum under the title *Blunders in Style*, shows eight pairings of characters in two rows. The scenes are united by the common theme of misunderstandings, showing how communication between people fails. However, the second pair stands out. Here, a scene of such a misunderstanding (regarding cold soup)¹⁰² between a lady and her cooking maid is portrayed. What makes this tableau of a misunderstanding between mistress and servant remarkable is the fact that the confusion is mirrored on the level of pictorial representation. The high mob cap with green ribbons, the yellow neckerchief and the white dress with pink stripes worn by the maid clearly are an emulation of her mistress's style (cf. McKendrick et al. 1985: 57). Beyond the linguistic innuendo of speech, there lies the visual innuendo of dress. In the confusion that the similar dress brings about, the misunderstanding inside the tableau is reproduced for the beholder outside. It is not only unclear *what* is really meant, but also *who* it is that speaks.

¹⁰² Specifically, the misunderstanding is occasioned by the misinterpretation of an indirect speech act.

Such a confusion of servants and masters is a common topic in it-narratives, not only in the example of the ostrich feather given above, but also, for instance, in *Aureus*, where the narrator observes a servant dressed in attire that offers “no variation by which to distinguish him as a servant, except a small crest, engraved on the buttons of his blue jacket” (*Aureus* 217). At a later point, the it-narrator even witnesses a ball featuring servants “assuming the titles of their employers, dressed in the same style of fashion as their betters, [...] decorated in the borrowed plumes [...] of their noble mistresses” (255f.).¹⁰³

We can explain the prevalence of servants in those instances of social confusion by considering that they engage in what Thorstein Veblen calls “vicarious consumption”, a consumption of servants *on behalf of* their masters (cf. Veblen 2007: 49). The metonymic association of servant and master establishes a signifying relation in which the outward appearance of the servant (indexically) refers to the master’s socioeconomic status. The specific position of those servants, who are being handed down older garments from their masters, means that they might not be entirely as representative for a *general* breakdown of social legibility as first assumed. Only by widening the scope can we be sure that the struggle over the sumptuary ethic is indeed a general phenomenon. The print *Pot Fair, Cambridge* published in 1777, for instance, shows common sellers of pottery and their well-off customers (cf. McKendrick et al. 1985: 59).

Although class is clearly distinguishable here, it is so in everything *but* dress. The ‘coarse’ physiognomy of the seller on the right contrasts sharply with the delicate and refined features of her potential customer in the background. Yet regarding material, style, and general fashionability of dress, the two are virtually indistinguishable (cf. McKendrick et al. 1985: 59). The loss of the symbolic efficacy of certain commodities is thus a phenomenon extending far beyond the servant class. Servants serve as the preferred locus for critique, by embodying the most prominent point of contact between upper and lower classes (cf. *ibid.* 59f.).

103 A very similar instance of social confusion brought about by disregard of sumptuary ethics is found in *The Adventures of a Black Coat* (1760). Here, a merchant’s daughter dresses above her class, a transgression that brings about rapid social descent and finally leaves her an “abandoned prostitute” (*Black Coat* 180).



Figure 3: Pot Fair. Cambridge. Print after Henry William Bunbury, 1777

The association of women as the paradigmatic heralds of the breakdown of the sumptuary ethic is equally contingent.¹⁰⁴ Their higher potential for social mobility through favourable marriages, the role of the gentlewoman as the defender of social appearance, and the misogynist tradition of fashioning vanity as a particularly female vice (cf. Douglas 2007: 152), make them an ideal canvas for the projection of sumptuary anxieties. Given the aforementioned association of household servants with transgressive fashion habits, it comes as no surprise that female servants, such as the Jewish Maid in the *Ostrich Feather*, serve as the main object of satires on transgressions of the sumptuary ethic.

This is a tendency perhaps perceived most keenly by those whose epistemological positions it-narratives emulate: foreign travellers. In late 1795, a volume of travel writing under the title *Travels, chiefly on*

¹⁰⁴ 18th-century satire is of course not aiming exclusively at females for the use of extravagant luxuries. The *fop* and the *macaroni*, archetypes of male obsession with fashion and (deceitful) appearance, are derided with equal scorn. Yet their portrayal often hinges on framing their mannerisms as decidedly female.

Foot, through several parts of England in 1782, described in Letters to a Friend is published in London. It is the English translation of a travel memoir that the German author and literary critic Karl Philipp Moritz compiles while visiting England in 1782. Among the many descriptions of sights and customs, Moritz remarks at one point that “[f]ashion is so generally attended among Englishwomen that the poorest servant is careful to be in the fashion” (Moritz 1797: 382, emphases in the original). Only a few years later, his compatriot, the publisher and author Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz, assures the readers that “[t]he appearance of the female domestic will perhaps astonish a foreign visitor more than anything in London” (Archenholz in Cunningham 1974: 135).¹⁰⁵ When the ostrich feather comments on the same discrepancies between appearance and essence that the German travellers note, it does so from a very similar narrative position. It connects to the status of Archenholz and Moritz by being an outsider who can employ a reverse gaze to defamiliarize what is seen. This new gaze from the position of the other serves to present the collapse of the sumptuary ethic as a specific idiosyncrasy of English society, with the narrator commenting on this contemporary controversy under the guise of neutrality and detached objectivity (cf. Ballaster 2005: 35).

On the level of representation, these anxieties are the equivalents of the old fears of a “world turned upside-down” (Hunt 1996a: 132). Against this fear of an overturning of the system of social signification, sumptuary laws posit a primordial fantasy where dress corresponds naturally to status (cf. Hunt 1996a: 132–136),¹⁰⁶ just as inner essence corresponded to outward appearance. Such a fantasy operates as the idea of a fixed semiotic system in which signifiers and referents naturally align. Sumptuary law, then, attempts to guarantee that social status remains legible (cf. Hunt 1996a: 419). Against this fantasy of a symbolic system without a gap, a breakdown of sumptuary law must

105 The sentence is found in a 1791 English translation of Archenholz’ travel writings that are originally published in German in 1787.

106 Peter Laslett describes this through an analysis of the image of a “world we have lost” through the profound changes experienced in inter-personal relations at the transition to modernity (cf. Laslett 1965).

render the social fabric unreadable. In its place, a sumptuary ethic has to guarantee referentiality.

We have seen how the feather is not confined to a specific social milieu or to the lives of a certain class of people but aims to offer a glimpse of a fragile social totality. For this patchy social quilt, the sumptuary ethic provides what Lacanian semiotics – making use of the semantic field of clothing – call a quilting point (point-de-capi-ton), a point at which the chain of signifiers is anchored, that is, where signifier and signified are tied together (cf. Lacan 1993: 258–271). Setting these points is an ideological operation within a semantic system and cannot be universalized. Thus, these points cannot live up to the fantasy of direct referentiality that is lost together with the sumptuary laws. They guarantee meaning, but this meaning is already produced on the basis of an essentially arbitrary semiotic relation. Instead, they function as local reference points that are themselves always potentially contestable. It is such a contestation that *The Ostrich Feather of Quality* dramatizes. It shows a decline in the symbolic efficacy of this system, a general “distrust of the [...] order of symbolic fictions” (Žižek 1997: 3). With the transition from laws to ethics, there is a decline of trust in the ability of this system to maintain the ties between signifier, signified, and referent. It-narratives show this symbolic order in its struggle to uphold the referentiality it once promised.

3.2.4 Connecting the Classes – Turning the Wheel

As we have seen, the threat to social order is directed upwards. Lower classes dress as their social superiors, not the other way around. Hence, the fact that the it-narrator here is an expensive imported feather is no accident. By standing in high fashion amongst the English nobility, while at the same time not being regulated by law, and available to a wider public through institutions such as the pawnshop, ostrich feathers are emblematic of the struggles over a sumptuary ethic.

Here, it is not only the privileged position of the it-narrator that can claim objectivity by being detached from human affairs that makes it the perfect witness of such a semiotic disintegration. Quite the contrary, this is achieved by the fact that the it-narrator itself is now heavily

implicated in the process that it sets out to describe. The it-narrator plays an important role in the sumptuary discourses that it portrays through its specific identity as a commodity.



Figure 4: *The Fashionable Mamma, or The Convenience of Modern Dress.* Print by James Gillray, 1796

An example of this can be found in the above print by James Gillray, dating from 1796. It is titled *The Fashionable Mamma* and shows an extravagantly dressed woman nursing a child. The painting of a romanticized rural scene in the background, in which a mother in plain garb nurses a child, clashes violently with the outlandish figure of the 'fashionable mamma' in the foreground. The main points of contrast are of course the two giant ostrich feathers on her turban, which extend into the painting. As signifiers of wealth and expensive luxury items, such feathers are well suited to make their wearer appear ridiculous in satire. A lady at court might find it fashionable, but it is obvious that the servant who plays with the idea of giving this luxury item to his wife in *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* must find it bordering on the bizarre.

This position of the it-narrator both inside and outside of the discourses which it describes has important implications for its narrative. The privileged position of this narrator places it as a wedge between the private essence and public appearance of its owner. It is the outward signifier of a certain class position, but its functioning as an unobserved observer allows it to capture the most private moments of its owners, as they stand in opposition to the class identity which the feather is supposed to signify. *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* dramatizes the precarious integrity of the system of sumptuary ethic by means of its mobility.

And yet, its expanded and apparently unhindered circulation enables another, very different, effect. To recall its wide trajectory: In the course of a few pages, the ostrich feather is in the possession of the Nimiquois prince, a venturing captain, the Queen of England, a kept mistress in high society, the owner of a pawnshop, a socially mobile gentlewoman, a servant, a Jewish apostate, her treacherous maid, and an actress. Its narration can thus piece together episodes that have otherwise very little material in common. The feather, "after the vicissitudes, the ill-treatment, [it has] experienced, and the vagrant, *rantipole* life [it has] led" (*Ostrich Feather* 306, emphasis in the original), summarizes its story thus:

The pomp of a court, the splendour and the respectability of ornamenting a duchess, a marchioness, and a countess, were much counteracted by the grief felt in witnessing the sorrows of my dear and much regretted Miss Levi, and the vulgar scenes at the pawnbroker's and other places [...]. (ibid.)

These different social milieus are not simply changing and ultimately contingent backgrounds for these narratives. Instead, the episodes are built around topical clusters that connect to the social imaginary these milieus hold in the early 19th century. When the feather enters the 'service' of the Queen, it reports on the splendour of court. While in the possession of the kept Mistress, it informs on the intrigues and machinations that take place in this social sphere. When it forms part of the wardrobe of a bourgeois family recently admitted into the nobility, it takes this opportunity to polemicize against the calculations and schemes of this new class and their thirst for social mobility. When it finally falls into the hands of their servants on the other hand, it vacillates between sympathetically describing their precarious living conditions and portraying them as essentially crooked, eager to rob their masters the very moment the opportunity arises. The figures that the circulating commodity meets, the aristocrats, servants and pawnbrokers, are thus not so much characters, as they are social types.

As the feather changes owners, in a society that abolished laws regulating its possession as a luxury item and in which an increasing number of people have the economic means to purchase it, its narrative sews together the stories of very different social milieus. When the feather promises to "describe scenes which have never met your eye, and characters which you did not believe to exist" (*Ostrich Feather* 307), it does so not only to the family of the captain's bride, where it is returned at last, but also to a middle-class reading public that has little insight into the lives of the urban poor or the ethnically marginalized.

The portrayal of different social classes recalls Erich Auerbach's theory of mimesis, for which the inclusion of characters regardless of social rank is a sign of nascent realism (cf. Auerbach 2013: 92). Auerbach reads the history of western literature as the process of the conflictual development of a realist mode of representation that breaks with the classi-

cal association of certain aesthetic styles with particular literary subject matter that creates a system of equivalence for literary representation in the same way that sumptuary laws associated a certain apparel with specific social positions. This system is codified in the *rota vergilii*, the Virgilian wheel, created by Giovanni di Garlandia in the 13th century (cf. Skoie 2006: 119f.). This is a wheel-like chart that assigns specific literary themes to literary styles, modelled after the works of Vergil (i.e. the heroic, georgic and the bucolic mode). In accordance with such systems of literary propriety, the depiction of lower-class individuals is restricted to the comic mode. Against such a convention, Auerbach retraces the history of what he calls the “tragic seriousness” (Auerbach 2013: 282) of realist representation. The social mobility of the narrators of it-narratives would suggest that they can lay claims to a place in this literary genealogy. Certainly, it-narratives occasionally show the suffering of the lower classes in relative seriousness, particularly after the influence of the novel of sensibility provides the vocabulary for such a portrayal.¹⁰⁷ But although the portrayal of the lower classes is not necessarily comic, the satirical mode of it-narratives does not achieve the level of mimetic realism that Auerbach demands.¹⁰⁸ As seen above, the figures that the it-narrators encounter are much closer to social types than to the round characters that we know from later 19th-century fiction.

We can find the aesthetic effect of such a commodity-narration, which is stringing together the lives of aristocrat and servant, gentlewoman and Jew, not only in the portrayal of a class that was hitherto underrepresented in literature, but in the connection itself. This connection is only possible once the absolute political barriers to consumption, such as sumptuary laws, are abolished. In their absence, the impediments to consumption are now only relative. Money, as the general equivalent of value, functions as a universal social mediator.

¹⁰⁷ For the influence of Sterne on it-narratives, see the conclusion to this work.

¹⁰⁸ There are, of course, many literary portrayals of the lower classes that precede it-narratives (cf. Auerbach 2013: 31f.). As a rule, it-narratives, keep their “presentation always within the satiric moralistic key” (Auerbach 2013: 481). As Auerbach writes about the style of Henry Fielding, this lacks the “existential and tragic seriousness” (ibid.), he finds in Stendhal and Balzac. In this sense, it-narratives are products of 18th-century literary conventions – the fallen prostitute, the destitute father etc. remain too close to stock characters as to rival later portrayals of the lower classes in Realism and Naturalism.

Thus, luxury items such as the ostrich feather can become potentially infinitely mobile, as their exchange-value is universalized in a process that abstracts from its positive qualities. Because exchange-value supplies the object with a co-existence as a bearer of value, it is ‘useful’ to everyone. By virtue of this process, the commodity can assume its adventures that bring it from the planes of Africa to the court of England and from the head of a gentlewoman to the drawer of a Jewish apostate.

The central aesthetic effect of such it-narratives is thus a distinct sense of interconnectedness. At the very end of its tale, the feather comments on the vagaries that have brought it back into the possession of the captain’s wife: “I am convinced every thing is so connected in life, that the great wheel which turns the affairs of the world, brings all things for our good in the end, even to a feather” (cf. *Ostrich Feather* 306f.). The next sections will take this imagery seriously, by asking how exactly it brings “all things for our good in the end” and what it is that makes it turn.

3.3 Open and Closed Circuits

3.3.1 The Literature of Circulation

Toscano and Kinkle observe that in some texts, “the narrative structure of the work is parasitic on the global movements of a particular commodity” (2015: 190). Hitherto, we have approached it-narratives by looking at the side of these “global movements”. But instead of focusing on the commodity outside of literature, that is, the economic reality of 18th-century Britain, I want to shift the perspective onto its literary context.

In the 18th century, the rise of the novel is certainly not the least reason for the lack of scholarly attention that it-narratives suffered up until the last decade. The fact that 18th-century literature is often read for tracing the development of the novelistic form means that contemporary prose texts that resist subsumption under this trajectory fall by the roadside all too easily. An event that is central to both the development of the novel form as well as for the literary context of it-narratives is the publication of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. The year

1719 sees the publication and the sale of its first four editions, sparking a vast number of translations, sequels and spin-offs.

For illustrating the literary ecology in which both Defoe's work and it-narratives are embedded, it is enough to draw attention to a few points in *Robinson Crusoe* that resonate with our earlier observations in it-narratives. For one, there is Robinson Crusoe's firm connection to British colonialism. Robinson's rule over the island, which at the end of the book is called a "Collony" (RC 257), is characterized by the attempt to implement European technologies to establish domination over nature and impose a rudimentary political hierarchy. At the same time, this colonial ambition is quick to rationalize itself and set itself apart from the rivalling project of the Spanish, which is portrayed in the black terms of the *Leyenda Negra*. This is a thematic nexus that we have seen is central to the perspective it-narrators assume on colonial matters.

The 1740s, the period directly before the widespread popularization of it-narratives, are commonly seen as the second and definite stage in the development of the novel. This decade is framed by the publication of Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748), as well as Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). All of the novels cited above, with the notable exception of *Pamela*, can trace their generic history to what later scholarship calls the picaresque, even, as we will see, the apparently static *Robinson Crusoe*. Ever since the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) sees its impoverished protagonist roam the streets in search of a better life, the picaresque in early prose fiction becomes a staple of European literature. The picaresque protagonist is characterized by his, and less commonly her, physical and social mobility, stumbling from one episode to the other. The *Lazarillo* sparks direct successors in Spain, most notably Mateo de Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599) and Francisco Quevedo's *El Buscón* (1626). Soon, the English picaresque follows the footsteps of his Spanish forerunners. Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) is the first text that is clearly influenced by the *Lazarillo* and marks the rise of a uniquely English tradition of picaresques. When the first edition of Richard Head's *The English Rogue* is published in 1665, three others follow until the end of the year. Head's tale quickly becomes the most popular of the late 17th century picaresques (cf. Bjornson 1977:

145). This trend is supported by translations of the Spanish originals (cf. Ardila 2015: 123), as well as the popularity to which (non-fictional) criminal biographies rise during the Restoration Period (cf. *ibid.* 125). *The English Rogue* sparks numerous successors, some fashioning themselves as the epigones of Guzmán, others claiming biographical status and dovetailing with the biographies of criminals.

As the century progresses, the criminal aspect becomes less central and the picaresque is emancipated from its close connection with criminal biographies. *Moll Flanders* is a criminal, but a sympathetic and repenting criminal at the end of her life-story. With *Roxana* (1724), written two years later, the reader finds a much less pronounced connection to the criminal underworld. While the text includes scenes in the metropolitan half-world, *Roxana* trades the changing schemes of the rogue-like picaro for an array of different lovers, each with his particular social position.¹⁰⁹ But while a picaro such as Tobias Smollett's Roderick Random still harbours a somewhat rakish predisposition to physical violence, and *Tom Jones* – plagued by his “naturally violent animal spirits” (*Tom Jones* 218) – believes he might have killed a man, there is little doubt as to their moral integrity. What remains therefore of the Spanish picaros and the criminal biographies of the late 17th century is less the violence and criminal energy of their protagonists but, in a more general sense, their mobility. The English picaros of the 18th century do not transgress criminal law so much as they transgress geographical boundaries. On the 900 or so pages of *Tom Jones*, the protagonist engages in a tour from the country seats of rural England to the capital and back. In about half the number of pages, Roderick Random travels from Scotland to England, to Cartagena, back to England again, and finally returns to his native Scotland. The female picaras are no less busy. *Roxana* engages in an extensive (de-)tour on the continent, while *Moll Flanders* traverses the Atlantic four times until she returns to live out the rest of her days in London.

¹⁰⁹ As Sheila Ortiz-Taylor notes, the episodes that the female picara accumulates are structured not by the different occupations that the male picaro can take on, but by a succession of lovers, who in their turn represent the different social stations that she goes through by proxy (cf. 1977: 220).

As in it-narratives, this mobility concerns social spaces as well. In the course of his adventures, Roderick Random earns his living as an apothecary's apprentice, a surgeon's mate, a soldier in two armies, a valet, and a professional gambler. Moll Flanders changes occupations almost as frequently, while Roxana lives with a jewellery merchant, a French prince, the English King, and a Dutch merchant, among others. The protean nature of the picaresque is a narrative device used to open up new perspectives on society in the same way that the commodity-character of it-narrators does. This extraordinary mobility is what ties them most obviously to it-narratives. Both types of texts build on this mobility to string together a number of narrative events that would otherwise remain unconnected.

As in the case of it-narratives, this is a tentative movement towards realism in the sense of Erich Auerbach. It makes possible the representation of a wide array of characters that were previously deemed unfit for literary portrayal, except in the coarsest satire. Not only are these subjects represented, but they are represented next to one another, connected by the changing identities of the picaresques. It is thus not the portrayal of a disenfranchised soldier or an impressed seaman as such, but their portrayal as being of *one world* as the merchant and the king. What emerges is the sense of a social totality, even if it remains fragmented by the episodic structure of the narrative and shallow in the lack of character depth.

The necessary conditions for this aesthetic effect are the mobility and fluidity of the narrator. As Blackwell notes, the abrupt shifts in subject, the fragmentary diegesis, and the vast number of different characters all put emphasis on the narrator's subordination to extrinsic forces (cf. Blackwell 2007: 181) that govern its circulation. Regulations on commodity circulation such as sumptuary laws assume the same function for it-narrators that barriers to social mobility play for the protagonists of the picaresque. They present impediments to mobility, attempts at drawing borders that would set limits to the circulation of commodities and social positions, aiming to secure the legibility of the social fabric. Both it-narrators and picaresques pose threats to this hermeneutics of the social. Their circulation is the common narrative strategy that allows for

imagining a world in which (post-)feudal boundaries are superseded by help of economic and aesthetic entrelacement.

3.3.2 Episodic Structure in the Picaresque

We have already established that both forms, picaresques and it-narratives, are episodic in general. The changes of occupations (and lovers) in picaresques mirror the changes of owners in it-narratives¹¹⁰. They provide the joints at which changes of the subject matter are articulated. The spacing of these episodes, however, can vary considerably. It-narratives might introduce only the person of the owner, whose moral shortcomings are exposed in a single scene (as in *The Sedan*) or introduce the new owner with the aim of turning them into a co-narrator and bring in a number of additional characters that are adjacent to his/her story (as we have seen in the case of Traffic in *Chrysal*). In the English picaresque, we find a similar variety in the length of episodes, ranging from the shortest episode in *Roderick Random*, where near the end of the book a sailor goes overboard, only to be rescued two hours – and two sentences – later (cf. RR 419), to the complex embedded story of the Man of the Hill in *Tom Jones* (cf. 383–411).

A prototypical example for the structure of these episodes is found when Roderick obtains a position as a surgeon's mate onboard a military vessel. A friend equips him with "clothes that enabled [him] to support the rank to which he had raised [him]" (RR 155), later also gifting him "half a dozen fine shirts and as many linen waistcoats and caps, with twelve pair of new thread stockings" (RR 206). These items of clothing come to signify a new social identity. The picaro is reliant on the signifying power of commodities that it-narrators portray from the perspectives of these commodities; the absence of sumptuary laws is the necessary condition for his social metamorphoses. It follows that his mobility is only possible through the relatively free circulation of commodities. And yet, the destabilization of the social hermeneutics

¹¹⁰ Sometimes, the it-narrators allude to the picaresque model of changing occupations, as in *Chrysal*, whose narrator speaks of entering the "service" (1, 99) of a person once it comes into their possession.

that comes with ambiguous referentiality makes his position always potentially precarious. The new identity is acted out over the course of the episode, as he serves in his new position, drawing in a new set of characters and offering a certain thematic cohesion.

Inevitably, this episode comes to an untimely end when fate strikes. In a remarkable instance of bad luck, the captain of the ship falls ill and suddenly dies. He is succeeded by Crampley, an antagonist with whom Roderick has frequent quarrels and who uses his new position to avenge himself. In the course of this conflict, the crew are stranded on a beach, where Roderick challenges his adversary to a duel. Roderick's downfall is complete when he is badly wounded and left on the shore to die. When he awakens, he finds himself "stript of [his] clothes, money, watch, buckles" (RR 210), that is, stripped of the signifiers of his social position:

When I received the use of my understanding, I found myself alone in a desolate place [...]. – What a discovery this must be to me, who but an hour before, was worth sixty guineas in cash. I cursed the hour of my birth, the parents that gave me being, the sea that did not swallow me up, the poignard of the enemy, which could not find the way to my heart, the villainy of those who had left me in that miserable condition, and in the extacy of despair, resolved to lie still where I was and perish. (RR 210)

The scene of Roderick's arrival on British soil draws on the idea of the beach as a liminal space (cf. Denning 2002: 8) signalling a transition in the status of the protagonist. The scenery is grim: The enemy dagger, the wounds Roderick suffered, and finally his "resolve [...] to perish", connect to the presence of death that Virginia Richter finds to permeate literary beach scenes (cf. 2020: 78). Roderick's death wish conforms to Sheila Ortiz-Taylor's observation that the end of an episode always plays with suggesting the end of the *picaresque*'s life. Every episode might turn out to be the last (cf. 1977: 221). The death imagery becomes concrete when Roderick is discovered by an old servant, who, terrified by his appearance, takes him for "a dead mon [sic]" (RR 212). Yet, the captain's death is real, while Roderick's, although almost just as final, remains metaphorical in the end.

However, the imagery of the beach is not only associated with death and dying but also with life and rebirth (cf. Breidenbach et al. 2020: 11), suggesting a circularity that is epitomized in the pattern of the ebbing and rising tides. Indeed, the circularity of the episodic structure of the picaresque that Ortiz-Taylor posits (1977: 223) demands that rebirth follow upon death.¹¹¹ We find the signals of such a rebirth in the same scene in which Roderick is still taken for dead. The people who find him worry about having to pay the cost of his burial if he indeed should die, hence he is put in a wheelbarrow and transported to a neighbour's house (cf. RR 213). There, he is finally taken in by an old woman who nurses him back to health and assumes the role of a mother, soon eliciting "filial respect" (RR 215) from Roderick. The transition into a new 'life' is complete once Roderick is recommended as a servant to a neighbouring lady. In her household, he miraculously finds that the livery of his predecessor "fitted [him] exactly, so there was no occasion for employing a taylor" (RR 218). For the picaro, the transition into a new 'life' is – as always – seamless.

We can strengthen the argument Ortiz-Taylor makes by reminding the reader that the very name of the first picaro, Lazarillo ('little Lazarus') refers to such a structure of rebirths. Lazarus, brought back to life by Jesus Christ, is himself a strong figure of circularity, spelling out the metaphorical dichotomy of life and death that Ortiz-Taylor uses to develop her argument. Nor is this point too far-fetched: The story of *Roderick Random*, after all, features an episode focused on the British attempt at storming the castle of St. Lazarus at Cartagena. The castle is itself a figure of repetition as it is assaulted time and again by the body of British soldiers, of which "a sufficient number remain [...] to fall before the walls" (RR 186), only for new soldiers to retry this ill-fated endeavour. By focusing on this imagery, we can now also account for

111 The association of the beach with a circularity of life and death and the reversal of positions establishes a carnivalesque aspect (cf. Döring 2015: 110). The carnival offering possibilities for transgression, transformation, and the suspension of social norms (cf. *ibid.*) feeds into the permutability of the picaro we have established earlier. We will briefly revisit the question of the it-narrative's relationship to the carnivalesque in the section "To Counterfeit is Death" in the fourth chapter.

the short episode of the sailor's apparent death and resurfacing as the minimal structure of the death-rebirth cycle of the picaresque.

Very similar structures are found in *Roxana*. After being brought to the brink of starvation at the end of her first unhappy marriage, she is rescued by her landlord. She marries him and follows her new husband to Paris, where she enjoys wealth and happiness in respectable social circles. In a sudden change of fate, her jewellery-trading husband is robbed and killed in the streets. Roxana, though not as destitute as Roderick, loses the social position she has established for herself through her husband. Reduced again to a precarious position, she receives the condolences of a German prince and begins an affair, which once again grants her a new social position and underscores it with the vast array of signifiers of wealth she receives as gifts. Here, fate strikes once more in the guise of death, when the prince's legal wife passes away. The death of the German princess brings about a strong sense of regret for his lack of fidelity in the prince, in the wake of which he abandons Roxana in order to live the life of a penitent. Once again, an episode ends by death and the picara is ready to assume a new role. In both cases, the episodes are framed by the imagery of death and dying.

Yet, as Ortiz-Taylor rightly notes, it is not fate alone that is responsible for the picaro's expulsions. Instead, there is always a certain error on part of the picaro/a that actively endangers and undermines the new social position they have established for themselves (cf. 1977: 220). In both cases, this error is clearly, yet subtly, present. Roderick is faced with adverse circumstances, but it is his own doing, that is, his provocation of physical violence, that leads to the catastrophe of the duel (cf. RR 210). The same holds true for other situations in his adventures, where it is mostly his temper that brings about or hastens the loss of a social position and the end of an episode.

Again, the same dynamic is found in *Roxana*. While the death of her husband is an accident, in all subsequent episodes it is she herself who helps to sabotage her newfound stability (cf. Ortiz-Taylor 1977: 220). Once she loses the prince and the social position he established for her, she seems rather content with the end of the episode, even though she professes great love for him and expects a child. Nevertheless, Roxana appears exultant when she feels "at Liberty to go to any Part of the

World, and take Care of my Money myself” (*Roxana* 103). This can only be rationalized once the reader remembers that Roxana herself has been preparing the way for the prince’s penitence. Long before the death of the prince’s wife, she raises the question of adultery with him and repeatedly questions the moral legitimacy of their relationship (cf. Ortiz-Taylor 1977: 220). The prince points out the dangerous implications of her suggestions, warning her that “if once we come to talk of Repentance, we must talk of parting” (*Roxana* 82). Thus, when the death of the princess finally separates them, it is only the cue for a separation that was long prepared by Roxana herself. There seems to be an underlying force at work that aims to break free from the restraints of every new social position. It is a drive that seems not to stave off death, but to actively seek it. In seeking this death, the picaros push the narrative forward.

3.3.3 Episodic Structure in It-Narratives

In contrast to the picaresque texts discussed above, it-narrators are no living beings, and while they are the narrators of their stories, as we have seen in the second chapter, it is often doubtful whether one could call them their protagonists. Yet, on a structural level, the cycles of birth and death found in the English picaresque are also present in it-narratives. They are mirrored in the progress from naïve observation to satirical unmasking in the it-narratives we have found in the previous chapter. The opposition of false appearance and true essences we have examined in the second chapter observes the tripartite structure that the cycle of life, death, and rebirth suggests. The episode starts with the false appearance of the subject as it is observed in public interaction. When a transition from public to private space takes place, the privileged epistemological position of the it-narrator allows it to discover an essence that does not correspond to the subject’s social appearance. When the subject returns into a public setting, the false appearance is reinstated again, confirming that deceit has taken place. Once this discovery is made, a new human subject incites the curiosity of the narrator, most frequently a new owner who acquires it at that moment. Such a structure can be

called the ideal type of the tripartite framework for it-narratives and was found in the narratives examined in the second chapter.

For understanding what motivates these transitions in it-narratives, we must return to the premise that was shown to be central to it-narratives. The establishment of a superior epistemological position hinges on the fantasy of detached observers who have little stake in what they observe. It seems we can apply Simon Dickie's dictum about what he dubs "the ramble novel"¹¹² much better to it-narratives specifically – they lack desire (cf. Dickie 2011: 266):

Plot is so rudimentary in these texts and characterization so shallow, that the usual motors of narrative are just not there. Ramble novels are almost without desire, as a narratologist might say. There are no important mysteries to be resolved, no hermeneutic plot. (ibid.)

One reason for this can be found in the specifics of the it-narrator. We have already found that one of the central characteristics of these narrators is their lack of agency in the traditional sense. They experience their circulation in the contingent acts of exchange that propel them forward through the narrative as something that is caused externally. In the same sense, the protagonists of picaresque texts experience the events that lead to the end of an episode and the beginning of a new one, as strokes of fate and instances of very bad, or very good, fortune. Yet, by following Ortiz-Taylor's analysis of the circular structure of the picaresque episode, we found that there seems to be an uncanny underside to this. There is something in the picaresque subject that actively seeks these moments of change.

The reader can find suggestions of a similar force in it-narratives. Consider, for example, a story this chapter has focused on already: *The Adventures of a Shilling*. Reflecting on its mobility, this shilling boasts: "I found in me a wonderful inclination to ramble" (*Silver Shilling* 211). My wager at this point is that this testifies to precisely the force that animates the protagonists discussed earlier. Courtney Weiss Smith has rightfully drawn attention to the idiosyncratic syntax (I found *in me*)

112 A term for a number of very different narratives with highly mobile protagonists.

of the expression (cf. 2016: 129). There seems to be a split present in the subject: There is a foreign element inside the self. The silver shilling is animated by a drive that works at bringing about the end of an otherwise stable episode much in the same way as Ortiz-Taylor has shown for the picaro. The shilling illustrates this inclination in the way characteristic of the genre, providing a list of its successive owners:

The apothecary gave me to an herb-woman, the herb-woman to a butcher, the butcher to a brewer, and the brewer to his wife, who made a present of me to a nonconformist preacher. After this manner I made my way merrily through the world; for, as I told you before, we shillings love nothing so much as traveling. (*Silver Shilling* 211)

Just like the ostrich feather, the shilling circulates among very different social strata, yet we do not find any commentary on the transition between social classes that is typical for the feather. The preacher, the apothecary and the butcher are listed not as different social types, but as largely contingent stations in the circulation of the it-narrator. Consequently, the shilling does not dwell on the particularities of their lives, that is, the specific social spheres that the feather distinguished so keenly, but on the abstract succession of the episodes. The passage serves not to draw attention to the different social spheres themselves, but to illustrate that characteristic inclination of the shilling to move on. After all, it “love[s] nothing so much as travelling” (*Silver Shilling* 212).

The silver shilling of Addison is not alone in this love of circulation for circulation’s sake. In Thomas Bridges’ *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, from which the quotation at the beginning of this chapter is taken, we find a very similar phrasing. At one point in the course of its travels, the bank note ends up in the possession of a stockbroker’s wife, who is certainly a person of higher social status. The it-narrator admits this advantageous position yet does not wish to stay with this owner: “I could have been very well contended to pass the remainder of my days in the bottom of the small end of her purse; but I was born to wander, and there is no resisting one’s destiny” (*Bank-Note* 1, 64). The imagery of a natural disposition used when the it-narrator speaks of “being born to wander”, connects to what we have seen in the self-sabotaging drive

forward in the picaresque. This urge is most clearly visible once there is an outside barrier to circulation, serving as a foil against which this drive can articulate itself. This is illustrated in a particularly striking way in Addison's it-narrative:

The people very much favored my natural disposition, and shifted me so fast from hand to hand, that before I was five years old, I had traveled into almost every corner of the nation. But in the beginning of my sixth year, to my unspeakable grief, I fell into the hands of a miserable old fellow, who clapped me into an iron chest, where I found five hundred more of my own quality who lay under the same confinement. (*Silver Shilling* 211)

The natural disposition of the it-narrator clashes with the owner's desire to hold onto the material signifiers of wealth. The miser poses the antithesis to the it-narrator's "inclination to ramble". The narrator of *The Adventures of a Halfpenny* (1753), for instance, speaks of having "lost the very essence of [...] [its] being" (5) when it lands in the hands of a miser. The miser is an ever-recurring figure in these narratives, emphasizing the propensity of the commodity to circulate. In *Chrysal*, a miser is shown in a very unsympathetic light (cf. 1, 91), while the same type of person is called "disagreeable" and "contemptible" (17) in *The Birmingham Counterfeit* (1772). In *The Adventures of a One-Pound Bank Note* (1813), the narrator laments being confined by a miser and plots its will to circulate directly against the miser's desire to hold on to it when it is finally set free: "[T]he joy of our separation was on my side, at least, equal to the reluctance on his" (234). This trend can be traced back as far as the first narrative in our corpus. In Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* (1709), the first narrating coin calls the miser "a creature against whom we have the utmost aversion" (7), offering a substantial analysis of the conflict between the hoarding subject and the circulating object:

[H]is [the miser's] Love is as troublesome to us, as odious to all the World besides; for, shut up in his Coffers, we lose this agreeable Quality, which is only maintain'd by an absolute Freedom of circulating with the Sun about the World, where we make far greater Discoveries than that glorious Planet; for we are admitted to those Secrets which are indus-

triously concealed from his enquiring Eye; and made Confidants of those Intrigues of Love and Politicks, which he would only disappoint or destroy. Whether we go in Bribes to tame the troublesome Zeal of the *Patriot*; to betray the *Statemans* (sic) Trust; or purchase the Honour and Chastity of the matron or Virgin. (ibid., emphases in the original)

Here, the two perspectives that have hitherto structured our approach of the genre are brought into constellation. Epistemology is shown to be contingent on circulation. Only insofar the it-narrators can circulate freely, can they make “far greater discoveries” than their human counterparts.¹¹³ As Christopher Flint observes, the narrative efficacy of these texts depends on the commodity’s ability to use infrastructures of circulation (cf. 1998: 223). The scenes featuring misers show that it-narrators are keenly aware of this.

We see the opposition between circulation and its impediment articulated forcefully in this passage. The it-narrator’s propensity towards mobility is expressed in the coin’s talk of the “absolute Freedom of circulating with the Sun about the World”. The process of circulation is again naturalized, evoking the imagery of the continuous revolutions of the Sun. The counterforce to this is fashioned as the miser’s “love” for the coin. This is no far-fetched metaphor, as the example of *Aureus* shows, who tells how it feels the “gloating eye of the libidinous” miser and feels “disgust lest even his touch should have contaminated the purity of [...] [its] nature” (118). Later, it relates its encounter with another miser: “After gazing fondly upon me a considerable time, she kissed me most

113 It is now clear that the empiricist fantasy of the “unobserved observer” (Benedict 2001: 144) does not exist in the (social) vacuum that its proponents try to prove, but always in a specific historical and economic context. What in the first moment appears as a natural analogy – the it-narrator’s ability of “circulating with the Sun about the World” (*Golden Spy* 7) – is soon shown to rely on very specific political constellations. Far from only designating the astronomical object, the object of scientific discourse, the sun also immediately evokes the political object on which the circulation of commodities depends: the empire. First the empire of the Spanish, ‘en el que nunca se pone el sol’, and later the British, ‘in which the sun never sets’. The first it-narrator, representing a French Louis d’Or in Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709), carries on its body the image of another sun – Louis XIV. The image of the sovereign – Le Roi Soleil – vouches for the mobility of the currency and grants its entry into national and international circulation. This connection between coin and king will be explored further in the fourth chapter.

affectionately” (354). Here, an explicitly libidinal dimension is evoked. If there is desire in these it-narratives, so it seems, it is clearly on the side of the impediment to circulation. The it-narrator’s “inclination to ramble” is a force that is plotted against such a desire.

To explain this puzzling constellation, I propose to turn to the concept of the drive as it is articulated in psychoanalysis. The contrast between the desire of the miser and the mobility of the it-narrator can be made sense of in the distinction between desire and drive that Lacan puts forward. As Raoul Moati notes, desire is characterized by a fundamental impossibility. It can never reach its object, for, as soon as it does so, the reason for the desire has already moved on to the next object. From this, Moati concludes that “[t]here is nothing that desire cannot put in the position of an obstacle to its realization, including its own goal” (2009: 20). Drive, on the other hand, introduces a terminological separation of aim and goal, the aim referring to its purpose and the goal to the specific object that it strives to attain. It offers a way out of the deadlock of desire:

In order to achieve this, drive topologically modifies the criterion for the fulfilment of the aim. The latter no longer stems from a synthesis of the identity of the aim of desire with its targeted goal [...]. Success no longer lies in the coincidence of what is obtained with what is aimed at, because such a coincidence turns out to be defective *at the very moment when it is accomplished*, and the topological distortion of the drive imposes the failure to reach its goal [...] as the criterion for the success of the aim. (Moati 2009: 7f., emphases in the original)

Drive thus strives to realize its aim (an aim that lies in the drive towards an object) precisely by not reaching the object itself: its teleology is the absence of telos. Ever restless, the money-narrators whom the miser wants to hold onto follow this logic of the drive.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ The miser’s love of money is thus rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what money is. What sets money apart from all other commodities is its special configuration of use-value and exchange-value. Its use-value is realized only in its exchange-value: It is

Theories of the drive of course precede Lacan's work. Most famously, Sigmund Freud conceptualizes the drive in his later work as a dualistic force, split between Eros and Thanatos,¹¹⁵ that is, between a life-drive and a death-drive. Lacan reformulates these concepts and develops a monistic theory of the drive that stresses the dialectical unity of tendencies of preservation and destruction (cf. Lacan 2005: 719). Connecting to observations already implicit in Freud (cf. 1955: 57), for Lacan, there is only one drive, namely a drive that seeks its telos not in life nor death, but in a life beyond death, or a "negative vitalism" (Tomšič 2019: 59). This non-human aspect of the Freudian death-drive is central to the question at hand. According to Freud, the death-drive seeks "ways of returning to inorganic existence" (1955: 39). This aspect plays an increasingly prominent role in Lacan's concept and is responsible for the way in which the drive towards the termination of the episodes is experienced by the picaro as something outside of the self, as a non-human force. The drive becomes a death-drive when the picaro seeks metaphorical death in the end of the episode, as Ortiz-Taylor shows.¹¹⁶ But instead of positing death as telos, the drive works on the suspension of teleology itself (cf. Sigurdson 2013: 368). The "compulsion to repeat" (Freud 1955: 19) drives both the picaro and the it-narrator to abandon each new position of stability. Thus, in seeking this death, both the picaro and the money-narrators examined here seek infinite continuation, that is, the infinite continuation of the narrative.

The question remains whether there can be an exogenous end to this, or, differently put, how the dynamics of drive relate to a narrative structure that is necessarily finite. For the purpose of approaching the problem from this perspective, we must shift focus from the structu-

useful for what it can be exchanged for – it is money only insofar as it is kept in circulation. By hoarding it, the miser effectively robs it of the quality that attracted him in the first place. For a detailed examination of the desire of the miser, see Benn Michaels 1985.

¹¹⁵ Freud uses the term *Todestrieb*, 'death-drive'. The name Thanatos as opposed to Eros is introduced into psychoanalytic vocabulary by Paul Federn (cf. Laplanche and Pontalis 1980: 447).

¹¹⁶ The curse that Roderick Random directs against the "parents that gave [him] being" (RR 210) in the beach scene quote above, is a curse against his being in the world and a wish to return to inorganic existence, echoing the *me phunai* ('to not have been born') of Oedipus at Colonus (cf. Stevanović 2021: 40).

res of the episodes to the narrative arc that is constituted when these episodes are interlinked.

3.3.4 The Hand of God and the Wheel of a Clockwork

Hitherto, we have derived our insights from readings of the micro-structures of picaresques and it-narratives. Having located a drive to infinite circulation in these episodes, the question remains how this drive translates into the macro-structure of these tales, that is, how it translates into the ways in which the individual episodes are connected. This question will point us to the concept of providence that we will show suspends the continual drive to circulation and arranges for the happy return of the narrator. Looking for an equivalent in it-narratives, we find similar structures of providential return in some narratives, although without the explicit mention of the theological concept itself. This observation leads us to consider the process whereby the scientific revolution of the late 17th century secularizes the doctrine of divine providence. Finding the traces of this process in it-narratives, whose narrators are not only objects, but commodities, allows us to shift attention to how the secularized concept of providence infuses the economic discourses of the long 18th century.

Beginning by examining the picaresque macro-structure, we will narrow down our focus towards Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random*. This seems promising because many of the defining features of the English picaresque are exhibited in *Roderick Random* in a particularly striking fashion. In *Roderick Random*, we find a clue as to the force that will dominate the narrative structure right at the beginning of the text. On the first page, Roderick recounts the story of his life *ab ovo*, and while he is keen to include the story that leads up to his birth, he avoids the Shandean error of losing himself in it. The only part he dwells on in detail is a peculiar dream that his mother has while being pregnant:

She dreamed, she was delivered of a tennis-ball, which the devil (who to her great surprize, acted the part of a midwife) struck so forcibly with a racket, that it disappeared in an instant; and she was for some time incon-

solable for the loss of her off-spring; when all of a sudden, she beheld it return with equal violence, and earth itself beneath her feet, whence immediately sprung up a good tree covered with blossoms, the scent of which operated so strongly on her nerves that she awoke. (RR 1)

Such a dream certainly does not offer much of an interpretative challenge, yet one should pay close attention to its imagery, nevertheless. As David Jeffrey observes, the motif of the tennis ball is taken from John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*,¹¹⁷ where it is used in a similar context by a servant who argues for the essential lack of agency of human subjects, who are instead moved by the forces of fate (cf. 1980: 607). The picaresque is imagined as an object, something that is passive unless it is struck by a great and malignant force that drives it from its natural place. In this scene, the future protagonist is imagined as a thing: Yet the association with an object is not suggestive of passivity, as one might think, but of incessant movement. From the very beginning, *Roderick Random* suggests that it is not human desire that drives its protagonist forward, but an impersonal drive, bringing forth a thing-like quality in the subject (cf. Stevanović 2021: 42f.).

Yet, there is a counterforce at work as well, arranging for the return of the ball in the end. In this return, the imagery of natural rootedness is plotted against that of play. Once returned, the ball becomes a seed that takes roots in its native soil and produces a tree, thereby framing the scene in a vocabulary that evokes the organic circularity of natural growth. It is suggested here that the circularity of the episodes is mirrored in the circularity of the narrative itself. Accordingly, Ortiz-Taylor proposes what is essentially a microcosm-macrocosm model for understanding the structure of the picaresque narrative. The circularity of the episodes is mirrored in the circularity of the narrative that encompasses them (cf. Ortiz-Taylor 1977: 223). After all, Roderick starts out as an impoverished foster child that is mistreated by the rest of his relations and driven to leave his native Scotland in search of employment, only to return a wealthy gentleman who purchases his family's estate. Tom

117 "Bosola: We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded which way please them" (Webster 1900: V.4.64f.).

Jones shares Roderick's orphaned background but returns home as the heir to a wealthy country squire. Moll Flanders returns to her native London a wealthy woman and Roxana is reunited with her Dutch husband and lives in comparable wealth. Thus, what could appear to be a dramatic upward mobility is always framed as a return to a previous state. For instance, once at the end of his narrative, Roderick learns that he is not an orphan after all. On the last pages, he is reunited with his émigré father, now a prosperous landowner in Argentina, who provides Roderick with the means to rise to the status of a gentleman and marry his love-interest, Narcissa. Neither are the foundling's family ties cut as thoroughly as it appears at first. He discovers his identity as the son of Mr. Allworthy's sister and thus rightfully assumes the position and fortune of a country squire. In both cases, closure goes hand in hand with rural imagery. Their return is a return to a country seat.

The circularity in question is not only characteristic for the position of the picaresque hero in the world, but also for his character. Through all the heroes' mobility, their voyages and protean adaptations to new roles, a certain stasis remains. As the outside world around them constantly changes, the picaresque heroes stay the same on the inside. There are readings that seek to prove how Roderick "evolves," "learns" or "proves" himself, effectively implying the structure of a Bildungsroman *avant la lettre* (cf. Stephanson 1989: 106).¹¹⁸ Yet, as Stephanson rightly remarks, "these are literary-critical fictions of continuity that are flatly contradicted by textual facts." (ibid.). Still in chapter 64, Roderick has not 'learned' to curb the violent temper that sabotages his aspirations time and again (cf. ibid.). While he swears eternal love to her, he loses "all remembrance of the gentle Narcissa" (RR 303) while his ambition draws him to Miss Sparkle, a rich spinster. Throughout the narrative, Roderick stays largely the same. But only by staying his same rambling self can he push the episodes forward, ever working towards the subversion of the stability that each episode offers.

118 Arguments such as these have been elaborated amongst others by Richard Bjornson in *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (cf. Bjornson 1977: 228-245) and by Jerry C. Beasley, both in *Novels of the 1740s* (cf. 1982: 113-25) and in "Smollett's Art: The Novel as 'Picture'" (cf. 1985: 143-83).

At the end of the day, the picaresque hero is transferred to a new setting that is fashioned as a return to what they always *should have* been. However, this transition from the mobile picaresque hero, tumbling from one contingent episode to the next, to the organically embedded heir that assumes his rightful place, is itself not achieved organically. That is, it does not follow seamlessly from the progression of the narrative but invades the narrative as if it were an exogenous force.

It is often noted that there is something strikingly unnatural about the endings of picaresques such as *Roderick Random* and *Tom Jones* (cf. Ortiz Taylor 1977; Beasley 1979: 211f.; Stephanson 1989: 103). Something about them strikes the reader as too abrupt in the case of the former and too artful in the case of the latter. Robert Alter, for example, calls the last chapters of *Roderick Random* “egregiously incongenial to the picaresque spirit” (1965: 76). Raymond Stephanson comes to a similar conclusion when he concedes that:

[t]here would be no problem with the ending (i.e., the last twenty pages from the point where Roderick discovers his father and gets married) were it not for the fact that the rest of the text has been about the impossibility of such closure, about the certainty of negative transformations and the delusion of positive metamorphoses. (1989: 103)

This reading seems to confirm a contradiction inside the text: The drive forward, at work in the episodic structure that permeates the novel, contrasts with the abrupt ending brought about by the sudden discovery of the father. Unlike in the episodes that follow one another through the narrative of *Roderick Random*, there is nothing in the picaro that would sabotage this last episode. By the end of the book, it is clear that whatever was driving Roderick forward, it has been neutralized. Thus, it is not too far-fetched to speak, as some critics do, of two different fictional worlds that clash in the text of *Roderick Random* (cf. Stephanson 1989: 105): The world of the episodes, characterized by drive and instability, and the static world of the ending, in which drive has been neutralized and Roderick has returned to his rightful place. The question remains what to make of this clash and where to find the force that reigns in the drive to endless circulation.

The first explanation for this clash is of course to diagnose artistic shortcoming on the part of Smollett, or, only a little more nuanced, to attempt to explain it away by means of an autobiographical argument, in which the happy ending is understood as stemming from Smollett's yearning for success and acceptance (cf. Stephanson 1989: 105). On the other hand, Stephanson also argues that this disjunction is emblematic of the slow transition from the picaresque to the romance mode during the 18th century (cf. *ibid.*). Both strategies avoid taking seriously the aesthetic effect of the contrast of the two worlds. In order to give them recognition, we must focus on the moment of *anagnorisis* in which these two worlds collide when Roderick's father suddenly recognizes his son.

This moment comes about only in the last chapters of the book. Roderick has accumulated some wealth and embarks upon a voyage from Sub-Saharan Africa to Argentina on the way to increase his fortune by selling slaves. Upon his arrival, Roderick and his uncle, Captain Bowling, meet with a Spanish Don who receives them and tells them of another Englishman, called Don Rodrigo by the locals. Enthusiastic about the idea of meeting a compatriot, Roderick is brought to the *hacienda* of the gentleman, who is implied to have risen to great wealth in the last years. There, he listens to the life-story of the man who evokes a curious sympathy in him. Prompted by an interjection by Captain Bowling, Roderick reveals his name. Upon hearing it, the recognition triggers a violent ecstasy in Don Rodrigo:

His utterance was choked up a good while by the agitation of his soul; at length he broke out into "Mysterious Providence! – O my dear Charlotte, there yet remains a pledge of our love! and such a pledge! – o found! O infinite Goodness, let me adore thy all-wise decrees!" Having thus expressed himself, he kneeled upon the floor, lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, and remained some minutes in silent ecstasy of devotion. (RR 413)

Now found to be Roderick's father, Rodrigo, the Spanish form of Roderick, adds another point in case for a circular structure, in which father and son, past and future, share a name. While the modern reader remains baffled by this abrupt change in fortune, Don Rodrigo knows

how to make sense of it. God's "[m]ysterious Providence" has brought the son back to his father, against all odds and quite literally at the other side of the world.

When Smollett lets Don Rodrigo frame this reunion in terms of providence in 1748, the concept is already looking back on a history of over 2000 years. In the 5th century BCE, Herodotus and the early dramatists understand the ancient Greek word *πρόνοια* (*pronoia*) to belong to the realm of gods; it refers to the way in which divine providence maps out the course of human affairs (cf. Hengstmengel 2019: 13f.). In the discourses of classical philosophy, it comes to define a point of contention between the schools in the Platonic tradition (including Aristotelianism and Stoicism), who hold onto the idea of *pronoia* determining the fate of Man, and the epicureans, who develop a concept of chance that rests on the random swerve (the *clinamen*)¹¹⁹ of atoms (cf. Hengstmengel 2019: 18; Reeves 2015: 607). From there on, *pronoia* is taken up in the writings of the early church fathers, who, lacking a word for the providential framework in the bible, readily take up the concept. In the Christian tradition, the idea of divine providence rises to the rank of one of the central tenets of faith. In its most basic definition, divine providence refers to the belief that God not only created the world but goes on to actively care for it (cf. Hengstmengel 2019: 23): "[P]rovidence refers to God's care for this world, and thus his design and government of it" (ibid. 14).

Being one of the central theological concepts of Christianity, it shares the fate of all such doctrines in the late Middle Ages, coming under close scrutiny by those currents which seek a reformation of the faith. As a concept that is closely associated with the problematic relationship between the individual believer's agency in this world and God's grace, it becomes one of the grounds on which the theological battles of the Reformation are settled. As we have already seen earlier in the chapter, the Reformation's scepticism of the doctrine of works righteousness (the idea that the believer, by performing good deeds in this world, can reach a preferential position in the next) hinges on a

119 Interestingly, its first English usage is recorded in Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, where it is satirized (OED s.v. *clinamen*, n.).

firm belief in the idea of *sola gratia*, that is, grace as the only way to individual and collective salvation. Providence is thus closely related to this central concept of the Reformation faith. However, while grace applies only to the elect, providence extends to all of creation. Hence, while medieval Christianity still reserves aspects of the belief in chance that stem from the epicurean tradition, the reformed and Anglican tradition hold any belief in chance to be an affront against God's sovereignty (cf. Thomas 1991: 91). This belief in the prominent role of providence has a solid foundation in the Anglican church and persists largely unchallenged for a considerable time (cf. *ibid.*).

Having thus skimmed the theological history of the concept, the apparently contingent transitions between the episodes of *Roderick Random* and its sudden transition into the rural scenery shine in a new light. We have seen that the transitions between episodes are often occasioned by sudden events that destabilize the homeostasis of a picaresque episode. Precisely such unforeseen events, most prominently sudden deaths, are taken as signs of God's intervention in worldly affairs (cf. Walsham 2001: 16). Keith Thomas, in his seminal work *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, cites two of the dominant positions on providence in Anglicanism and Calvinism. He refers to the positions of two of the central theologians of Reformation Providence: Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1575–1583, and Johannes Calvin himself:

Archbishop Grindal [...] believed that a particularly sudden death could be recognized as a specific judgement of God. Calvin had stressed that if the Almighty had marked out the moment of a man's death, then no medicine could avert. (Thomas 1991: 99)

In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the belief in providence, articulated via miracles, wanes (cf. Hengstmegel 2019: 27). Instead of being articulated through wonders that could radically suspend the natural order, providence is now taken to operate from within the natural order. God's will can be shown, no longer through inexplicable miracles, but through instances of inexplicably good or bad fortune (cf. *ibid.*).

God is now not only responsible for the providential course of all of creation, but also for individual fates and more mundane happenings.

Calvin writes about exemplary instances of such manifest providence in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), when he polemicizes against the common belief in chance:

What we ought to believe concerning providence is by this depraved opinion most certainly not only beclouded, but almost buried. Suppose a man falls among thieves, or wild beasts; is shipwrecked at sea by a sudden gale; is killed by a falling house or tree. Suppose another man wandering through the desert finds help in his straits; having been tossed by the waves, reaches harbor; miraculously escapes death by a finger's breadth. Carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. (Calvin et al. 2006: 198f.)

The examples Calvin enumerates here sound remarkably like the instances of sudden death and miraculous deliverance that we find in Roderick's travels. From the bad fortune of the first captain's sudden illness helping Roderick's rival assume a position of power, to Roderick's mysterious survival after being stranded and wounded in the duel, up to the fortunate sailor who goes overboard at the end of the narrative only to be miraculously rescued by the same ship two hours later. The strokes of fate that Ortiz-Taylor points out at the intersections of the picaresque episodes (cf. 1977: 218) consist of precisely those unlikely and sudden events that Calvin sees as prime examples of providence, not fortune.

Indeed, when returning to the text, we find frequent hints to this connection. Don Rodrigo is by no means the first character to explain such contingencies according to a providential framework. When a desperate Roderick ponders enlisting as a soldier, his friend Strap urges him to "share the fruits of [his] industry in peace, till Providence shall send better tidings" (RR 80). Likewise, when he is pursued by his enemies, the old lady who gave him shelter pushes him to "get out at the back-door and consult [his] safety as Providence should direct [him]" (RR 23of.). Finally, when he finds himself once again destitute, Roderick surrenders his lot to God's will:

[R]epining at that providence [...] I determined, in a fit of despair, to risk all I had at the gaming table, with a view of acquiring a fortune sufficient to render me independent for life; or of plunging myself into such a state of misery, as would effectually crush every ambitious hope that now tortured my imagination. (RR 368)

Narcissa, when hearing of the lucky coincidence that grants Roderick economic independence and thus the means to marry her, cannot but remark how “this great and unexpected stroke of fate seemed to have been brought about by the immediate direction of Providence” (RR 425).

If providence plays such a central part in *Roderick Random*, by reigning in the drive towards continued circulation and offering an explanation that recontextualizes the large number of (mis)fortunate events, we might suspect it to be placed in an equally prominent position in it-narratives. Indeed, Calvin does not restrict the workings of providence to the animate world:

[C]oncerning inanimate objects, we ought to hold that, although each one has by nature been endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God’s ever-present hand. (Calvin et al. 2006: 199)

It seems that in it-narratives, we can find the same theological doctrine as a justification of their narrative form. Certainly, in narratives such as Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal* and *The Adventures of a Bank Note* by Thomas Bridges, the concept appears a number of times. However, it does so almost exclusively in the discourses of the it-narrator’s owners and their interlocutors, not as a rationale for the mobility of the object itself. Apart from this, providence is curiously absent in the texts that we have hitherto examined. Yet, the fact that we do not find the word itself does not mean that the concept is not operative in another guise.

Another look back at *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* should make that clear. There is a clue pointing towards the concept of providence in the feather’s insistence on a purposefulness of its circulation. At the end of its narrative, the feather summarizes its adventures: “I am convinced every thing is so connected in life, that the great wheel

which turns the affairs of the world, brings all things for our good in the end, even to a feather” (306f.). There is no talk of providence here, neither of God nor of divine intervention, and yet, there is a “great wheel”, turning and determining the affairs of this world. Providence, it seems, is present in everything but in name. The reason for this shift of tone, I argue, can be found in the specifics of the genre and its relation to contemporary discourses of providence.

As the last chapter argued, it-narratives could not have been written without the paradigm shift that comes with the scientific revolution of the 17th century and which assigns a new authority to objects. This paradigm shift does not leave theological concepts like that of providence untouched. As the scientific revolution extends the mechanical models that it observes in interaction during experiments to the forces of nature outside the laboratory chamber, these forces lose much of their association with the divine will:

Thanks to new discoveries in physics and astronomy, natural philosophers began to look upon nature as a machine made up of inanimate bodies and particles controlled by external mechanical forces. The exclusion of spirit from the physical realm and the portrayal of the universe as a huge independent clockwork inevitably raised the question what role was left for God. (Hengstmengel 2019: 28)

The rise of experimental science gives a considerable boost to the old rival of *pronoia*, the epicurean swerve of atoms, which holds that particles move on their own and independently of the will of a higher being.¹²⁰ A world ruled by the same mechanical forces that can be isolated and understood in the laboratory chamber leaves at first glance little room for divine will. And yet, as Hengstmengel remarks: “[T]he new world-view by no means meant the disappearance of the belief in providence” (2019: 28) nor does it mean that the experimental scientists are atheists. The resulting transformation is better understood as a shift, in which the providential structure is grafted onto a new imaginary. The world is

¹²⁰ For the history of the Renaissance rediscovery of the Lucretian concept of *clinamen* and its impact in Renaissance discourses, see Greenblatt 2011.

no longer a mass of independent qualities that are subjected directly to God's plan for his creation, but instead imagined as a huge clockwork.

This imagery is found already in the first half of the 17th century, when Gerald Malynes writes of the world as a "clocke where there be many wheels, the first wheele being stirred, driveth the next, and the third, and so forth, till the last that moveth the instrument that strikes the clocke" (Malynes 1601: 95).¹²¹ The wheels in question here are parts of a sophisticated machine that presents a complex system of causation. A first turn of the wheel sets the mechanism in motion, but its effect, the striking of the clock, is produced at another site. In between lie a variable number of transmissions. Causation might be infinitely complex, but it in the end, every action but the first impulse is reducible to a set of transmissions that are in themselves understood to follow strict rules. They correspond to what theological debates conceptualize as the secondary causation of providence. This view holds that God's will remains a first cause to everything that happens within creation, but that the actual effects are brought about by human and non-human actors as secondary causes (cf. Goudriaan 2006: 143–155). The underlying worldview of a clockwork-universe means that the post-Reformation belief in radical providence can coexist with the mechanistic system that rises to dominance during the scientific revolution.

In it-narratives, the imagery of a clockwork can not only be found in obvious candidates such as *The Adventures of a Watch!*. In a discussion of this it-narrative in *The Critical Review*, a contributor reproaches the author of *The Adventures of a Hackney Coach* for "having wound up this paultry machine, [...] [that] will go for a few hours, and then be silent, we hope, for ever" ("Review of The Adventures of a Watch" 569). The reviewer, pointing perhaps to a sense of lack of verisimilitude in the story's design, understands this narrative as a clockwork animated by a wheel that turns to bring about a providential ending. In *Chrysal*, a similar image is used when the complexity of social causation is expressed in a warning: "There are *wheels* withing *wheels*" (2, 196, emphases in

121 As Hengstmengel remarks, the imagery of the clock is even older, Malynes having borrowed it from *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, a dialogue written in 1549 (cf. 2019: 11; Hales et al. 1971).

the original). Earlier, we found such a wheel at work in the quotation from *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality*, when the feather reflected upon its adventures at the end of its narrative and posited a “great wheel which turns the affairs of the world” (*Ostrich Feather* 306f.), bringing everything to a providential closure. It is clear now that the wheel in question must be pictured less like a cartwheel and more like the cogwheels that turn the gears of a sophisticated machine, as in Malynes’ quotation. It might have lost the direct association with God, but it still obeys a providential structure. Its aim remains that of a universal salvation, it “brings all things for our good in the end” (*Ostrich Feather* 307). Yet even though the mechanical worldview leaves ample room for the agency of God, he is curiously absent in this narrative that so forcefully stresses its quasi-providential ending. In the feather’s comments, the wheel itself is the agent of the providential resolution.

But while Calvin argues that animate and inanimate objects alike are subject to God’s providence, this chapter has shown how it-narrators behave as a very specific subset of objects – as commodities. Gerald Malynes, who was cited as an early champion of the new mechanistic worldview, does not contribute to theological debates but is a merchant. It is in this sense that we can understand the second quotation that precedes this book. In the quote, Smith talks of money as “the great wheel of circulation, [that] [...] in the course of [...] circulation, distribute[s] to every man the revenue which properly belongs to him” (Smith 1976: 2, 309). Adam Smith connects to the quote by the ostrich feather when he calls Money “the great wheel of circulation”. As in the case of the ostrich feather, a “great wheel” (*Ostrich Feather* 306) is imagined as the agent of order, assigning to everyone their proper ‘reward’ and thereby “bring[ing] all things for our good in the end” (ibid. 307). Thus, when examining the rationale for the narrative circulation of commodities, we will need to consider how theological debates feed into economic discourses.

3.3.5 Chiropoeia

In 1766, *The Adventures of a Bale of Goods* tells the story of how its it-narrator fails to be sold by its owner. It is remarkable for the fact

that it tells the story of an unsuccessful exchange, but also for how it explains this failure through regulations on trade. A prospective business partner complains of being “tied up [...] from purchasing any Thing English”, as French imports are being seized by the customs and enter the black market at much lower prices (cf. *Bale of Goods* 16). This short narrative points us to 18th-century discourses on the regulation of economic circulation that are not manifest in most other texts of this genre, but, as we will see, crucially inform their narrative structures.

Just as in the case of the scientific revolution, the economic discourses that come to shape the world in which it-narratives are written can be traced to the beginning of the long 18th century: As we have seen, the second half of the 17th century witnesses a commercial revolution on the British Isles, as trade becomes a *raison d'état* (cf. Brezis 2003: 485). With this development, the rules and regulations imposed on the circulation of commodities become a central topic of political debate. Accordingly, the late 17th century sees the emergence of a loosely connected system of economic thought.¹²² Mercantilism is both the name for the economic policy that emerges in this context and for the economic epoch in which it becomes dominant (cf. Magnusson 2015: 45f.).

As its name suggests, mercantilism rests on the assumption that surplus-value is created in trade (cf. Magnusson 1978: 111; Coleman 1980: 777). Thus, just like the individual, the nation state can accumulate wealth by buying cheap and selling dear. Its central concern as an economic policy is the regulation of national trade that is manifested in its central aim of achieving a positive balance of trade.¹²³ This focus on balancing trade is based on a contemporary economic phenomenon. Throughout much of the 17th century and up to the second half of the

122 The equation of mercantilism with what is today called protectionism has been contested in the last decades. Mercantilist thought certainly lacks the theoretical coherence that would be attributed to a modern economic school (cf. Magnusson 2015). Yet, one can link mercantilist policies to a set of doctrines such as the positive balance of trade and a general leaning towards the regulation of imports and exports, so that positing this equation is justified for the present purpose.

123 The metaphor of economic balance in trade, like the metaphor of the wheel discussed earlier, most likely goes back to the English merchant Gerard de Malynes, who speaks of the “overbalancing” of trade (cf. Brewer 2003: 80). Edward Misselden’s *The Circle of Commerce* (1623) is another early precursor stressing the importance of the balance of trade.

18th, England suffers from a chronic shortage of bullion, leading to serious economic problems and widespread counterfeiting (cf. Spengler 1966: 214). Bullion is thus understood as something that should by no means be allowed to leave the national economy. On the other side, imports are understood to have dangerous effects as well, particularly when they are luxury items. Given that exotic luxury items (such as the narrator in *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality*) are often imports, mercantilist thought frequently equates all imports with luxuries (cf. Bunn 1980: 315). As such, they are considered a hindrance to the economic development of a nation.¹²⁴ But the discourse that mobilizes a language of regulation against such excess does not create its vocabulary *ex-nihilo*. At the time when English overseas trade constitutes an ever-increasing share of the national revenue, William Harvey publishes *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus* (cf. Harvey 1628), a treatise on the circulation of blood. His central insight is that blood pumped out of the heart would return to it. The system Harvey describes is thus a closed circuit (cf. Weston 2013: 30).

In the following years, the medical concepts that develop from this discovery are used as metaphors for the flow of commodities (cf. Weston 2013: 24), the discovery of the circulation of blood in the human body providing a ready framework for this sort of economic thought.¹²⁵ Henry Pollexfen, an early political economist and courtier, employs such an imagery in a prominent analogy: “Trade is to the Body Politick, as Blood to the Body Natural” (1697: 108). However, just as in the human body, the flow of commodities in the political body is threatened by a lack of balance brought about by the interaction with its surroundings. If the circuit is closed, then it cannot regulate itself but

124 Luxury is seen as a general symptom of decay in a nation, and contemporary writers link the downfall of the Roman Empire with the import of Asian luxuries, foretelling a similar fate to England and later the British Empire (cf. Bunn 1980: 316f.). At this point, mercantilist discourses on the regulation of trade intersect with the anti-luxury discourses that we have touched upon earlier in the question of sumptuary ethics.

125 Magnusson also draws attention to the fact that there might be an additional explanation for the overlapping of the languages of medical and economic circulation. Economic writers such as Barbob, Locke, Petty, etc. are all trained physicians (cf. Magnusson 1978: 118).

needs outside intervention once its homeostasis¹²⁶ is endangered. John Cary, a Bristol merchant writing on trade towards the end of the century, elaborates on this thought: “For if you draw it [the blood] out faster than you can replenish, they [the patients] die” (1695: 1f.). Like the physician regulating the volume of blood in the body of the patient, the economic advisor seeks to regulate imports and exports in such a way that a ‘healthy’ homeostasis is maintained. Thus, a proto-theory of economics is born as a science of the regulation of imports and exports.

How, now, does this economic ideology relate to the questions of drive and providence that underlie the specific narratives that we deal with? The world of economics is chaotic, commodities swerving like the epicurean atoms, nations suffering from crippling shortages and surpluses gone to waste. To impose order on this chaos, mercantilism holds, the sovereign must step in and direct the flow of goods, blocking their entry at one point and facilitating their export at another. Mercantilism thus abandons the theological structure that dominates medieval thought about economics (cf. Hengstmengel 2019: 6). Unlike in theology, in economics one can no longer count on a providential plan. A medical imagery of intervention supplants the theological idea of self-regulation. Inside this imagery however, there remains a tension between the ideal balance that was set as the goal of mercantilist policies and the location of the site of the production of surplus-value in trade. Trade is thus tasked with ensuring homeostasis and expansion at the same time.

However, a dialogue in *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782) shows how these doctrines face increasing resistance. When the brother of the rupee’s owner is about to embark on a voyage for the East India Company, he is warned against the short-sightedness of “the Indian nations, who ignorant of the blessings that commerce diffuses, even to themselves, are often disposed to interrupt its equitable course” (Scott 1782: 52).¹²⁷ Trade is here no longer imagined as being in need of intervention, but as running on an “equitable course” on its own, the inter-

126 On the ‘import’ of the concept of homeostasis in economic thought, see Hou-Shun 1956.

127 Note that I am quoting from a different edition of the text here, as the relevant passage is not included in Blackwell’s anthology.

ruption of which destroy an equilibrium that is natural, not man-made. The mercantilist infatuation with regulating the balance of trade is thus replaced by a confidence in self-regulation as mercantilist protectionism is re-imagined as a decidedly primitive economic policy and projected onto the colonial other. Immanuel Wallerstein speaks of a period from 1650 to 1750, in which Britain actively implements mercantilist policies (cf. 2011: 266). They fall out of favour when policy makers start to see the colonies not only as sources for imports for the domestic market, but also as markets for exports from the imperial centre (cf. Bunn 1980: 305). Still, the process whereby the mercantilist doctrine is replaced on an ideological level is a long and often contradictory one and any attempt to pinpoint it to a specific historical date must appear arbitrary. Yet, there is a text that has achieved such notoriety that it might supply an anchor for our analysis. Interestingly, it is not an economic treatise, but a poem. The verse satire *The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves turn'd Honest* (together with a prose discussion of the poem and a short essay) forms part of Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of The Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714) (cf. Mandeville 1724). The text offers a beehive as a metaphor for the national economy. At the beginning, the beehive is shown as living a life of corruption and luxury. Through divine intervention, the bees suddenly embrace a virtuous lifestyle and practice economic frugality. But while corruption and the consumption of luxuries disappear, the beehive suffers a painful economic decline in consequence of the diminished propensity to consume. The text ends with the following couplets:

Bare Virtue can't make Nations live

In Splendor; they, that would revive

A Golden Age, must be as free,

For Acorns, as for Honesty.

(Mandeville 1724: l. 10–13)

Now famous, these couplets decouple economic thought from the moral framework in which Malynes and many before him locate it (cf.

Magnusson 2003: 52). Instead, by boosting demand, “private vices” can lead to “public benefits”. The latent assumption is that consumption of any kind (including that of luxuries) will drive the growth of the economy and thus increase the welfare of all its individuals.

Mandeville’s fable sparks controversial debates which heavily influence the economic writing that follows (cf. Hundert et al. 1994). Most prominently, the question of the status of luxury in an economy is taken up by Adam Smith. Parts of his work voice ardent critiques of previous economic thought; Smith, in fact, is the first to refer to it as the “mercantile system” (Smith 1976: 1, 450). For his critique, Smith picks up on the apology of luxury that Mandeville proposes. Far from being a sign of moral and economic decay, the consumption of luxuries, Smith holds, can help economic development, and even reduce the disparity between rich and poor (cf. Bunn 1980: 315).

Among the arguments he deploys for criticizing the mercantilist system, the metaphor of an “invisible hand” (Smith 1976: 1, 477) rises to such prominence that it is still one of the few concepts of political economy that are widely known outside the field. In the second chapter of Book IV, Smith discusses the restriction of imports, and the relationship of an individual’s desire to acquire wealth to the annual revenue of the nation:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it. (1, 477)

The “invisible hand” leads the action of economic actors and connects them to a plan that lies beyond the individual and its particular will. In

an apparent paradox, private self-interest is needed in order to bring about public benefits. While in the Anglican understanding of providence, the individual's self-examination establishes the connection between the subject's interiority and the exterior plan, in the case of the invisible hand, this is achieved by the individual's pursuit of self-interest.¹²⁸ In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759, one finds the same concept, in a slightly different context:

They [the rich] are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all means to the multiplication of the species. When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition. (Smith 2009: 215f.)

Here, the “invisible hand” features as the principle that governs the habits of consumption. This connects to a tradition in which economic theory mobilizes a providential structure to make sense of economic inequality (cf. Hengstmengel 2019: 180f.). In the very next sentence, providence is cited both as the reason for the division between rich and poor, and the reason for the alleviation of the consequences of this split. The economy is here no longer a closed circuit that is susceptible to having its balance disturbed from the outside, but a homeostatic system that follows its own regulatory mechanisms, independent of individual agency. Thus, in the tradition of Mandeville and Smith, we see a return of the providential structure into economic thought. With the emergence of classical political economy, the hand that turns Malynes' first wheel is no longer the hand of God, but the invisible hand of impersonal market relations. In the discourse of political economy, a chaotic world of fast-moving commodities is ordered, but since this order is

¹²⁸ As the providential plan is (by definition) perfect, all apparent inconsistencies have to be explained by self-examination on the part of the individual. Thereby, the individual can find the subjective flaw that occasions the inconsistency. Keith Thomas elaborates on this question: “The correct reaction on the part of a believer stricken by ill fortune was therefore to search himself in order to discover the moral defect which had provoked God's wrath, or to eliminate the complacency which had led the Almighty to try him” (1991: 96).

imposed inside language, this is an act of rhetoric, more specifically, a tropological substitution. In contrast to the trope of *prosopopoeia* that we have observed at work in the second chapter, I propose to call this the effect of *chiropoeia*¹²⁹ – the making of a hand. Whereas the substitution of the first relates to an element in the narrative, conferring subject-like features on an object, the substitution of the second is enacted on the level of narrative structure as a whole, imposing a principle of order upon an essentially contingent system.

Smith himself delivers a series of *Lecture on Rhetorics and Belles Lettres* in 1748–1750 that is only reconstructed in the 20th century. Interestingly, he approves not only of the writings of Jonathan Swift, but explicitly also of the style of Joseph Addison, author of *The Adventures of a Silver Shilling* (1709) (cf. Smith 1985: 106 and 127), thereby establishing a tentative connection to the early tradition of it-narratives outlined in the second chapter. In the further course of these lectures, he refers to rhetorical treatises on tropes as “a very silly set of books” (Smith 1985: 26 and 59) and favours “simple” (85) and “plain” (*ibid.*) styles. While not going back to a time before the Fall like Bacon, Smith still imagines an antique language to have been “so plain that the meanest person would perfectly understand the terms of art and expression” (*ibid.* 4). Smith, though not as adamant as Bacon or the fellows of the Royal Society before him, connects to the rhetorical self-denial we have traced in the second chapter.

In such an anti-rhetorical rhetoric, *chiropoeia* must necessarily be precluded if it wishes to function. Like *prosopopoeia* in the discourse of experimental science, *chiropoeia* effaces its own rhetorical character in the discourse of political economy. By examining the work of this trope in it-narratives, the last section will show how the disavowal of *chiropoeia* points to a tension in the order it promises.

129 Here, I am indebted to Robert Stockhammer, who suggested the word in another context.

3.3.6 Sense(s) of an Ending

Examining the ways in which the disconnected episodes are given a final meaning in it-narratives, we have located the work of *chirotopoeia* as the secularization of the theological concept of divine providence in the theory of political economy. I have already pointed out the quasi-providential structure that frames the narrative of *The Adventures of an Ostrich-Feather*. But this text is by far not the only one in which *chirotopoeia* affects the circulation of a commodity in a way that provides a fortunate closure of the narrative. In *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, for instance, a thistle is miraculously transformed into a flax plant and thus becomes the quire of paper. A peculiarity of this narrative is the fact that the different sheets of paper are used for different purposes and tell the stories of their owners quasi-simultaneously. Being thus scattered, the paper wishes for the reunification of its original parts. At the end of the narrative, the perspective of a reunification is retained against all odds, as the paper narrowly escapes being used for the printing of a book that would separate it forever from the rest of its fragments. The it-narrator comments on this fortunate coincidence:

Luckily for me however, in the hurry of business, I was mislaid and other paper of my quality used instead. To complete my satisfaction too, I was found just as some paper of *my* kind was required, on which to print the very sermon that you hold in your hand. It only remains for me to tell you, that I foresee my sufferings will shortly be ended, and my remaining parts happily united. (*Quire* 39, emphases in the original)

Here, again, it is a sudden stroke of fate that re-integrates the narrative into a providential framework by supplying a *telos*. Providence is supplemented by the language of the Christian Passion, as the initial wish for the transformation into flax and the subsequent fragmentation of the it-narrator's body is figured as the lapsarian loss of identity that can only be redeemed by the eschatological perspective of a re-unification. The plant suffers fragmentation as a result of a fateful wish to be transformed into flax and subsequently paper, but experiences the providential return of all of its parts in the end. On the last pages of the story, the

religious vocabulary that the narrator uses to express the violence that its body suffers and to make sense of this journey is made explicit, as the quire of paper is acquired by a printer and used to print a sermon.

Likewise, we can find the *chiropoeia* at work when the it-narrator of Eliza Andrews' *The History of a Pin* (1798) is returned to the owners to whom "fate" (*Pin* 215) has first given it, and who serve as the antipode to all the vices that its narration exposes:

[A]fter the vicissitudes of my existence, I was fortunate enough to find myself once again with my first friends, from whom I had learnt those precepts, that made me ever after detest vice, and venerate virtue; and I had seen enough of the world to convince me, that man's best interest, as well as happiness, depends upon a strict and due observance of the latter. (*Pin* 230)

A considerable number of it-narratives end their story on similar terms. The narrator of Charlotte Palmer's *The Silver Thimble* (1799), for example, "ha[s] the good fortune to be restored again to the possession of Miss Steady" (*Silver Thimble* 252). Palmer's it-narrator connects to the providential framework in a return to an owner whose telling name promises constancy in a world ruled by contingency. Amongst others, we also find the work of *chiropoeia* in *The History and Adventures of a Lady's Slippers and Shoes* (1754) (cf. *Slippers* 78) and *The Adventures of a Watch!* (1788) (cf. *Watch* 161), as well as in Edward Thompson's *Indusiata: or, The Adventures of a Silk Petticoat* (1773) (cf. *Indusiata* 179). What unites these narratives is the fact that a sense of a providential or natural closure of circulation is achieved at the end of the story. In this, they are homologous to the picaresque structure exhibited in Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random*. The circularity and openness of the episodes Ortiz-Taylor demonstrates is reframed as the providential ending is grafted onto an otherwise fragmentary and non-totalized narrative.

Yet, there are some very notable exceptions to this sort of ending. The first it-narrative, Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy*, provides very little in terms of a closure. The story is a loose connection of episodes that are told by coins from different countries who occasionally digress and engage in discussions amongst each other. During one such dis-

cussion, the frame-narrator cuts short their debate and implies he will soon return to the coin's stories (cf. *Golden Spy* 304); the text, however, ends at this point.

Joseph Addison's *The Silver Shilling* gives a similar promise at the end of its story: "The second adventure, which I must not omit, happened to me in the year 1703, when I was given away in charity to a blind man; but indeed this was by a mistake, the person who gave me having heedlessly thrown me into the hat among a pennyworth of farthings" (*Silver Shilling* 213). This is the last sentence of the text. The promised story will never follow. A similar ending is found in Thomas Bridges' *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*. The fourth volume of the book ends with the narrator's promise to tell several stories that it announces for the upcoming fifth and sixth volume (cf. *Bank-Note* 4, 204). Yet the work ends here. No further volumes will be published. The narrator seems to be aware of this being a genre convention when it remarks at the very beginning of the narrative: "My last dying speech I fear I shall have scarce time to make, as all my predecessors have gone off suddenly" (ibid. 1, 2).

There is even less formal closure to be found in *The Adventures of a Sovereign*, a text that is published in a number of instalments in the *Lady's Monthly Review* from 1820 to 1822. These instalments usually close with the end of a narrative episode and so does the last. However, there is no intradiegetic clue as to the closure of the narrative; the only thing that sets apart the last instalment from all others is that the line 'to be continued', inserted after the main text, is missing (cf. Anonymous 1822: 76).¹³⁰ The ending is thus not signalled in the story, but only by paratextual means and negatively at that, that is, only by omitting the suggestion that it will be continued.

This discrepancy between the drive to infinite circulation in the textual body and its extra-textual demarcations is radicalized in Peregrine Oakley's *Aureus, or, The Life and Opinions of A Sovereign* (1824). Here, an ending, albeit a very abrupt one, is suggested: The last chapter is written from the perspective of the editor (who shares the name of the real author), as he recounts the story of the manuscript of the coin's tale

130 As in the case of the *Rupee* above, I am quoting not from Blackwell's edition, but from the original, as the crucial passage is omitted.

that was entrusted to him. The coin, he says, was lost at sea and “has met with a fate tantamount to dissolution, from which even a metallic *Sovereign* is not exempt” (*Aureus* 438, emphasis in the original). This ending, however sudden, seems to promise a closure. Yet, just below the last sentences of the narrative, a post-script is inserted:

* An indistinct rumour¹³¹ has been lately circulated, respecting a visit, in a diving-bell, to that part of the ocean in which the *Sovereign* was submerged. If this account be authenticated, the result will be regularly announced to the literary public. (*Aureus* 438)

With this paratext, the fragmentary character of the episodes that is apparently enclosed by the ending on the narrative is forced open once again. The reason for the potential infinity of circulation is given self-referentially. It is circulation itself that is to blame – that of a rumour.

When trying to make sense of this, Frank Kermode’s analysis of narrative closure in *The Sense of an Ending* provides a useful framework. In this seminal work, Kermode develops a comprehensive study of narratives of the end. One of the central distinctions that he puts forward is that between two different modes of temporality: *chronos* (χρόνος) and *kairos* (καιρός). He draws on the theological readings of these Greek concepts in Oscar Cullman’s *Christ and Time* (1959) (cf. Cullmann 2018) and John Marsh’s *The Fullness of Time* (1952) (cf. Marsh 1952). In this theological framework, *chronos* becomes the “passing time” (Kermode 2000: 44) that elapses in wait, while *kairos* refers to the temporality of a moment that is filled with meaning derived from its relation to the (eschatological) end. (cf. *ibid.*)¹³² Following Kermode, one could say that the divine plot, the plot of providence, is a pattern of *kairoi* that relate to the end. *Kairos* can then be understood as closer to a concept of a “critical” (i.e. qualitative) (Kermode 2000: 48) time, as opposed to *chronos* as quantitative time (cf. *ibid.*).

131 For a phenomenology of rumour and its theories of circulation see Mladen Dolar’s forthcoming work *On Rumor*.

132 Looking for a contemporary reading of *kairos*, one could connect it to the temporality of what Alain Badiou conceptualizes as the event (cf. Badiou 2007).

In Kermode's work, this argument follows the idea of John Marsh that neither the Hebrew of the Old Testament nor Ancient Greek know such a distinction. Whereas the Old Testament lacks a distinction of these concepts, the New Testament introduces an emphatic idea of *kairos*. The acts of Christ are not set in the temporality of the "passing time", but connected to the providential framework, thereby both dividing and connecting past and present and retroactively giving new meaning to the Old Testament. Even though this distinction has been contested since, and Kermode himself is right to warn against an all too easy opposition between Christian rectilinearity and Greek (and Hebrew) cyclicism (cf. Kermode 2000: 49), I follow him in the assertion that we can find analytic value in such a distinction. When talking about literature:

we can use this kind of language to distinguish between what we feel is happening in a fiction when mere successiveness, which we feel to be the chief characteristic in the ordinary going-on of time, is purged by the establishment of a significant relation between the moment and a remote origin and end, a concord of past, present, and future [...]. Normally we associate 'reality' with chronos, and a fiction which entirely ignored this association we might think unserious or silly or mad [...]. Yet in every plot there is an escape from chronicity, and so, in some measure, a deviation from this norm of 'reality'. (Kermode 2000: 50)

In the textual realm, this distinction is found between the antipodes of the chronicle, enumerating events as they happen in "passing time" (ibid. 44) with no overarching structure of meaning, and the pure plot, in which the overabundance of signification which is produced leads to an 'unrealistic' timelessness, the highly stylized novel (Kermode gives *Tom Jones* as an example) being an instance of the latter. This distinction is central for understanding the tension at work in the texts we deal with here. Picaresque works such as *Roderick Random* and it-narratives, such as the examples given at the beginning of this section, are characterized by a very specific constellation of these rivalling temporalities. The "passing time" (ibid.) of the contingent episodes that are enumerated without an apparent plot to structure them, are given meaning in

a moment of *kairos*, which reframes all preceding episodes as parts of a providential plot. As we have seen, the providential structure manifest in the picaresque is secularized in it-narratives.

But how shall we make sense of what happens in the texts told by the money-narrators above? In these narratives, the openness of the episodes is not reined in by *chiropoeia*, there is no final return as in *Roderick Random* or *Tom Jones* (cf. Blackwell 2012: xliii). Instead, the fragmentary character of the episodes is either left unchecked, or it is redoubled on the level of the relationship between text and paratext, thereby putting an emphasis on the lack of closure. Examining the ways in which such narratives end, we have found that they either lack the framing moment of *kairos* altogether, or that they evoke it only in order to pry their narratives open again – as in the case of *Aureus*. In these cases, the work of organization that *kairos* performs, the division of that which simply passes into a past and a future, is suspended (cf. Kermode 2000: 46). What are we left with if a narrative lacks such a division?

Ultimately, the aesthetic effect that this structuring evokes is that of the potential infinity of *chronos*, understood as “passing time” (Kermode 2000: 44). Kermode writes that *kairos*, through the introduction of plot, “humanizes time by giving it form” (2000: 45). He cites the ticking of a clock as an example. We humanize it by imposing a structural frame to the ticking, that is, by dividing it into meaningful minimal pairs of ‘tick’ and ‘tock’, the first signifying a beginning and the second an ending. We thus make sense of a process that in itself would be formless chronicity (Kermode 2000: 45f.).¹³³ The time of those narratives is not the time of human actors, but the time of the economy, a non-human time that is essentially devoid of meaning.

Before interest in it-narratives rises in the middle of the century, such a movement is prefigured in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Although his father strongly urges against it, Robinson, providing a blueprint for the unlucky Traffic in *Chrysal*, dismisses the “middle state” (RC 6) in life that his economic background suggests for him and sets

133 For understanding the absence of meaning in unorganized intervals, Kermode cites research showing that people are able to grasp the time interval between the ‘tick’ and the ‘tock’, but not the interval between these pairs, the interval between the ‘tock’ and the ‘tick’ (cf. 2000: 45).

out to make his fortune through trade, finally leading to his shipwreck. But even after he is restored to safety and acquires considerable wealth, this drive urges him out to set out time and again. This is accentuated when we expand the horizon of Robinson's story from the first book to the two works that complete Defoe's trilogy: *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and the *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe* (1720). At the beginning of the former, we meet a middle-aged Robinson, along with his wife and kids, financially settled and certainly not in need of further (ad)ventures:

I had no fortune to make; I had nothing to seek: if I had gained ten thousand pounds I had been no richer; for I had already sufficient for me, and for those I had to leave it to; and what I had was visibly increasing; for, having no great family, I could not spend the income of what I had [...] so that I had nothing, indeed, to do but to sit still, and fully enjoy what I had got, and see it increase daily upon my hands. (FA 2)

Yet, he is still plagued by his wandering inclination, haunting him “like a chronic distemper” (ibid.). This insistence grows to a level where he has “no enjoyment of [his] life, no pleasant hours, no agreeable diversion but what had something or other of this in it” (FA 7). It becomes clear that Crusoe cannot escape his “wandering thoughts”, they break “violently into all [his] discourses” (FA 2). It is a foreign speech that invades or infests his own language and seems to come from a point in the self that is not identical with this self. Jacques Lacan proposes the dictum *ça parle* (‘it speaks’) for such a phenomenon (cf. 1997: 244). In Crusoe's case, this foreign language creeps in most easily when the guards of his consciousness are down, he “talk[s] of it in [his] sleep” (FA 2). It is not difficult to discern the signs of the drive in Robinson's involuntary obsession with going out to sea again.

Thus, Robinson, too, is plagued by the drive that we found earlier in *Roxana* and *Roderick Random* and that connects to the non-human time of *chronos* via the potentially endless accumulation of episodes. In the work of Jean-Claude Milner and Samo Tomšič, this insistence of the drive can be understood as following from a parasitism of the infinite on the finite (cf. Milner 2017a: 67; Tomšič 2019: 183). Subjects are suffe-

ring from “the constant demand for infinite satisfaction” (Tomšič 2019: 184), clashing against the finitude of the body that imposes a ‘natural’ end to it. Human finitude is plotted against the non-human infinity of the drive. Yet, Robinson’s travels are brought to an end: On the last pages of the *Further Adventures*, he returns to Europe from the Far East and embarks on a ship to England from a city in the north of what is today Germany, thereby repeating the voyage of his ancestor from Bremen to Hull. The *Serious Reflections* firmly establish this closure. Here, the narrator is undisturbed by his former “rambling thoughts” (RC 5) and instead reflects upon several theological questions prominently featuring the concept of divine providence (*Serious Reflections* 204–238). The addendum to the *Serious Reflections*, *A Vision of the Angelick World*, at first bears no apparent relationship to the prequels, yet by connecting to Jeffrey Hopes’ thoughts on the concept of providence (cf. Hopes 1996: 324), we can recognize Defoe’s theology as an implicit poetology. The circular structure of the *Robinson Crusoe* books is ultimately transposed onto an eschatological horizon, which re-establishes the temporality of *kairos*.

Hence, in *Robinson Crusoe*, as in *Roderick Random*, we can observe the circular structure that Ortiz-Taylor proposes for the picaresque – the protagonists are returned to an ‘organic’ social or religious community in the end.¹³⁴ On the way to this closure, however, we find the protagonists assuming curiously thing-like traits. This happens not only, as we have seen, through the non-human insistence of the drive in the subjects, but also on a more literal level. We recall that Roderick – like Robinson – awakes on the beach. For him, however, it is a voyage back home – he recovers his senses not on a deserted island but on the shores of Sussex. In this, he prefigures the voyages of many it-narrators, who are often colonial commodities on their ways from the peripheries to the centre. The beach where he first reaches British soil again is not only indicative of a figurative rebirth that ushers in a new episode in the picaresque narrative but also a space where the ‘thingness’ of Roderick is brought to the fore. When he regains consciousness on the beach, he

¹³⁴ For a closer look at the *Crusoe* trilogy, *Roderick Random*, and their relation to it-narratives, cf. Stevanović 2021.

resembles flotsam that is washed ashore by the sea, waiting to be picked up by someone who would pass by.

Tobias Döring proposes a theory of the beachcomber as a poetic figure of postcolonial literature (cf. Döring 2015), but it is a character that is also a suitable metaphor for the eclectic accumulation of generic traditions that shapes it-narratives and picaresques alike. We encounter such a beachcomber in the figure of the old man who finds Roderick after his shipwreck and duel. Roderick, who embodies a multiplicity of miscellaneous episodes and occupations, the “literary flotsam” (Döring 2015: 116) of the picaresque tradition, is rescued – or rather salvaged – when he is picked up not far from where he recovers his senses. Even at a distance from the shores, the imagery of the beach is kept up in this scene, as the old man is said to “crawl[...] backwards like a crab” (RC 213) when startled by Roderick. Much like the various items that beachcombers find left behind by tides and waves, and the various items Crusoe encounters washed ashore on his beach after he is shipwrecked, he is carried away. At the end of the episode, Roderick is not only taken for dead but treated like an object and carried off in a wheelbarrow.

In the same vein, we can now reread another central passage in *Roderick Random*. The dream of the protagonist’s mother at the beginning of the narrative is not only a figure for his later providential return, but a scene in which Roderick is imagined as an object: the “tennis-ball” (RR 1). Scenes like these stress thing-like qualities in the protagonists, foregrounding their passivity and a lack of agency in their stumbling from one episode to the next.¹³⁵

The circular movement of Roderick is not directly connected to the world of economy, at least in its explicit imagery. The imagery for his circulation as an object is provided by waste (in the scene of him being carried off and unloaded for others to pick him up) and play (in his likening to a tennis-ball). Thus, these images are taken from fields that are conventionally considered to form exceptions to the omnipresence of

135 As we have seen in this chapter, even the mobility of picaros/as, while suggesting a sense of agency at first, is quickly shown to stem from a space in which the subject does not experience itself as autonomous – the non-human space of the drive. They relate to their “rambling thoughts” (RC 5) as something coming from the outside and being done to them.

the economic. Nevertheless, it is present implicitly, as Roderick is on a quest to accumulate enough capital to establish himself as a gentleman and thus be able to marry Narcissa.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, on the other hand, the connection to the world of commerce is explicit. We have seen earlier that Robinson, like many of the circulating commodities of it-narratives, is plagued by a “wonderful inclination to ramble” (*Silver Shilling* 211), his “rambling thoughts” (RC 5). Unlike the silver shilling, he is undoubtedly a human narrator, yet his humanity is already tainted by the non-human. His last name is a butchered version of the German name “Kreutznaer”, resulting from “the usual Corruption of Words in England” (RC 5). It evokes not only the Christian cross, the *Kreuz*, but also the low-denomination coin that derives its name from it, the *Kreuzer*.¹³⁶ Like Roderick, Robinson is associated with the non-human from the first pages on, but unlike him, it is a very specific commodity that he is likened to. Like the coins of later narratives, he sets out to “circulat[e] with the Sun about the World” (*Golden Spy* 7), compelled by the drive to accumulation. Once the publication and commercial success of Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal* contributes to the proliferation of it-narratives, young Traffic does the same. Here, however, the narrator is not a human subject but a literal coin. In the progress from Kreutznaer to *Chrysal*, the imagery of the non-human space of infinite circulation is literalized by turning a subject into a commodity.

With this transition, the temporality of *kairos* is traded for that of *chronos*. This process, however, is never complete. Pure *chronos* would be entirely purged of narrative as such, approaching essentially non-literary enumeration. While we do encounter traces of such non-human time, for example in the quotation from *The Adventures of a Bank Note* at the beginning of this chapter, it-narratives, after all, are literary texts. When they evoke pure *chronos*, they always do so within the bounds of their form. It is precisely in this opposition between their narrative form and the non-narrative chronicity that they touch upon the contradiction that is at the centre of economic thought in the long 18th century.

136 I am indebted to Alexander Regier for this observation.

While we have already touched upon this deadlock in the mercantilist language of homeostasis and surplus, we have to trace the roots of this tension further back. Early Greek writing distinguishes two aspects of what today is referred to as economy. Aristotle talks of *oikonomia* (οικονομία) and *chrematistike* (χρηματιστική) (cf. *Politics* I.9.1257a-1258a; Dierksmeier and Pirson 2009). On the one hand, the word economy itself derives from the ancient Greek *oikos*, referring to the household and to *oikonomia*, as to the knowledge of the management of the household (cf. Baloglou 2000: 87). It corresponds to the idea of a closed economic circuit, its aim being the optimal way of allocating scarce resources in a given situation. *Chrematistike*, on the other hand, refers to economic action insofar as it is concerned with the increase of one's wealth. It corresponds to the idea of an open circuit and to the constant drive forward of accumulation. While *oikonomia* deals with concrete goods, *chrematistike* addresses a dynamic of abstract accumulation that arises only once money is introduced. (cf. *Politics* I.9.1257a-1258a). This dynamic is "turning all wealth that escapes its natural place, the *oikos*, into 'progressive' value, money that is forever burgeoning and growing" (Alliez 1996: 7).

Robinson and Roderick, who only partially belong to the new world of commerce, are brought back into the space of *oikos*. Commodity-narrators (be they a feather, a pair of slippers, or a quire of paper) can also be confined to the space of *oikos*. Their material body, as the repository of their use-value, connects them to the realm of physical value and closed circuits. In contrast to Defoe's and Smollett's protagonists, their providential return is firmly secularized by means of the trope of *chiropoieia* that imposes a final and beneficial order to all economic exchanges. Their closed circularities evoke the temporality of *kairos*, the quasi-providential closure of the narrative that reframes the openness of its episodes and brings them to a meaningful end.

Those narrators that represent money, on the other hand, lack such grounding in their material use. As we have seen, their use-value collapses into their exchange-value, as they are only useful for what they can be exchanged for. This peculiar configuration transcends the boundaries of *oikos*, and ushers in the space of *chrematistike*, the space of potentially infinite accumulation. They externalize the conflicting

dimension of drive, from which human protagonists, such as Robinson, Roderick, or Traffic, suffer. If it is a characteristic of adventure literature that contingency collapses into providence (cf. von Koppenfels and Mühlbacher 2020: 8), then the adventures of money resist this type of closure. Consequently, their temporality remains that of bare *chronos*, the providential structure is torn open at the end and the narrative suggests an open circuit of infinite episodic accumulation. In the economic thought of the long 18th century, these two are fused in a contradictory unity. This unity is responsible for the contradictory position that trade occupies in mercantilist discourse, as the realm of both balance and constant surplus, as well as for the rhetorical force that political economy needs to mobilize in order to suggest the natural homeostasis secured by the invisible hand. My wager is that by grafting their narrative structure onto the circulation of commodities, it-narratives offer a central ground on which this contradiction is negotiated in the social imaginary of 18th-century Britain.

Finally, we have thus seen that the genre of it-narratives neither observes a clean cut between *oikonomia* and *chrematistike*, nor fuses them together in the sense that contemporary economic theory does. Instead, the lines across which the division cuts remain visible in the tendency of commodity-narrators to observe it and those of money-narrators to break it. The problem of the contradiction between *oikonomia* and *chrematistike* that is raised on the level of content in other 18th-century texts such as in *Robinson Crusoe*, where the protagonist's misadventures are attributed to his dissatisfaction with the stability of the "middle state" (RC 6), it-narratives negotiate on the level of their form. Texts such as *The Adventures of a Shilling*, *The Adventures of a Sovereign*, *The Adventures of a Bank-Note*, and *Aureus* dramatize the conflict between the finitude of literary form and the infinity of the accumulative drive of *chrematistike* by portraying the failures of *chiropoeia* to achieve closure. They are thereby reflective of a cultural moment in which concepts on the circulation of commodities are constantly under question, resulting in the conflictive transitions from sumptuary laws to sumptuary ethics and from protectionist mercantilism to liberal political economy. But they also reflect these discussions back to the reading public, who, in the tales of providentially

returned feathers and forever circulating coins, can find images for the living contradictions of their own economic reality – a reality that is transforming with increasing speed towards the end of the 18th century.

4 Counterfeit and Counterfact

4.1 Coin and King

The second part of this book closed on the problem of closure in it-narratives. The endless drive to the accumulation of episodes was shown to clash with the finitude of the textual form. At the same time, some it-narratives seem to suggest a rather surprising ending to their story. Consider, for example, the following passage:

This morning a parish girl picked me up, and carried me with raptures to the next baker's shop to purchase a roll. The master examined me with great attention, and then, gruffly threatening her with Bridewell for putting off bad-money, knocked a nail through my middle, and fastened me to the counter. (*Halfpenny* 6)

This excerpt is the ending of *The Adventures of a Halfpenny* (1753) and comes from a surprisingly large group of it-narrators who tend to suffer the same fate. Addison's shilling tells of counterfeit coins being "punched through the belly" (212), the narrator of *The Adventures of a Farthing* (1740), after being made to resemble a sixpence, is discovered and "therefore fastened [...] to the top of the counter, as a bad sixpence" (350), where the protagonist of *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland* (1805–1806) joins it some decades later (cf. 137). These narrators reflect the common practice of shopkeepers to display detected counterfeit coins as a warning where they would be seen by prospective customers. Such stories of counterfeits range across all denominations but are united in that they seem to undermine precisely those suppositions that we have found to distinguish the narrators of their genre, that is, that they circulate freely and report truthfully. Their circulation is not suspended on grounds of their value, as the preceding chapter has shown in the threats that these coins face by misers, but precisely because of their (perceived) lack thereof.

Passages such as the excerpt from the *Halfpenny*, in which the circulation of it-narrators is threatened by their discovery as counterfeit, will allow us to put the observations of the preceding chapters in a new

perspective by combining the problems of reliability and circulation in the question of (monetary) validity. For this, we will have to take a detour for illuminating the historical context of the question of counterfeit money.

In order to approach the narrative implications of the relationship of counterfeit and legal tender in it-narratives, we must first turn attention to the specific objects that coins such as the narrator of the *Halfpenny* represent. We recall that by being coins, these it-narrators cannot claim the self-identity of an object. Unlike objects who can purport to stand outside of potentially deceitful human language, a coin is stamped by its marks. Coins are media onto which something else is impressed. In this case, the image of the king.

On the first pages of the text quoted at the beginning, the *Halfpenny*, a human frame-narrator relates how he finds a coin, which “seemed once to have borne the profile of King William” (4). The coin in question is thus a shilling such as the narrator in Joseph Addison’s tale from 1710. However, on this coin, the image is “now scarcely visible, as it [the coin] was very much battered, and besides other marks of ill usage, had a hole thro’ the middle” (ibid.).

Coin-narrators frequently draw attention to the implication that emerges from this imagery. Addison’s shilling starts its story in Elizabethan England, being stamped with “the face of queen Elizabeth on one side, and the arms of the country on the other” (210). However, later in its story, it informs the reader of its “change of sex”: At the end of the 17th century, it is recoined to bear the image of William III. Such play on the identity of monarch and coin is found across a large number of narratives. The narrator of *Argentum* (1794) gives its full title as “George the Third, King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, Duke of Brunswick and Lunenburgh, Arch-Treasurer and Elector of the holy Roman Empire” (116), alluding to the translation of the Latin abbreviation stamped on the coin.¹³⁷ Other texts suggest this identity between coin and king in their choice of narrators. The narrator in *Argal; or, the Silver Devil* (1794) for instance, is a crown, a coin that embodies this association with the king in the metonymic

137 That is, M·B·F·ET H·REX·F·D·B ET·L·D·S·R·I A·T·ET·E.

connection through the regal headpiece. The narrator in *Adventures of a Six-and-Nine-Pence* (1774), on the other hand, is “decorated with the most faithful name of John, King of Portugal” (9). The tale is told from the perspective of a Portuguese coin that is used widely in the colonies, but frequently finds its way to the centres of the imperial powers as well and is colloquially referred to as a ‘Joe’ (cf. Smoak 2017: 472). This coin establishes the link between the monarch and the currency through the individual name of the king.

Nowhere, however, is this connection foregrounded to the degree of *The Adventures of a Sovereign* (1819–1822) and *Aureus; or, The Life and Opinions of a Sovereign* (1824). When the coin in *Aureus* addresses the human frame-narrator with “Favoured mortal, I am thy sovereign” (5), it plays on a common double meaning, possible when the minting of a gold coin of the same name in 1489 and again in 1817 makes explicit the identity of coin and king that the monarch’s likeness on the currency suggests. The coin-narrator makes ample use of the coexistence of these referents, relating how it came “in contact with a fellow Sovereign, not indeed of [its] own species, but clothed with humanity” (*Aureus* 369). Listening to its “beloved Sovereign in the unrestrained intercourse of a polite gentleman” (ibid. 357f.), the it-narrator comments on the flesh-and-blood sovereign, “[s]uddenly changing the discourse as he is wont to do” (ibid. 369). The reader is thereby invited to connect the comment to the it-narrator, whose sudden changes of topic they have witnessed throughout the highly episodic narrative. Yet while some narrators make this link more explicit than others, all coin-narrators evoke it in one way or another by virtue of the image of the king. To understand the significance of this connection for it-narratives, I must first shed some light on the historical situation in which this link is embedded, and show how it opens up to relationships that run much deeper than a mere play on words.

English coins bear the images of kings since the reign of Athelstan in the 10th century. Since then, the making of money is seen as central to community-building. When government levies taxes, pays soldiers, and hires suppliers, “coin [is] the vehicle that [carries] value from the individual to the king and back” (Desan 2014: 78). In the words of Bartholomew of Lucca, an Italian historiographer of the Late Middle Ages:

“Nothing pertaining to the king [...] is so much handled by men as the coin” (Bisson 1979: 1). In 1605, the Privy Council declares that the right to mint “inheres in the bones of princes” (Desan 2014: 170). In other words: The Sovereign is (s)he who has the right to mint. At some point in the 10th century, the traveling of the early Anglo-Saxon kings, who are constantly on the move throughout their territory to keep up relations with their subjects, is replaced by the circulation of their images on coins (cf. Desan 2014: 42). The physical presence of the king that served to uphold the bond of feudalism is replaced by the social link between the subjects enacted as their exchanges are mediated by the image of the king on the royal money.

On the most basic level, the concept of a social link refers to the constitution of a body politic that governs the relationship of parts to wholes in any given social formation (cf. Santner 2011: 34). The constitution of this body politic through the institution of kingship is the central focus of Ernst Kantorowicz’s seminal study *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957). Kantorowicz famously theorizes the conceptual split between the flesh-and-blood king and his role as divinely appointed monarch. We find this split explored prominently by Shakespeare, not only in *Richard II*, which Kantorowicz himself uses to flesh out his observations, but also in *Hamlet*, when the Danish prince tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body.

The King is a thing –

(IV.2.24–9)

This passage, which has long troubled commentators, can be read as referring to the doctrine of the king’s two bodies (cf. Johnson 1967: 434). The natural body is necessarily joined to the body politic of the king, but this body politic is not always (e.g., after death) ‘with’ the natural body (cf. *ibid.*). This split is redoubled in the split between the king and his image on the coin. With the introduction of the royal coinage, Kantorowicz elaborates an analogy between Christ, as whose “vicar” (1957: 162) the king serves, and the *fiscus*, as the public finances that “touch[...] all” (*ibid.* 190). In this sense, we can read Hamlet’s second

line as not only referring to the fact that kingship is an institution (cf. Johnson 1967: 434) but also to the fact that it is expressed in a literal thing: the royal coin. Santner summarizes the process whereby the king feudal and the king fiscal are split:

Kantorowicz thus discovered [...] that if the king was to function as the general equivalent of subjects in his realm – and thereby help to sustain the realm in its symbolic efficiency as a locus of subject-formation – his being had to undergo, as if by some necessity in the logic of symbolic authority, a kind of doubling or “gemination” resulting in the production of the abstract physiological fiction, of a sublime quasi-angelic body (2011: 35)

In this sense, the abstraction that is produced is a representation of the king that circulates where his body remains stationary. In the absence of the flesh-and-blood king, it is the circulation of his image on the means of exchange that engenders the bond between his subjects.

The idea of such a bond, implied by the quote from Bartholomew of Lucca, is found again in the concept of the “social link” (Santner 2011: 81), taken from the framework of Lacan’s structural psychoanalysis. In every symbolic order that subjectivizes individuals, a master signifier determines the direction of this subjectification. It provides the structure for how signifiers in the symbolic order relate to each other, by acting as the anchor for all signifying operations. In the words of Lacan: “Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier. It’s the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated” (1993: 268). In the symbolic order of feudalism, the king takes on the role of such a master signifier, governing the production of meaning in signification and the vectors along which subjectivation takes place. In short: the concept of the king holds together the social order that is feudalism. Thus, when it is no longer the early feudal king that circulates amongst his subjects but the royal coins that are issued, the representation of the king on the money comes to provide this “point of convergence”.

Elaborating on Kantorowicz’s idea of the split between the king feudal and the king fiscal, we find that the sovereign is not only represented

on a coin, but – as many it-narrators playfully suggest – identical with it. Far from being politically neutral, the right to stamp one’s likeness on a coin is a central tool in securing the legitimacy of a ruler (cf. Lander 2002: 141). In the case of the sovereign, the coin becomes a powerful piece of propaganda. When Henry VII ascends the throne after dispatching Richard III, the introduction of the sovereign confirms both the identity of king and coin *and* Henry VII as the legitimate ruler (cf. Lander 2002: 141). But, as the following passage from an *The Adventures of a Sovereign* shows, this identity is a double-edged sword:

This piece of money is a fit emblem of those whose name it bears; brilliant and beautiful when it first came into use, but now, though so short a time has elapsed, its lustre is already gone. And how often has this been the case with human sovereigns! When they first assumed the regal power in the morning of life, while their hearts were still susceptible of the softer feelings, they have dazzled us with the practice of virtues, which have shed a brighter lustre around them than all the pageantry of crowns and sceptres could bestow. But, alas! how speedily has this lustre been tarnished by ambition, avarice, or lust! (243)

This excerpt in which the narrator talks about the deeply unpopular George IV, demonstrates how it-narratives can reverse the ideological function of the king’s image on the coin, showing the sovereign losing the lustre of his appearance in the same way a coin does. Exploiting the satiric potential of the identity of king and coin, it-narrators make ample use of the overlap between the semantic domains of kingship and coinage. The underlying innuendo can be used to invoke a comical physicality. The narrator of *Aureus*, for instance, laments how the frequent use of coins is “grinding [their] very noses off [their] faces” (12), calling back to a historical pun. When Henry VII’s successor Henry VIII mints copper coins that are only coated with a thin layer of silver that first wears off around parts of the royal portrait, this earns him the title of “old coppernote” (Howes 2020). The connection between coin and king is established for better or worse, and its ideological effect depends on the political coordinates of whoever decides to invoke it.

Jumping forward to the 18th century,¹³⁸ we find a political situation which is not unlike that of the reign of Henry VII, in which the new monarch must legitimize his rule. The claims of the Stuart pretenders mean that the place of sovereignty is continuously contested. In this situation, the king's image on the means of exchange lays claims to the rightfulness of a dynastic succession. George II circulates on coin even as a flesh-and-blood counterfeit king is traversing the British countryside in the Jacobite campaign of 1745–1746. Here, detecting counterfeit becomes a central skill for distinguishing between true sovereignty and a “damned crown which won't pass” (*Argal* 29). The obsession of many it-narratives with questions of validity thus connects to a widespread uneasiness about monetary matters in the 18th century that is intricately linked with questions of sovereignty.¹³⁹

It is now clear how the homophonic double meaning of a coin's heads and tails/tales provides it-narrators with opportunities for exploring the relationship of money and sovereignty in their stories. But as we have seen in the third chapter, the world of it-narratives shows the decreasing efficacy of the institutional remains of the feudal order. The narrator in *Chrysal* relates an episode that is emblematic of this shift. The guinea becomes the possession of an upstart, “sprung from the dregs of people” (3, 134). Having acquired wealth and now looking to solidify his new position, he attempts to obtain a coat of arms that would suggest nobility. The herald he pays for designing this coat of arms

138 In the period between the reign of Henry VII and George II, between the end of the 15th century and the middle of the 18th, another important change takes place. Henry VIII's successor Edward is the last to mint a full faced coin, the subsequent portraits of the monarchs all face to the side (cf. Pinkerton 1789: 71). This change from frontal to profile portrait involves an important trade-off: The king can personalize his image by including more features, but only by halving it. The profile coin presents the king as an object to be worshipped, a feature, Jesse Lander points out, that carries special attractions for a sovereign plagued by pretenders (cf. 2002: 141f.). The king could thereby be represented not as the abstraction of a divine office, but as a concrete individual. The head shown in profile is the head of an existing person.

139 Schaffer summarizes the findings of Robert Iliffe on this topic: “Such linkages between the economies of signs and of commodities had a political and theological implication: Jacobite nonjurors accused their enemies of belief in a convenient fiction – that the former king had been legitimately replaced by William of Orange through God's will. Conversely, William's supporters accused the nonjurors of idolatry, a Popish faith in outdated signs and fetishes” (Schaffer 2014: 37; cf. Iliffe 1999: 97–119).

assures him that the “King makes lord and knights of whom he pleases, but the herald must make them gentleman” (*Chrysal* 3, 150), suggesting that his services as a private contractor are crucial for solidifying a new social position. The subject does not rely on the king alone for its rise in social ranks but is now able to actively purchase a new position, or, at the very least, its appearance.

Thomas Bridges’ bank note makes another prominent case for this shift. It starts with an episode similar to that in *Chrysal*, in which a poet acquires unexpected wealth and wishes to improve his social standing. Pondering on how to best invest his capital to this aim, he receives sudden inspiration:

Go [...] to the Bank; give them twenty pounds for a bank-note, payable to Timothy Taggrhime, Esq. After the Bank has dubb’d you an esquire, no man will dare say a word against it; you may then boldly add the title esquire to your name the very next work you publish. [...] [Y]ou, when you are a Bank-dubb’d esquire, may look on all these self-dubb’d esquires with [...] contempt. (*Bank Note* 1, 14)

Traditionally a feudal designation of rank below that of a knight, the title of esquire is in much broader use by the time Bridges is writing. Contemporaries understand the title to be applicable to, amongst others, the eldest sons of knights, particular offices under the crown, barristers, foreign noblemen, and those given the title directly by the monarch (cf. Burn 1830: 504–507). By depositing ready money for a personalized bank note, the struggling poet in Bridges’ *The Adventures of a Bank Note* can demonstrate his credit in both senses of the word – not only in the ability to obtain goods and services before payment, but also as a source of public acknowledgment of merit. Showing one’s ability to pay is translated directly into a title conferred by the bank. Finally, this title itself bestows credit. As a suffix to the author’s name on future works, it is implied, it will generate further profits for him.

In the historical period in which it-narratives emerge, a moment between the caesura that is the beheading of Charles I by parliament and the loss of the head of Louis XVI to the *assemblée nationale*, a major transformation in the way individuals relate to each other is under way.

The transformations that the scientific and commercial revolutions outlined in the second and third chapter bring about mean that the nature of the social link changes. The feudal social order is replaced by capitalism. The social link is now increasingly provided by the means of payment instead of the monarch, thus the tales that coin-narrators tell are not the “sad stories of the deaths of kings” (*Richard II* III.2.156), but satires on the Good News of the marketplace.

Santner understands the way that the social link is ‘backed’ by the sublime flesh of the sovereign as the central point in the doctrine of the king’s two bodies. With the end of the political theology of kingship, this source of what Santner calls “libidinal credit” (2011: xv) disappears. The bond that this social formation establishes is no longer found in the direct relationship of the monarch and their subjects (as for the Anglo-Saxon kings of old), nor in the symbolic sublation of this relationship in the coinage of the medieval kings (as Kantorowicz describes it). Instead, it is established at the marketplace. In modern cultures, money increasingly takes over the function that kinship and kingship exert in premodern societies: “[I]t is the institution that organizes economic life, structures social relations and underlies political power, informing symbol, ritual and systems of meaning” (Dimen 1994: 115). In short, it takes on the function of a master signifier.

Thus, we could read the quote from *The Adventures of the Sovereign* the other way around. When the coin announces to the frame-narrator “I am thy sovereign” (*Aureus* 5) it is not only the image of the king to which we can attribute those words, but money itself. The identity of king and coin implies not only the image of the king as a coin, but also the possibility of money usurping the position of the sovereign altogether.

It-narrators frequently dwell on this ambiguity to express the ascendancy of a new sovereignty of money. The frame-narrator of *The Golden Spy* calls the narrating coins the “Darlings of the age” (304), whose “empire is all over” (ibid.). Coins, such as the *Louis d’Or* who carries the first name of the French ruler, are taking over the lordship that was due to the king. This transition rests, as Santner makes clear, on the “prior displacement, murderous or not, of the *sovereign* of the realm by the *coin* of the realm, a displacement that is paradoxically prefigured by the imprint of the sovereign’s own figure on coins” (2016: 48, emphases in the original):

With this shift, however, a figure whose sacral soma was seen to embody a ‘vertical’ link to a locus of transcendence – to divine authorization – comes to be dispersed “horizontally” among the “people”, who now come to be both blessed and plagued by a surplus of immanence. (Santner 2011: xxi)

Yet, if the social link is now mainly enacted outside of a dyadic relationship between the king and his subject, what function remains for the profile of the king on the coin? Coin-narratives, especially those dealing with counterfeit, provide the literary spaces for reflecting on this question.

4.2 “Gold Wou’d not Lye”

So far, we were able to show how the conflation of king and coin that many it-narrators play on gains new significance in emerging capitalism, as the social link between the subjects is established by the currency that takes over this function from the feudal institution of kingship. In order to show how the narratives of counterfeit coins can constitute a meta-genre of it-narratives, we must return to texts in which the signifying logic of the it-narrators is apparently untroubled, that is, to the texts in which legitimate money talks. For this, it is worth returning once more to a prototypical coin-narrative, *The Adventures of a Rupee*. The *Rupee* traces the circulations of a piece of the gold that is cast into an Indian rupee, which first circulates domestically and across Asia, before being brought to England. Once there, it loses its status as money once again, by becoming an exotic keepsake, used not for transactions but for its value as a curiosity (cf. Mulholland 2018: 383). Hence, this narrative is particularly apt for showcasing the differences between things, commodities, and money. For the purpose of this chapter, the moment when the thing (the lump of gold) becomes a piece of money (the Rupee) is central. It begins when the narrator is discovered by peasants in the Tibetan mountains:

The sun saw me in the mountains of Thibet an ignoble lump of earth. I was then undistinguished from the clods that surrounded me by the splendour of my appearance, or the ductility of my substance; but I contained within myself the principles of my future form, and certain parts of the rays of light remaining in the cavities of my body, by degrees I assumed colour and the qualities which I had not before. [...] I remained many centuries, ignorant of the world or its inhabitants. (34)

At the beginning of its story, the it-narrator's ontological status is that of a thing, something that is not the object of use, but of perception. It is 'present-at-hand' in the Heideggerian sense (cf. Heidegger 1967: 25f.; Harman 2010: 18f.). Since it is still utterly "ignorant of the world or its inhabitants", it is not perceived by human subjectivity, but only another object, the sun. Likewise, it is not human labour that realizes a potentiality of form, but natural phenomena, the "rays of light". It is an object not of signifiers and subjects and societies, but of matter and form, of colour and light. At the beginning of the tale, the it-narrator is at maximum distance from human affairs. It is presented as 'natural' as opposed to 'cultural'.

This state does not last for long. The it-narrator is found by two friends who immediately recognize its potential value and start a fight over who would be its rightful owner (cf. *Rupee* 35). The narrator can incite this kind of desire because, in its relation to its human owners, it is no longer a thing independent of human affairs. As soon as they discover that it consists of gold, it represents value, that is, the two types of value that we have introduced in the third chapter: use-value and exchange-value.

As the story progresses, the peasant who manages to secure the gold will not put it to use for any of its positive qualities as an object, but exchange it. For doing so, he does not trade one particular commodity for another but transforms the gold into something that is exchangeable for all commodities. The narrator relates this transformation:

I am dragged from my subterraneous abode – They apply the strongest force of fire to my body, till part of my substance assumes a liquid state – I am next poured into a mould, which gave me the roundness and character I still retain. After I had undergone these changes, they called me a RUPEE. (*Rupee* 35, emphasis in the original)

By changing its narrative mode in this passage, the text emphasises a caesura. Whereas the rupee had previously reported in the detached language of an unobserved observer, now it shifts into the register of direct bodily experience. The change in tone is accompanied by a switch from past to present tense that evokes additional immediacy. When the narrator's positive material qualities (the qualities that set it apart from subjects) are supplanted by exchange-value, the text momentarily suggests direct human experience instead of the detached perspective of an object, signalling its entry into the sphere of 'culture'.

As the gold is turned into a rupee, it is no longer a particular commodity, but the general means of exchange that functions as an equivalent of all commodities. It can only serve this function by forfeiting its use-value. The coin is no longer exchanged for the positive qualities of its material, but for its ability to be exchanged for all other positive qualities. It is still useful, but only for what it can be exchanged for. Thus, as we have already seen in the third chapter, its use-value collapses into its exchange-value: “[T]he money commodity [...] acquires a formal use-value, originating in its special social function; the point being that one commodity now has its use-value determined to be only its exchangeability” (Mehrotra 1991: 74).

In relating how gold becomes money, the narrative shows the development of the individual piece of money as it follows the historical development of money as such. This story, however, is itself the conscious product of another kind of writing, that of the emerging theory of political economy. As we have seen, this discourse is founded precisely in the years around the publication of *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782). Smith proposes a history of how precious metals become money, at the end of which stands the insight that:

people must always have been liable to the grossest frauds and impositions, and instead of a pound weight of pure silver, or pure copper, might receive in exchange for their goods, an adulterated composition of the coarsest and cheapest metals. To prevent such abuses, to facilitate exchanges, and thereby to encourage all sorts of industry and commerce, it has been found necessary, in all countries that have made any considerable advances towards improvement, to affix a public stamp upon certain quantities of such particular metals. (1976: 1, 29)

This public stamp bears the face of the sovereign guaranteeing the weight and finesse of the piece of metal that thus becomes money (cf. *ibid.* 31). It is the function that remains for the portrait of the king. The public stamp the metal receives when being transformed into a coin engenders an ontological shift. What has hitherto been a self-identical object becomes a medium, something that is split between a material carrier and what is represented on it.¹⁴⁰ In a modern terminological framework, one can understand commodity money as the unity of a signifier (the inscription) and the referent it points to (a specific weight and purity of material). In this way, the need to weigh and measure a coin is replaced by the trust in a political authority that provides a vir-

140 A contemporary of it-narratives, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, studies the semiotic implications of such a split in his *Essay on the Epigram* (1771). In trying to decode why short poems are sometimes called epigrams, that is, inscriptions, Lessing formulates a semiotic theory. Interestingly for our case, he proceeds from the example of a coin: his theory of the epigram is essentially numismatic. According to Lessing, in the fusion of inscription and that which is inscribed, the epigram operates like a coin whose material cannot be separated from the inscription it bears. The epigram describes the thing it is inscribed onto. Commodity money makes for its own validity as a proposition (cf. Shell 1982: 169). The inscription on, say, a one shilling piece, transforms silver into a piece of money with which things can be bought. Only in this fusion of statement and material can an object become commodity money. Yet inside this unity there is a process at work. Lessing divides the function of the epigram into two parts: expectation and explanation. In the first line, an expectation is roused, in the second, its explanation is provided (cf. Lessing 1825: 173). The relationship of the first to the second line in an epigrammatic poem is the relationship of the inscription to the material content of the coin. With money one can thus understand this process as going from the promise of the inscription to the explanation of its material content. Accepting the inscription on the coin, we confirm the signifying process that makes money out of metal. In his essay, Lessing thus proposes something like a semiotic theory of commodity money that connects surprisingly well to the structure of the counterfactual examined at the end of the second chapter.

tual support for every act of exchange (cf. Shell 1982: 159). The inscription on a gold coin that political authority vouches for is a proposition about the coin itself, a proposition that one is asked to take for granted – granted by the king.

The denomination¹⁴¹ thus refers not only to nominal value, but to the material composition of the coin itself. The shilling on the image at the beginning of this chapter is supposed to be minted at sterling silver, that is, at 92,5 % purity. The king is no longer the author or owner of circulating currency, but ‘merely’ the authority that represents the public order (cf. Vogl 2017: 53) that is embodied in the material purity of the coin.¹⁴² The coin is considered truthful for aligning inscription and material. *The Adventures of a Rupee* has shown the process whereby this is enacted when the piece of gold is turned into a rupee and thereby fuses inscription and material. The authority of the it-narrator now does not only rest on the fact that it is a non-human object, but on the fact that it aligns the signifiers of value with a body of precious metal.

This material is composed of a highly valued commodity, the value of which is supposed to be identical to its nominal value. The corresponding monetary ideology, bullionism, holds that money would only be able to fulfil its social function as long as its ‘intrinsic’, that is commodity value, would correspond to its nominal value (cf. Carruthers and Babb 1996: 1566f.). The precious metal held to be a ‘natural’ depository of value vouches for the ability of the coin to store that elusive substance. Bullionism is thus the ideological background that would allow one to say, as Charles Gildon’s coin does, that “Gold would not lye” (175). By equating value with material, various ways open in which the gap between nominal and commodity value can be exploited. The threat of counterfeit looms large.

141 At this point, the denomination is a name, not a number: “Only in the 19th century did it become common for coins to be stamped with their denominated money values. Until then, coins were mainly identified by the name of their generic type, by the Sovereign who issued them, and often by the mint where they were struck” (Fox 2011: 152).

142 In the words of Joseph Vogl: “[T]he sovereign appear[s] not as the author or owner of the money in circulation but as the ‘most public person’ and ‘highest authority’ (persona magis publica or maioris auctoritas), whose function [...] [is] solely to represent the public order” (2017: 53).

4.3 To Counterfeit is Death

In the scenes quoted from Helenus Scott's *The Adventures of a Rupee*, we have seen how pieces of gold become commodity-money, that is, how they become signifiers pointing to their own material as their referents. However, in order to understand how narrators such as the false halfpenny quoted at the beginning of this chapter behave in circulation, we now have to turn our attention to scenes showing the transformation of valuable material, not into legitimate money, but into counterfeit-narrators.

For this, we must turn our attention to a story that shares many features with *The Adventures of a Rupee*, yet is told by a counterfeit coin. *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland* (1805–1806) follows a piece of silver throughout the millennia as it is implicated in the lives of various people. The central passage of the narrative is the transformation of the silver into the counterfeit coin that gives the story its title. The narrator, here still a piece of silver, relates this scene of transformation:

He [the counterfeiter] had stamps cut resembling the marks of the most opulent dealers in Dublin, and with several of these he made weighty and grievous impressions on me and my fellows. The greatest torment in my formation was yet to come. Over one of the large furnaces in the manufactory was placed a plate of Iron, until it was red hot. On this a number of us were arranged in order. There we remained until we were almost in a state of fusion. We were then precipitated into aquafortis. [...] The sudden immersion into this potent liquid drew to our exterior the far greater part of the silver contained in each, and gave us that appearance, which passed us on a deceived public for sterling. (*Bad Shilling* 154f.)

Like the rupee, the piece of valuable material is made into a coin. In the process of minting, the shilling suffers the same conceptual split as the rupee, yet this results in a twofold split of the identity of the narrator. Unlike the rupee, it is adulterated with “copper, tin, &c. &c.” (ibid. 155) and afterwards immersed in aqua fortis in order to separate the valuable silver from the base metals and draw it to the surface of the coin.

The narrator is thus transformed into a signifier, through the “stamps” (ibid. 154) fashioned after those used for legitimate shillings. However, this signifier is made to refer to a material body that can no longer keep the promise of purity.

In relating this transformation, the bad shilling is exemplary for a number of narrators who tell the stories of their transformation into counterfeit. The narrator of *The Adventures of a Farthing* (1740) is “coloured over, bent, and seem[s] to all appearance a real sixpence” (349), while its counterpart in *A Month’s Adventures of a Base Shilling* (ca. 1820) receives “an Appearance [...] such as would likely or readily deceive” (260). When these coins suffer a split between a base core and a silver/gold layer on the outside, they present their deceiving surface in the imagery of clothing. The counterfeit coin in *The Adventures of a Silver Penny* (1786) receives a “coat of gold” (83) and the base shilling speaks of legitimate coins “that really were within what we [the counterfeits] were but in coat” (260). The former first prides itself in looking “grand and magnificent” (*Silver Penny* 86), but soon discovers “that nothing is more dangerous than a gaudy dress borrowed to deceive” (ibid.), while the latter suggests an image in which a “piece of base coin [is] found to be [fake], when its outward garb [is] stripped off” (*Base Shilling* 263). The most extensive counterfeit-narrative, *The Birmingham Counterfeit; or, Invisible Spectator* (1772), confirms this tendency when its narrator describes the counterfeiter:

He could so curiously clasp a golden coat on my back, as to make me pass current for a guinea. It was not long before I appeared invested with all the splendour of the precious golden ore; and so nicely was my new garment made to fit me, that it was impossible for the naked eye to distinguish what it concealed. (16)

Counterfeit-narrators imagine their false surfaces through the imagery of deceitful clothing, connecting to the anxieties over sumptuary ethics discussed in the third chapter of this work. By virtue of such false dress, the counterfeit coinage puts the stability of the social link that is constituted by money at peril. The narrator in *Chrysal* suffers such a threat to its signifying potential by being clipped. This “mysterious

art of lessening the weight, without defacing the image, on the golden coin" (*Chrysal* 2, 173) is a method of counterfeiting by which a small part of the coin around its edges is shaved off, thereby reducing its total weight in valuable material. By this art, Chrysal is "depraved [...] of a fourth of [its] weight" (2, 174), and compares itself and the other clipped coins to "a number of British soldiers" (ibid.), in a "mutilated condition" (ibid.), ready to be sent out to England and weaken its economy.¹⁴³ In this imagery the narrator reverses a scene from the beginning of the volume, in which Chrysal enters the service of a mutilated soldier who understands his body as an extension of the sovereign, only regretting "the loss of [his][...] limbs" (2, 74) insofar as he cannot lose them again in his service. This imagery connects to an observation in the third chapter, by recalling how Addison's shilling boasts of how the "arms of the country" (211) are stamped upon it. Here, the coat of arms evokes not only the 'arms' in the sense of the shields it was historically applied to, but also the metaphorical limbs of the body politic. In the imagery of coins as the military forces of the state in *Chrysal*, the attack on their bodies is framed as an attack on a part of the body politic. By virtue of money's role as mediator of all transactions, this is an attack on social cohesion as such.

Voicing such fears for the political commonwealth, it-narrators connect to contemporary anxieties about the prevalence and social effects of counterfeit. In 1691, John Locke asserts that counterfeiting "contributed more to Sink us, than all the Force of our Enemies could do" (1691 [1691]: 472), commenting on a phenomenon that is ubiquitous for the contemporary public. In the 1690s, during the commercial revolution, clipping and counterfeiting emerge as serious threats to England's commercial base and its bid to become a global power (cf. Wennerlind 2004: 131).

¹⁴³ The counterfeiter, as in many other it-narratives, is a Jew. Ann Louise Kibbie examines how counterfeiters encountered in it-narratives are portrayed according to antisemitic stereotypes (cf. Kibbie 2007). Indeed, the antisemitic figure of the Jew seems to be a reoccurring figure in it-narratives: Not only when their narrators portray Jews, but also in the genre's preoccupation with circulation and figurative and literal homelessness. While my work does not allow for enough room to tackle this question, it would certainly be interesting to further explore the genres connection with structures of antisemitism.

This situation is particularly dramatic in the colonies, where patchy imperial infrastructure, long distances, and notorious shortages of British money make counterfeiting an everyday crime (cf. Smoak 2017). Rhode Island and the Caribbean become major centres of counterfeit production. The governor of Dominica, for example, complains in 1799 that he estimates half of the locally used Portuguese coinage to be either one third too light or outright fake, with little resemblance to the coin that bears the same name (cf. Smoak 2017: 494). Earlier, and closer to the administrative centre, Jonathan Swift campaigns against the introduction of new copper coins in Ireland. In *The Drapier's Letters* (1724–1725), he uses the persona of a drapier to argue against the new coinage that is suspected (and later found out) to be significantly underweight (cf. 487–502).

The situation is little better in the metropolitan centres. By the late 18th century, the monetary situation has deteriorated on a massive scale: “10% of silver coins, an amount exceeding one million pounds, and 75% of copper coins were the proportions of counterfeits passed in circulating coinage” (Greene 2006: 23). The beginning industrialization leads to the emergence of Birmingham as a major metropolitan centre for the production of counterfeit (cf. Smoak 2017: 468). The association is so strong that the city's name becomes synonymous with counterfeit. It-narratives like *The Birmingham Counterfeit*, and *The Adventures of a Halfpenny, commonly called a Birmingham Halfpenny*¹⁴⁴ testify to the metonymic relation between counterfeit coin and city. By 1787, only 8% of copper coins in circulation show “some tolerable resemblance to the king's coin” (Peck 1960: 214).

The Adventures of a Halfpenny (1753) thus illustrates a central anxiety of its time when it comments on the effects of the prevalence of counterfeit: “[T]he present exact scrutiny into our constitution” (6) it laments, “has very much obstructed and embarrassed my travels” (ibid.). The double entendre is instructive: Talking of its “constitution”, the coin refers to both the composition of counterfeit coin and the constitution of the state (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 325), suggesting that a threat to

144 A later adaptation of *The Adventures of a Halfpenny* (1753) quoted at the beginning of the chapter.

the former is identical to a threat to the latter. The narrator paints a picture of the effects of widespread counterfeit that is bleak and satiric at the same time:

[T]he greatest sufferers are undoubtedly the numerous fraternity of beggars. [...] One of these orators, who takes his stand at Spring-gardens, now enforces his piteous complaint, with ‘Good Christians, one *good* half-penny to the stone blind’; and another, who tells you he has lost the use of his precious limbs, addresses your compassion by shewing you a *bad* half-penny, and declares that he is ready to perish with hunger, having tried it in vain in twenty-three places to buy a bit of bread. (*Halfpenny* 4, emphases in the original)

We learn that the low quality of the coinage disproportionately affects beggars, as it is now “almost as profitable to work as to beg” (ibid.). Proceeding from this satiric quip, the narrator imagines a parallel social structure, in which beggars have “called in” farthing coins, suggesting that “this public-spirited people” should likewise “put a stop to the circulation of bad half-pence, by melting them down from time to time as they come into their hands” (ibid.). The order to do so is supposed to issue from “the king of the beggars” (ibid.), who will assure that his subjects “bring all their adulterated copper to their mint in the Borough, or their foundry in Moorfields” (ibid.), and thus put an end to the problems caused by the fake currency. The problem of counterfeit is here fashioned as a carnivalesque reversal,¹⁴⁵ replacing the official institutions of contemporary Britain with their imagined counterparts in the criminal underworld. The beggars are portrayed as adhering to a parallel social structure, which operates as counterfeit duplicates of public institutions. They are subjects to a monarch, able to melt and

145 I am referring here to the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival, specifically to the aspect of the “feast of fools” (Bakhtin 1984: 81) in which social hierarchy is reversed and a mock-version of the social order is established temporarily, featuring ephemeral kings and mockeries of other dignitaries (cf. ibid. 81f.). With its representation of the underclass and a certain effect of heteroglossia occasioned by the way in which these narratives “cut across classes” (Tretyakov 2006: 61), it-narratives might even be understood as a carnivalesque genre, yet tracing this connection further lies beyond the scope of this study.

issue coins and thus to enforce monetary policy. In this, the halfpenny connects to anxieties concerning the confusion of social order and the idea of a “world turned upside-down” (Hunt 1996a: 132) that we have discussed in the third chapter. The prevalence of counterfeit is imagined as resulting in a parallel social bond that exists in the half-world of London, independent of the official institutions that should regulate monetary matters.

However, when such institutions are shown to take measures against counterfeiting, it-narrators frequently dwell with glee on the punishment they bestow onto those convicted of this crime. Shortly after being clipped, *Chrysal* can inform the reader that its counterfeiter has been caught:

They caught him in his work, beyond a possibility of evasion or escape. This is a crime never forgiven in any state. He was therefore immediately delivered up to the civil power, from which he received a death no less cruel than that [...] from the inquisition. Of all the human sufferings I had yet seen [...] this gave me the greatest pleasure. (2, 175)

For most of the long 18th century, the death penalty is a common outcome for someone charged with counterfeiting. In the 17th century, counterfeiting is still considered an act of petty treason (cf. Coke et al. 1680: 25), but at the end of the century, in 1697, parliament passes an act which changes the penalty for counterfeiting, which is now to “suffer Death as in case of High Treason” (“The Statutes at Large” 672). Initially designed to be in effect for the duration of one year only, it is extended by two subsequent statutes and then made perpetual in 1708 (cf. Hiebendaal 2009: 119).

The shifts in the relationship of sovereignty and currency that are occasioned by nascent capitalism bring about the displacement of the social link related above, but also change the way the legal system has to address monetary transgressions. As we have seen in *Chrysal* above (cf. 2, 174), the attack on the coin is now an attack on the social link: “Since the social fabric [is] [...] increasingly constituted as a set of exchange relations, an assault on money [is] [...] therefore considered an attack

on the entire social form” (Wennerlind 2004: 131).¹⁴⁶ Capital crime, in the words of Joseph Vogl, “receives a double meaning, both economic and legal” (2017: 82). In order to combat the counterfeiting epidemic,¹⁴⁷ the death penalty becomes a powerful threat.

Inflicting capital punishment for counterfeiting is not a British specificity: Venice burns counterfeiters (cf. Stahl 2000: 235) and France boils them (Sargent and Velde 2001: 65), yet the association of counterfeiting and death is a particularly close one in 18th-century England. The narrator of *Aureus* tells its readers how it was born:

in the neighbourhood of Tower-hill, in a splendid palace fit for the birth of a Sovereign, and very near that unseemly pile of buildings encircled with a moat, in which monarchs have met with an untimely fate, and a residence which has often been a preparatory step to the scaffold for the most virtuous as well as the most vicious of mankind. (*Aureus* 19f., emphasis in the original)

The narrator here points to the fact that the royal mint is located in the Tower until 1810, not only confirming its association with the sovereign, but also with the place where traitors are executed, thus pointing toward the fate of those who are found to counterfeit the royal coin (cf. Bellamy 2012: xliv-xlv). However, this connection goes yet further. The two following image shows colonial bank notes from the 18th century.

Next to its nominal value, it bears the inscription “To Counterfeit is Death”. In addition to the death threat, the 1774 colonial bank note shows Walnut Street Prison in Philadelphia. Here, the threat of death is itself connected directly to the means of exchange.

¹⁴⁶ The idea of counterfeit and clipping as crimes against the social link is articulated forcefully in Chaplain William Fleetwood’s “Sermon against Clipping” in 1694 (cf. Wennerlind 2004: 141f.). Fleetwood argues that even though the victim of the crime is not perceived as clearly as in other crimes, “the Mischiefs [...] are truly done, both to the Publick, and to almost all Particular” (2000: 148). Consider the additional symbolic association of filing away the king’s head after the beheading of Charles I.

¹⁴⁷ As early as 1695, Thomas Houghton calls counterfeit a threat to all classes that is “Epidemical (sic), and universally spread through the Nation” (3).



Figure 5: Colonial 5-pound note. Printed by Hall & Sellers, 1774

Unfortunately for the convicted counterfeiters, local authorities do cash in on this promise of death that the government issues. As the narrator in *Chrysal* tells us, it is a “crime never forgiven” (2, 175). Whereas other capital offences are sometimes pardoned, there is evidence that the sentence for counterfeiting is indeed carried out in most cases (cf. Giuseppi 1966: 90).¹⁴⁸

The executions that follow are highly public and the deaths of counterfeiters present gruesome scenes.¹⁴⁹ The narrator of *The Adventures*

¹⁴⁸ In accordance with this, King and Ward find significantly lower pardoning rates for counterfeiting and forging, particularly in London and Middlesex, where most of the cases are recorded (cf. 2015: 34).

¹⁴⁹ Michel Foucault discusses the function of such spectacles whose “aim was to make an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offence was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person” (1979: 58).

of a *Hackney Coach* (1781) witnesses such a spectacle. When the coach approaches the gallows at Tyburn, its passenger exclaims: “What a crowd!” (206), before being forced to halt at some distance from the centre by the masses of onlookers. The scene is related in terms of a public spectacle, with the narrator observing how “a gentleman gave a guinea for a front seat in one of the galleries” (ibid.), invoking a theatrical context. The execution about to take place is that of Dr. William Dodd, an Anglican priest and notorious public figure who forged a 4,200£ bill and is convicted to be hanged despite substantial public controversy (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 3, 355). Hence, the it-narrator gives an immersive account of the discussions taking place around the convict’s fate, ranging from bystanders condemning him as “a vile hypocrite” (*Hackney Coach* 206), and “acknowledge[ing] the justice of this sentence” (ibid.), to those who see in him a “[p]oor soul” (ibid.) they would like to see spared. Some expect a pardon to arrive at the last moment, but as it fails to materialize, the execution is related in gruesome detail.

The ‘victim’ of counterfeiting, the “deceived public” (155) as the bad shilling calls it, is said to have a right to such public spectacles made of those convicted of having forged the “public stamp” (Smith 1976: 1, 29). Given this public imagery of the fate of counterfeiters, it is not too surprising that a literary anti-heroine of the time, who is no foreigner to taking risks, passes up on the opportunity to counterfeit money. Even though Moll Flanders is “promis’d Mountains of Gold and Silver”, she declines the offer, knowing that to be taken for counterfeit means “certain Death” (*Moll Flanders* 212). Thomas Macaulay¹⁵⁰, a historian looking back from the mid-19th century, relates such sights:

150 Marx famously accuses Macaulay of falsifying history (cf. 1996: 279). While this might be too polemical, Marx is certainly right in accusing him of offering a decidedly ‘whiggish’ interpretation of history as a history of progress (cf. ibid). In this case, this at first suggests taking his observations on 18th-century counterfeiting with a grain of salt. However, by examining various additional sources, we will see how such a view on counterfeiting is indicative of a contemporary preoccupation with the dramatic consequences of this crime.

At every session that was held at the Old Bailey, terrible examples were made. Hurdles, with four, five, six wretches convicted of counterfeiting or mutilating the money of the realm, were dragged month after month up Holborn Hill. One morning seven men were hanged and a woman burned for clipping. (1967: 4, 187)

Such sights do not leave the public image of the Bank of England unstained. The contemporary periodical *The Black Dwarf* calls the officials of the Bank the “priests of Moloch’s blood-stained altar” (Giuseppi 1966: 90). George Cruikshank’s mock bank note of 1819 shows how deeply engrained the spectacle of the execution of counterfeiters is in the public imaginary.

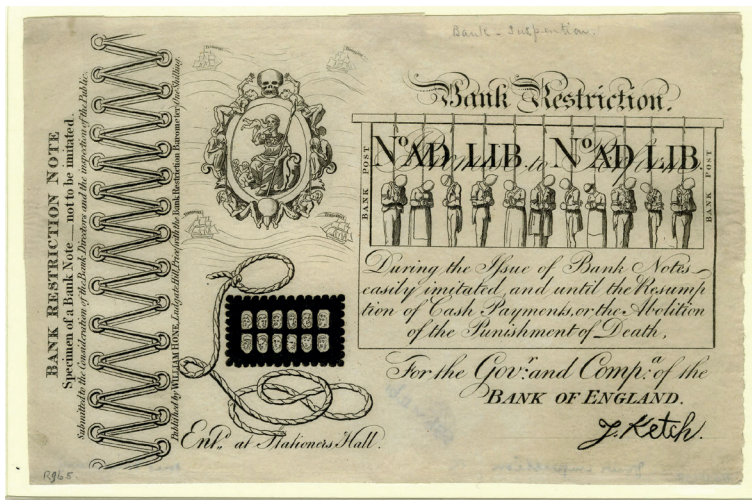


Figure 6: Mock Bank of England note. Printed by George Cruikshank, 1819

On the note, corpses of both genders are depicted hanging from the gallows while the figure of Britannia is devouring a child to the left. In accordance with this, the note is signed by ‘J. Ketch’ – the nickname for the public hangman – and the pound sign is converted into a noose. Finally, the ships in the background point to those who are lucky enough to be spared the gallows and are ‘transported’ instead, that is,

transported to the American Colonies, and after their independence, to Australia (cf. Helleiner 2003: 57).

When Cruikshank's satirical bank note is printed, satirical money narrators have already been circulating in textual spaces for a century. The close association of counterfeit and death in the content of counterfeit-narrative is also expressed on the level of their form. In the following, I will conclude this section with a look towards what this death threat means for the narrative structure of counterfeit-narratives.

For understanding the implications of the connection of counterfeit and death in narrative form, we must draw on a critical tradition that finds in 'death' a fundamental concept of narrative organization. Going back to Roman Jakobson's distinction between metonymy and metaphor as the logical principles governing syntagmatic and paradigmatic functions of language (cf. 1971: 90–95), Peter Brooks transposes the functions of these tropes onto the realm of narrative organization (cf. Brooks 1984). Brooks thinks narrative plot through the semantic connotations of a grave plot (cf. Felluga 2002), as something that imposes a final demarcation on a life that appears as boundless without it. The two forces of narrative that he takes up from Roland Barthes, the hermeneutic function (the anticipation of an answer to a question) and the proaretic function (the interest in hearing what comes next), are associated with metaphor and metonymy respectively (cf. Brooks 1984: 18–27). Metonymy, corresponding to the syntagmatic function of language, refers to the narrative succession of events while metaphor refers to the act of closure through which these events are given meaning (cf. *ibid.* 27 and 91). This leads Brooks to the insight "that narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (1984: 22). If we understand plot as essentially structured along the axis of life and death, what does that mean for the present texts that so often associate counterfeit with death?¹⁵¹

151 This perspective on the structuring of plot also helps understanding the peculiar effect of the drive discussed in the preceding chapter. We recall the scenes of miraculous 'rebirths' in Roderick Random. Such passages evoke the eerie movements of revenants, associating the drive with the un-dead (cf. Žižek 2008: 54), and can serve to enrich Brooks' concept of narrative closure. It-narrators who suggest the continuation of their stories beyond the boundaries of the text (such as *Aureus*, or *The Adventures of a Shilling*), transgress the dichotomy

For one, counterfeit *means* death in a very practical sense, as the bank notes shown above make clear. It is operative on the level of the stories inside the episodes, where the counterfeiters try not to get caught in the criminal networks in which they operate, all the while under threat of having their own life-threads cut short. However, in the stories of counterfeit, the narrators themselves are now threatened by discovery. With their discovery, their circulation, and thus the story, would end.

Finally, we can return to the passage from *The Adventures of a Half-penny* at the beginning of this chapter. This passage, like many passages in counterfeit-narratives portraying similar acts of discovery, connects to what Brooks tells his readers about how the ending of a narrative tends to center around a metaphorical operation. He observes how narratives begin with metaphors of temporality that are elaborated metonymically throughout the story until they reach a metaphorical closure that sums up the story preceding it (cf. Felluga 2002). Brooks imagines the function of metaphor in the Lacanian framework, that is, as the substitution of a signified by a signifier under the bar (cf. Brooks 1984: 59), which fixates the constant movement of signifiers and thereby produces meaning. Metaphor is thus the metaphorical (and in it-narratives literal) nail that fastens the signifier to the signified. When the nail is shot through the centre of the false coin, the circulation of the it-narrator is suspended, and with it the metonymical movement of the narrative from one episode to the next.

This is shown prototypically in a narrative such as *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland* (1809), where we have observed the narrator's transformation into counterfeit. The end of the narrative is foreshadowed by the imagery of death. The coin ends up in the possession of a gravedigger and is stolen by a man who illegally exhumes bodies for medical research. After this graverobber attends a funeral, the bad shilling is finally discovered and nailed to the counter of a shop, like many similar counterfeit-narrators (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 137). The funeral scene thus prepares the images of plot in the sense

of life and death that is used as an imagery for narrative structuring. The 'un-dead' quality of the drive provides the concept for this peculiar insistence on continuation after the end that is imposed by the finitude of the physical text.

of a grave plot that gives a final boundary to the narration (cf. Felluga 2002; Brooks 1984: 22). When the counterfeit-narrator is fixed to the shop counter, the story comes to an end. By this end, it gains meaning through its closing metaphor. The counterfeit-narrative is framed as a story warning of false appearances and their consequences.

4.4 The Sin of Murdering a Crown

The preceding section has shed light on the significance of death in the content and form of it-narratives, providing the grounds for understanding the specific ways in which counterfeit-narrators circulate. However, what seems like a clear moral agenda in it-narratives, namely showing the dangers of deceitful appearances, is soon complicated. Take this example from *The Birmingham Counterfeit*, where the false coin is detected after his owner tries to pay with it in a gin shop, a passage at first very similar to the quote from the Halfpenny at the beginning of this chapter:

[H]ow great was the horror and disappointment of my master, when he saw his friend Juniper, very gravely, and without saying a word, nail me to his counter. [...] This disconcerted him for a few moments, grieved to think that I was a counterfeit; but great and extensive geniuses are seldom long at a loss: with the assistance of a small portion of strong spirit, and a little leaf-gold, he made me appear to the eye as beautiful as ever. Pleased with his success, he [...] dropped me into a long bag, in company with many others, some of which had no better pretensions to sterling than myself. (*Birmingham Counterfeit* 83–88)

Here, the shopkeeper performs the ritual that is associated with the discovery of counterfeit for his customers, but is quick to take back its consequences in private. The theatrical character of the performance is revealed when he sets the coin free: “His countenance at the time of his nailing me down was horrible and tremendous; but, on his releasing me, which he did with all the care and precaution imaginable, a pleasant smile wantoned on his glowing cheeks” (ibid. 86). It is revealed that he did not really punch a hole through the coin but merely fastened it

to the counter in such a way that the coin would not be damaged. He proceeds to mend the damaged coin and puts it back into circulation.

This section will contrast the deadly punishments for counterfeiting in the 18th century with its social prevalence and the surprising reluctance of people to seriously curb its use. Following hints from 18th-century sources, we will find that counterfeit coins in it-narratives are often set free again. This serves as an opportunity for the genre to comment on social hypocrisy, but also to show that the circulation of the anti-mimetic it-narrators, like the circulation of illegitimate money, can continue even when they are discovered to lack a referent.

While we have seen counterfeit threatened by narrative death (by being fastened by a literal and figural nail) in the same way that counterfeiters are by literal death, the idea of killing a coin is more ambiguous than might appear at first. In 1748, such a murder is famously framed as one of the cardinal sins of the businessman by Benjamin Franklin:

Remember that Money is of a prolific generating Nature. Money can beget Money, and its Offspring can beget more, and so on. Five Shillings turn'd is Six: Turn'd again, 'tis Seven and Three Pence; and so on 'til it becomes an Hundred Pound. The more there is of it, the more it produces every Turning, so that the Profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding Sow, destroys all her Offspring to the thousandth Generation. He that murders a Crown, destroys all it might have produc'd, even Scores of Pounds. (Franklin 1762 [1748]: 1f.)

In this passage from the *Advice to a Young Tradesman*, Benjamin Franklin, then still a subject of the British Crown, laments the removal of money from circulation by drawing on the imagery of reproduction. The same Franklin whose press produces the warning that “counterfeit is death”¹⁵² here celebrates the mobility of money. The immediate answer to this contradiction should be that it needn't be paradoxical at all, since we can understand the quote as implying legitimate money, while the threat of death only refers to counterfeit. The situation should be clear – the former is socially beneficial, while the latter presents a threat to

152 Cf. <https://www.bellevuerarecoins.com/ben-franklins-gifts-colonial-currency/>

the very fabric that holds society together. However, the narrator of *The Birmingham Counterfeit* protests passionately against such a clear-cut differentiation of monetary matters:

Without me, many think trade and commerce would dwindle to a shadow, and the retail trader be totally ruined. In short, here is scarce any situation whatever, in which I am not particularly serviceable; and yet such is the ingratitude of mankind in general, that my name in public is universally despised and disowned, even by those who in private endearingly caress me. (*Birmingham Counterfeit* 40)

As we have seen in the first part of the book, the contrast of public and private life that the narrator evokes is central to the satire of it-narratives. However, unlike other it-narratives, the stories of counterfeit not only provide the privileged witnesses of the hypocritical performances needed to maintain public appearance, but make their narrators themselves the objects on which these performances can be observed. To distinguish between a good and a bad coin becomes a moral hypocrisy itself, a mere performance of virtue for the public that the it-narrator unmasks. However, this hypocrisy is not only a construct put forward in it-narratives as yet another target for satire. It connects to deeply conflicting attitudes towards counterfeit money in the 18th century. Contemporary reactions to counterfeit indeed suggest that the it-narrator does not deceive the reader when it claims that it is “particularly serviceable” (ibid.).

The way in which counterfeit is allowed to circulate in such a manner can be observed most vividly in the colonies, particularly in the Caribbean, where a highly heterogeneous monetary situation means foreign coin is critical to the economic life of the locals (cf. Smoak 2017: 472). The narrator of Edward Thompson’s *The Adventures of a Six-And-Nine-Pence of 1774* is a prime example. Although it owes its existence to “the ingenuity of a Journeyman Barber in the neighbourhood of Spitalfields” (9), it is neither a shilling nor a guinea, but bears the “name of John, King of Portugal” (ibid.). As hinted at earlier, the Portuguese coin is used by merchants for larger transactions in the Caribbean because of

its relatively high value (cf. Smoak 2017: 472) and is thus often forged, both in the Caribbean itself and in the imperial centres (cf. *ibid.* 493).¹⁵³

It is not surprising that the authorities try to intervene in such a situation. In 1798, for instance, the Board of Trade petitions Parliament to pass a bill that would outlaw the export of foreign counterfeit coins to the Caribbean colonies (cf. Smoak 2017: 493). In the meantime, governors are asked to urge their subjects to weigh coin before receiving it (cf. *ibid.* 494). Finally, attempts are made to demonetize the counterfeit coin. Surprisingly however, when such measures are implemented, they prove highly unpopular. Despite threats from imperial authorities, local governors find themselves unable and, more importantly, unwilling to put a stop to the circulation of counterfeit. When serious attempts are made, they provoke the rage of the local population that campaigns against the implementation of effective measures (cf. *ibid.* 495).

One could attribute this to the colonial situation in which supply lines are long and imperial authorities are notoriously slow to respond. Yet, we see some of the same phenomena in the metropolitan centre. As in the colonial setting, we do not find the harsh response on the side of the authorities that we would expect, given the drastic punishments for convicted counterfeiters. Instead, forgeries are often produced quite openly.¹⁵⁴ There are cases documented where the magistrates in Birmingham, when presented with evidence of the counterfeits, refuse to investigate (cf. Smoak 2017: 487). In Birmingham, counterfeiting is big business that is often carried out in the open (cf. *ibid.*; Selgin 2008: 29). Surprisingly, the “deceived public” (*Bad Shilling* 155), who we have seen

¹⁵³ By the end of the century, the imports of counterfeit reach staggering numbers. In 1798, a committee in Tobago judges that of the eight thousand ‘Joes’ in circulation, only two thousand come close to full weight (cf. Smoak 2017: 494). In the case cited above, the governor of Dominica judges that half of all the ‘Joes’ in the Caribbean are either one third too light or fakes with only “some Resemblance to the Portuguese coin that bears the same name” (*ibid.*). The situation on the island itself is yet more dramatic, with the governor claiming that only one in a thousand coins is of standard weight, and half of the coins counterfeit (cf. *ibid.*).

¹⁵⁴ However, it is important to point out that this production of ‘false’ money does not only include counterfeit in the strong sense, that is, coins made to resemble official coins, but a large number of private tokens that do not claim to represent official money (cf. Selgin 2008: 30), being issued by private businessman to pay wages and other liabilities to those who would accept them.

is figured as the victim of counterfeiting, responds in the same pattern as in the cases of the official interventions in the Caribbean. When provincial shopkeepers attempt to cooperate by refusing counterfeit money, their actions cause riots (cf. Selgin 2008: 32).

Hence, we are no longer surprised by the actions of the owner of the gin-shop¹⁵⁵ in *The Birmingham Counterfeit*, who heeds Franklin's advice and sets the counterfeit coin free to beget more money. Yet, he is not the only one for whom the detection of counterfeit is a performance. We can again return to our example from the beginning of the chapter. We recall how the narrator of *The Adventures of a Halfpenny* is discovered by a baker, who "knock[s] a nail through [its] [...] middle, and fasten[s] [it] to the counter" (6). Yet, the passages following this brutal treatment of the coin paint a different picture:

This morning a parish girl picked me up, and carried me with raptures to the next baker's shop to purchase a roll. The master examined me with great attention, and then, gruffly threatening her with Bridewell for putting off bad-money, knocked a nail through my middle, and fastened me to the counter. But the moment the poor hungry child was gone, he whipt me up again, and sending me away in 'change with others, gave me this opportunity of relating my story to you. (ibid.)

In the shopkeeper's threat of Bridewell Palace, a prison in the City of London, the association of counterfeit with death is evoked publicly. Privately however, the coin's circulation can be resumed. The fact that despite the danger associated with it, the counterfeit can be passed on, secures the it-narrator the "opportunity of relating [...] [the] story" (ibid.). Far from being plot devices unconnected to the social reality of counterfeit, these scenes of resumed circulation connect to a central paradox concerning the validity of money.

This paradox is best illustrated with Derrida's Essay "La Fausse Monnaie" in *Donner le Temps* (1991). Derrida approaches the question of

155 The class character of such a place in the 18th century should not be lost to the reader. The gin craze of the first half of the century means that gin shops are firmly associated with the poor and the lower classes.

counterfeit as a philosophical aporia. He does so by reading *La Fausse Monnaie*, a short story by Baudelaire in which a *flâneur* gives a counterfeit coin to a beggar. The text is usually read for its elaboration of Derrida's understanding of the gift but focusing on the counterfeit itself proves just as worthwhile, since Derrida's central insight concerns the ontology of the counterfeit: "Counterfeit money is never, as such, counterfeit money. As soon as it is what it is, recognized as such, it ceases to act as and to be worth counterfeit money" (Derrida 1992: 87). As an instrument of exchange, the coin's use-value is only realized in its exchange value. It realizes this value in circulation, by practically confirming that it functions as legal tender. While doing so, it behaves as if it were a signifier of value, that is, as if its denomination would correspond to its referent (the valuable material). As long as it thus circulates, it effectively is legal money, as it is able to fulfil its function as an instrument of exchange. Only at the moment of its discovery does it become counterfeit. Hence, even after being adulterated, the coin can circulate again and pass for current.

This paradox is essentially a question of the causality at play in the question of the validity of money. Money not only circulates because it is considered a reliable bearer of value, but also the other way round, it can be a reliable bearer of value because it circulates. Narratives such as *The Adventures of a Halfpenny* and *The Birmingham Counterfeit* stage the discoveries of counterfeit, only to remind the reader that they are easily undone. They show these discoveries to be performed for an audience in order to protect confidence in the currency that mediates social relations. In this, they demonstrate how the function of these narrators, both as means of payment and as circulating narrators, is not necessarily affected by the question if they are fake or legitimate currency.

4.5 Bullionism and the New Science

The previous section has examined the false endings of counterfeit-narratives in order to understand the paradoxical relationship between reliability and circulation in these texts. Bullionism, as we have seen, sustains the claim that precious metals "wou'd not lye" (*Golden Spy* 175) and are therefore legitimate currency. Coin-narrators can circulate because

they can claim reliability as means of exchange and stores of value. For counterfeit, on the other hand, this identity of nominal value and commodity value that grounds reliability does not hold. Yet, we have seen that counterfeit-narrators circulate despite their problematic referentiality and thereby connect to the social reality of 18th-century Britain.

Like all ideologies, bullionism is sustained by the erasure of its historicity. It engages in this erasure by “strategically framing its perspective so as to omit the negative, absence, contradiction, repression, the non-dit, or the impensé” (Jameson 1981: 110). This monetary ideology posits itself as the common-sense relation to money, as precious metals are held to be ‘natural’ carriers of value. From the vantage point of the 21st century, bullionism appears as a hopelessly antiquated understanding of money. We are too tempted to assume a teleology that would proceed through a ‘primitive’ belief in the intrinsic value of precious metals to a ‘sophisticated’ insight into the abstract function of money that does not need the recourse to a scarce commodity to fulfil its social function. However, a closer look at the historical processes underlying this apparent teleology paints a different picture. When the first coinage appears on the British Isles during late antiquity, it is introduced from the continent. The Roman conquerors bring not only soldiers, clerks, and architects, but also the money that sustains the imperial institutions that they herald. Contrary to what was long consensus in the study of the numismatics of antiquity, Roman coin, although predominantly made from precious metals, does not function according to the ideas of bullionists.¹⁵⁶ Early numismatic theory instead stresses the nominal value of money. Aristotle insists that the monetary standard is not a

156 Ehling concludes that the Roman monetary system can neither be called bullionist in a strong sense, nor nominalist (cf. 2008: 824). In a similar vein, Drexhage et al. cite the absence of inflation in the 3rd century as evidence that in everyday life, Roman coinage was practically fiduciary (cf. 2002: 205). However, the Roman monetary system is by no means exceptional in this regard. Earlier, the Greek city states were the first societies where money circulated widely, the Greeks having adopted it from the Lydians’ first use of electrum in the 6th century (cf. Seaford 2004: 128; Le Rider 2001: 43). Despite being minted from precious metal, inside the polis, this currency circulates by value, not by weight (cf. Seaford 2004: 133).

question of natural values, but something determined by law or convention (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* V.5.1133a25–31).¹⁵⁷

Money, deriving from the Ancient Greek word for (amongst others) ‘law’, is thus understood as deriving its authority from the state, not from nature. The resulting belief, nominalism, holds that it is the decree of state that makes money. Far from being based in the material that the coinage is made from, nominalism makes money a question of politics.

When controversies around debasements and recoinages spark debates about the nature of money in early modern England, this is a discursive undercurrent that is nowadays easily forgotten. One particular debate establishes an important precedent in common law: In 1605, the case of *Gilbert v. Brett* (also called the *Case of Mixt Monies*) opens the stage for a clash between nominalist and bullionist ideas about money. At the heart of the case is the dispute between two parties about a liability of 100£ that is to be paid after a recoinage changes the amount of precious metals contained in coins.¹⁵⁸ The case proves very extensive, with judges consulting legal writings that go back not only to the medieval tradition but to antiquity (cf. Fox 2011: 146). Finally, money is found to be based on an ‘artificial’ standard, provided by law or convention instead of nature (cf. *ibid.* 169). The court rules in favour of the defendant, and thus in favour of nominalism. While it is unclear whether common law took consistently nominalist or bullionist approach before, it seems that nominalism is the practical standard by the 17th century (cf. *ibid.* 174). Common law in pre-modern England has a well-defined

157 “All goods must therefore be measured by some one thing, as we said before. Now this unit is in truth demand, which holds all things together (for if men did not need one another’s goods at all, or did not need them equally, there would be either no exchange or not the same exchange); but money has become by convention a sort of representative of demand; and this is why it has the name ,money’ (νόμισμα) because it exists not by nature but by law (νόμος) and it is in our power to change it and make it useless” (*Nicomachean Ethics* V.5.1133a25–31).

158 In between the signing of the contract and the payment of the debt, authorities have significantly devalued Irish coinage (cf. Fox 2011: 147). The devaluation is supposed to provide the crown with money fighting the Rebellion of the Earl of Tyrone, and simultaneously deprive the rebels of the much-needed bullion they would use to gather international support (cf. *ibid.* 148). However, it also carries with it the effect that the lower silver content now makes debts incurred before the recoinage effectively lighter when paid in the new currency. The plaintiff sues for a restitution of the debt in an amount of coin that equals the pre-devaluation silver content of the sum.

set of legal structures that ensure that money passes at nominal rates, no matter its bullion content, and the Case of the Mixt Monies certainly creates a strong precedent for nominalism (cf. *ibid.* 139 and 169).

It seems that nominalism should stand on a firm footing by the beginning of the long 18th century. Yet, problems such as the ones that occupy the court case keep troubling policymakers and the public alike. A series of debasements, that is, lowerings of the silver content of coins, leads to a situation that puts the topic back on the agenda. When Macaulay tells us it may be “doubted whether all the misery which had been inflicted on the English nation in a quarter of a century by bad Kings, bad Ministers, bad Parliaments, and bad Judges, [is] equal to the misery caused in a single year by bad crowns and bad shillings” (1967: 5, 188f.), this is in reference to a number of debasements significantly reducing the amount of precious metal in English coinage. From the vantage point of historical distance, Macaulay confirms the comments on the dangers of debasement made by Locke, who, we recall, holds that counterfeit “contributed more to Sink us, than all the Force of our Enemies could do” (1991 [1691]: 472).

These comments have to be read as referring to proposals of a recoinage as the remedy to the low quality of the currency. At the end of the 17th century, English currency is badly worn and oftentimes clipped around the edge. These practices become increasingly lucrative as the price of silver at the end of the 17th century rises by more than 20% (cf. Sargent and Velde 2002: 279). By 1695, English coinage is missing 50% of its original silver content (cf. Jones 1988: 232f.). In the meantime, technological progress has made it possible to produce coins with milled edges, which are both harder to clip and harder to counterfeit, making another strong argument for a recoinage (cf. Sargent and Velde 2002: 273). With a project under way that would replace old with new coins, the question of their silver content is raised again, and with it, the question of bullionism and nominalism.

For this, parliament hears the opinions of public intellectuals, amongst them William Lowndes. Lowndes champions a more nominalist approach to the question of coinage, arguing that the currency should be devalued, that is, that the amount of silver the coins contain by default should be lowered. He proposes “[t]hat all the New Moneys,

whether they be Gold or Silver, shall in the Coining thereof be made in Fineness or Purity, according to the present Standard” (1695: 122, emphasis in the original). By bringing silver content down to a level that would align the face value of the coin with the current silver price, clipping and counterfeiting would be curbed (cf. Sargent and Velde 2002: 281).¹⁵⁹

However, Charles Montagu, the Commissioner of the Treasury, is dissatisfied with Lowndes’ suggestions and solicits the opinions of other experts, amongst them John Locke (cf. Sargent and Velde 2002: 282). Locke proves himself a staunch opponent to Lowndes’ ideas. He argues that

Silver, i.e., the quantity of pure Silver separable from the Alloy, makes the real value of Money. If it does not, coin Copper with the same Stamp and denomination, and see whether it will be of the same value. (1991 [1695]: 311)

Locke’s hostility towards the concept of debasement stems from a bullionist theory of money. He argues here not only against debasement, but against the recoinage itself. In order to avoid the costs of a recoinage, government should merely make sure that underweight coin would no longer circulate by tale but by weight (Sargent and Velde 2002: 285). In the course of these debates, Locke prevails. Montague and the Lord Keeper John Somers decide against an adjusted recoinage and for a recoinage at the old standard. All coins are successively removed from circulation and reminted at an effectively higher silver content, again dramatically reducing the total amount of available money.

For the English economy, this means further shortages in coin, particularly in small change. The Great Recoinage of 1696 thus leads to the precarious monetary situation characterizing much of the 18th century. My preliminary argument in this section will be that this constant threat to the institution that mediates social cohesion means that the narrative perspective of a coin carries a particular weight. However, in

¹⁵⁹ In addition, such a debasement would effectively enhance the money supply (cf. Ormazabal 2007: 6), as it would make a given amount of silver go further.

order to understand how this monetary ideology is negotiated in the narrative structure of it-narratives, it is worth focusing less on the outcome of the debate and more on its arguments.

While prevailing politically, Locke's stance turns out to be somewhat of an embarrassment for later monetary economists (cf. Sargent and Velde 2002: 288). His strict adherence to bullionism soon comes to seem antiquated in a world growing to accept representative money as the default (cf. *ibid.*). Lowndes' position, in contrast, seems the decidedly modern one (cf. Weiss Smith 2012: 217). Dissatisfaction with Locke's writing on money runs deeper than the fact that he chooses the wrong side of a historical debate. While Lowndes cites historical evidence, meticulously examining past coinages (cf. 1695), Locke seems to proceed by deductive reasoning alone (cf. Sargent and Velde 2002: 285). This still confuses critics to this day, who are surprised by the apparent blunder of one of the historical champions of the inductive method.¹⁶⁰ Thus, Sargent and Velde write that:

Locke's writings about the recoinage belie his reputation as an empiricist philosopher. Against Lowndes's carefully documented account of historical facts about British coinage and his rich model designed to account for them, Locke stubbornly held to a simplified model despite its inconsistency with some salient facts. But politically Locke triumphed over Lowndes the empiricist. (Sargent and Velde 2002: 263)

The 'simplicity' of Locke appears puzzling nowadays. Usually a sober empiricist, it is suggested that Locke's conservatism gets the better of him when monetary matters are concerned. In the following, I will argue the exact opposite, namely that Locke holds these views precisely *as* an empiricist. In his *Further Considerations Concerning the Raising the Value of Money* (1696), he remarks: "Men in their bargains contract not for denominations or sounds, but for the intrinsique value; which is

¹⁶⁰ William Shaw testifies to this when he comments that "[t]he interference of the philosopher Locke in the monetary debates which centred round the great recoinage of 1696, affords one of the most conspicuous instances of the weakness of even piercing intellects before a purely practical and technical question, and of the danger at such junctures of preferring broad generalisations before expert sense" (1967: 103).

the quantity of Silver by publique Authority warranted to be in pieces of such denominations” (Locke 1991 [1691]: 375). Equating nominalism with mere “sounds” and his own positions with the “intrinsic” value of precious metal, Locke not only makes a point about monetary matters. In the opposition of sound versus intrinsic value, we find the opposition of words versus objects that is so crucial for the tradition of empiricism and experimental philosophy ever since the writings of Francis Bacon.

We have already shown how it-narrators portray threats to the coinage as threats to the bond that constitutes the social order. We find a similar anxiety in Locke, for whom monetary policy is connected to the central problems of social cohesion. He predicts that a debasement will “weaken, if not totally destroy the public faith” (Locke 1991 [1691]: 417), seeing debasement as directly connected to a deterioration of the social link and a thereby as a threat to social order.¹⁶¹

In the eyes of the empiricist, the social link established by the circulation of money needs a grounding in something more than the “bones of princes” (Desan 2014: 170), in which the right to mint is said to reside. Having seen a sovereign reduced to nothing more than his bones in the throes of a civil war that devastated the country for the better part of a decade, the empiricists and experimental philosophers seek a common ground outside of the political. Looking back at Shapin and Shaffer’s study *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, discussed in the second chapter, we find the seeds of the empiricist’s desire for a non-sectarian grounding of authority. The English Civil War had demonstrated the dangers of the lack of a common reference in dispute and the empiricists and experimental philosophers try to fill in this blank by providing a ground for authority that would guarantee stability (cf. Shapin and Shaffer 1985: 72–76). As shown in the second chapter, unlike Thomas Hobbes, who calls on the power of the sovereign, they find this common denominator in the “matters of fact” (ibid. 18) that provide a “mirror of nature” (ibid. 23). The dispute between Hobbes and Boyle that is emblematic

¹⁶¹ Locke is not alone with these fears, we can find them in different historical sources of the time: Richard Scrotyer, in a Quaker pamphlet from 1696, calls this erosion of confidence the “Lamentable Confusion of the People” (Scroyer 1696) that is brought about by the state of the coinage.

of this conflict is repeated in the dispute between Lowndes and Locke. On the one side stands the belief in convention and sovereign rule, the nominalist position, on the other, the grounding of authority in ‘natural’ matters of fact, the position of the bullionists.

Christine Weiss Smith draws attention to how the story of modernization is usually told as an emancipation from nature (cf. 2012: 210; Appleby 1978). In this case, however, the appeal to nature is not a sign of a social reaction, but of modernization (cf. Weiss Smith 2012: 210). Far from being an antiquated relic, the it-narrative’s claim that “Gold would not lye” (*Golden Spy* 175) presents a ‘revolutionary’ scientific position at that time. Paradoxically, the modernization of the English monetary system, viewed from this angle, is not an *emancipation from*, but an active *evocation of* ‘nature’ (cf. *ibid.* 210). Bullionism is a means of guaranteeing the stability of a social link that is established independently of the sovereign.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that bullionist ideas can be found already in the writings of Boyle, which are ripe with the semantics of counterfeit and legitimate coin and of pureness and debasement (cf. Schaffer 2014: 25). In the preface to Boyle’s *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature* (1686), he develops a theory of judgment vis-à-vis the problem of counterfeit coinage:

I am wont to judge of opinions as of coins: I consider much less, in any one that I am to receive, whose inscription it bears, than what metal it is made of. It is indifferent enough to me whether it was stamped many years or ages since, or came but yesterday from the Mint. Nor do I regard through how many, or how few, hands it has passed for current, provided I know by the touchstone or any sure trial purposely made, whether or no [sic] it be genuine, and does or does not deserve to have been current [...] if I find it counterfeit, neither the prince’s image or inscription, nor its date (how ancient soever) nor the multitudes of hands through which it has passed unsuspected will engage me to receive it. (1772 [1686]: 4, 159)

Here, convention is discarded. The fact that a coin has passed through many hands cannot vouch for its legitimacy. Likewise, if it had been current by decree, it does not signify that it must indeed be so by nature,

nor can the likeness of the sovereign make the coin legitimate if it is made of base metal. The touchstone, an object-witness, is the only means trusted for confirming that the coin is indeed made of precious metal and worthy of further circulation.

Yet, matters of coinage are not metaphors alone for Boyle. The problem of determining the metal content of a coin is of practical importance for him. He works on the construction and improvement of hydrometers¹⁶² in order to find better means with which to detect counterfeit or clipped coins (cf. Shaffer 2014: 24f.). Like the alchemist writing down the story of *Chrysal*, Boyle – as the second chapter has shown, equally fluent in the speech of objects – is intensely interested in gold. On his death in 1691, Boyle passes on his own alchemistic writings to none other than John Locke (cf. *ibid.* 22), whom we have found paraphrased frequently in *Chrysal* and who argues in favour of bullionism. Locke, in turn, discusses these writings with another experimental empiricist: Isaac Newton (cf. *ibid.*).

Much like Locke, Newton is found at the centre of the debates around monetary policy. In the year of the Great Recoinage, 1696, Charles Montague and John Locke are successfully lobbying for Newton to take on the position of Warden of the Mint (cf. Wennerlind 2004: 147), where he is installed to implement empiricism in monetary matters (cf. Vogl 2017: 83). While initially less than enthusiastic about the position, Newton quickly takes to the task at hand and proves to be quite efficient at it (cf. Craig 1963: 137–140; Hiebendaal 2009: 123–138). Critics have repeatedly drawn attention to Newton's refusal to show mercy, as he rejects pleas for clemency by convicted counterfeiters.¹⁶³ Newton's zeal in this matter bears fruit in the end. His time as Warden of the Mint correlates with a drop in counterfeiting (cf. Craig 1963: 139). In this function, Newton shares a common position on monetary matters with Locke and Boyle, namely the idea that "Gold would not lye" (Golden Spy 175). Newton's mint connects to the broader project of the

¹⁶² Instruments measuring volume by means of water displacement. Recall the 'eureka' anecdote of Archimedes, who measures the water displacement of a crown supposed to be made from pure gold.

¹⁶³ Fifteen people accused and convicted of counterfeiting are executed in Newton's first year at the mint and eight in the following (cf. Craig 1958: 151).

Royal Society, by playing “its part in the intricate process of devising reliable objects in which public trust [...] [can] be invested” (Schaffer 2002: 511). Far from constituting a scientific field that is disconnected from the social surrounding in general and the monetary politics in particular, empiricist experimentalism is thus deeply intertwined with monetary matters. Its appeal to nature as a third position that would guarantee reliable reference takes the shape of bullionism when monetary matters are in question. Marc Shell summarizes the epistemological stance that informs this ideology:

Like small shopkeepers and philosophical empiricists, men with such sense refuse to take things at face value. They seem to heed John Locke’s warning (in “Error”) that truth should never be accepted “in the lump” (i.e., wholesale, or without first testing it with a balance and a touchstone). (Shell 1982: 158)

While Locke and his bullionist ideas influence policy in order to remove underweight coins from circulation, the owner of the shop in *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling* puts a nail through the respective it-narrator once it is discovered to lack the valuable material.

It is in scenes like these that we can discern a poetics of bullionism. Appearances (or, words) are being discarded in favour of essences (or, objects) just as unreliable signifiers of value, it-narrators made of base metal, are discovered to be counterfeits and are neutralized as signifiers by being removed from circulation. However, the examples from it-narratives dealing with counterfeit money have shown that this ideology is by no means uncontested. Some shopkeepers, that is, the owner of the gin shop in *The Birmingham Counterfeit* and the baker in *The Adventures of a Halfpenny*, know something the philosophical empiricists do not. In practice, counterfeit often functions just as well as legitimate money does. At first, we have shown the ideology of bullionism as a special case of the empiricist’s and experimental philosopher’s appeal to the natural, which, in it-narratives, is transformed into a poetics at the centre of which stands the claim that “Gold would not lye” (*Golden Spy* 175). Yet these texts have a more complex relationship to this ideology than appears at first. Their satires show the moral decay that is prevalent

in a society that values appearances, but not in order to simply discard them. Instead, in the stories of counterfeit-narrators that resume their circulations, they tell a truth about the symbolic efficacy of appearances.

4.6 Representative Money

Among it-narratives, there exists a last group of texts that can accentuate problems of narrative and monetary reliability. This subgenre is concerned with paper money, that is, objects that mediate the act of commodity exchange and circulation without having recourse to the fiction of intrinsic value. From the standpoint of these texts, the general narrative project of the genre can be put into perspective.

To begin, consider a text that appears rather late in the history of the genre: *Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note*, published anonymously in 1819. At the start of the story, the bank note engages in the mimicry of autobiographical forms characteristic of the genre:

It has been the custom, and still is, with historians to precede their narrations by an account of themselves; and, before they enter upon the main facts and events which professedly engaged them to take up the pen, to give the reader a sketch of their “birth, parentage, and education.” Some have gone as far back as to touch upon certain particulars relating to them before they were born. The example of one of our countrymen of no mean rank in the republic of letters, might be pleaded as a precedent for this embryo-biography, which at first sight seems a little out of the regular course of grave, or, more properly, stern history. Indeed, whatever an author should say of transactions concerning himself before he was born, can be but on an imperfect authority, a mere “gossip’s tale;” and what judges in these matters would pronounce hearsay evidence only. (*One Pound* 231)

The poetics of validity here tie back to the conventions of autobiography that were discussed in the second chapter. The playful evocation of the Sternean problem (“particulars relating to them before they were born”; “stern history”) serves to rekindle the problem of identity and exactness that was found to be crucial for the reliability of the (auto)

biographical account. Discarding the intermixing of the biographic mode evoked by the reference to *Tristram Shandy* and the relation of details the author cannot have experienced, the narrator claims to offer a 'true' autobiography.

Up to this point, we can understand the text as preparing the characteristic implicit argument for the rationalization of the it-narrator's claim to reliability. In the same way in which the claim of an identity between author and narrator in autobiographic writing establishes the authority of the text that follows, the money-narrator's legitimacy as currency rests on the claim that it refers to 'real' value. For all of this, the continuation of the bank note's discourse is thus only the more surprising:

The greater part of the world, however, is not altogether unacquainted with my very conception; nor would it be otherwise than vain and idle in me to conceal from the rest of it that I was the offspring of interest rather than of desire. My parents have been accused of illicit connections; but whatever might have been the extent or the crime of such intrigues, it would ill become me to dwell upon them. While on the one hand, I would desist from impertinently prying into those mysteries, which cannot be unfolded without, at the same time, exposing my kindred to shame, I would, on the other, with the present preliminary to my work to be regarded rather as an apology¹⁶⁴ for, than as an emblazoning of my life. Besides, I have of myself a great weight of suspicion to stand under, without undertaking to justify the actions of those who were the authors of my existence. [...] Without consulting the horoscope, I soon discovered that an evil planet ruled my destiny; and that I had been born (shocking to tell) with a lie, not with a silver spoon in my mouth. (*One Pound* 231; emphases in the original)

164 As seen in the second chapter, the narrator here plays on the autobiographical genre by evoking both Fielding's Satire *Apology of the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741) and *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (1740), the memoirs of a controversial contemporary playwright. The narrator thus connects to two narratives with rather problematic protagonists (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 346f.).

Here, the narrator departs from the structure that we find in *The Adventures of a Rupee* or *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland*. Whereas in the *Rupee*, the precious material of the narrator incites the affective dimension of “desire” that draws the human subjects into a fight over it (cf. 35), and in *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland* leads to the killing of a priest who is robbed of the narrator before it is cast into a counterfeit coin (cf. 151–154), desire is replaced here by the much more abstract “interest”. Whereas the forces of nature shaped the golden body of the rupee, the bank note presents itself as a product of human intentionality. Since its “parents” are its “authors”, it is the product of a semiotic process. The bank note is always already a signifier in a system of human commerce.

In contrast to narrators made from precious metal, this bank note is thoroughly entangled in human affairs. It testifies to this complicity, when it mentions the “illicit connections” (*One Pound* 231) that these “authors” (ibid.) are accused of. As in the case of the counterfeiters, who must be able to plausibly deny all connections to the false money they give into circulation, danger is here expressed in the imagery of entanglement.

This, however, carries crucial implications for the narrator’s claims to reliability. Unlike the specie-narrators before it, the bank note does not try to evoke the fantasy of a value outside of human affairs. It is a sign of value, but one that cannot claim reliability in the way that a golden rupee does. While coin-narrators proceed from the empiricist-bullionist tenet that “Gold would not lye” (*Golden Spy* 175), this bank note concedes that it was “born with a [...] lie in [its] mouth” (*One Pound* 231). Are we to assume the bank note to be as ‘bad’ as the eponymous shilling? We know that it is not counterfeit money that tells this story, but legal tender. What are we then to make of the fact that the bank note seems rather ambiguous about its ability to function in this way?

We can elucidate this problem when we consider that the bank note evokes an “evil planet” (ibid.), conventionally understood to refer to Saturn.¹⁶⁵ By the beginning of the 19th century, this planet has acquired a

165 This association goes back at least to Ptolemy’s discussion of Saturn’s character in the *Tetrabiblos* (cf. Ptolemy 1822: IV.9).

rich cultural history of conflicting connotations. Saturn is the god of the bucolic golden age and the god of death. He is the symbol of both liberation and of potential social disintegration. These conflictive connotations are joined in the idea of Saturn as the god of wealth, accounting, and money, whose temple houses the Roman treasury, thereby associating the god with a long history of anxiety about the social impact of commerce (cf. Garstad 2002). By evoking Saturn, this it-narrator is citing the traditions of a precarious social imaginary of money. The ambiguous patron deity (cf. Böhme 1988: 256f.) is combined with the insight that the bank note was born with a lie in its mouth, when the narrator speaks of itself as of a tool for deceit.

This problematic referentiality can be contextualized by a passage from another it-narrative. In *The Adventures of a Sovereign* (1819–1822), the narrator witnesses an interaction between its owner, Julia, and a creditor of her mother, involving not itself but a £5 bank note: “Taking a five-pound note from her pocket, She [Julia] presented it to my mistress, who looking significantly at her first, and then at the note, observed, that was quite a new one, and not endorsed; and she hoped that it was good” (249). Surprisingly, the good condition of the bank note is not a sign of its validity, but a ground for suspicion. By lacking the marks of usage, the bank note fails to provide reference to a long history of circulation, that is, to its previous acceptance in transactions and thus to its ability to be cashed in. It is finally accepted, but only after Julia is urged to “write her name upon the note” (ibid.), thereby ‘endorsing’ it, that is, taking personal responsibility for its convertibility into ready money (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 348). Scenes such as these illustrate the hints given by the narrator of *Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note* that point towards a general suspicion of its ability to realize its value. These stories are told at a moment in time in which many people outright refuse to accept bank notes (cf. Poovey 2008: 44f.), treating them effectively as counterfeit money.

The bullionist ideology hinges on money’s capacity to unambiguously refer to value. If, as in the case of the bank note, value is found to reside outside of its own material body, referentiality becomes precarious. This is where the apparent conflation of (good) paper money and (bad) counterfeit opens up to a central aporia of representation. The

etymology of the word counterfeit can shed a light on this connection. Even though it has lost these connotations by now, the word connects to a much broader semantic field at the end of the 18th century. It does not only refer (in the narrow sense) to false money, nor (in the wider sense) to deceitful objects or persons, but to representation itself. It is used to denote a picture or an image (OED s.v. counterfeit, n. and adj.). This meaning is nowadays practically obsolete in English but survives in the (antiquated) German *Konterfei*, as in ‘someone’s likeness’. The likeness, for instance, of the sovereign that guarantees the connection of nominal and material value. By means of this image, counterfeit stages its deceit. The term thus connects deceit to representation as such. From this perspective, paper money is an extension of the problem of counterfeit. Hence, even though it is legal tender, the bank note’s ability to realize its use-value and thereby serve as an instrument of exchange seems anything but certain. The narrator is troubled by this inadequacy time and again:

I found myself subjected to daily insinuations and humiliations; and though my tender condition might be supposed a protection against any direct violence, yet it did not prevent my discerning the many contemptuous allusions at my connections. These were generally veiled under an insidious or ambiguous kind of compliment; such as that ‘I was a thing full of promise – pity I could not inspire confidence equal to that promise’, for then I might live for ever: with various other artfully dissembled phrases of that nature. (*One Pound* 232; emphases in the original)

Again, the central anxiety lies in the ambiguity of its “connections”. The symbolic efficacy of the metonymical chain that is supposed to bind the signifier of value to a material embodiment of value is under suspicion. The bank note is not itself the embodiment of value, but merely a “promise” of value. All British bank notes of the time bear the inscription “I promise to pay the bearer on demand” (Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 347), making clear that bank notes as such are not seen as possessing the value they refer to, but merely to circulate in its stead. In contrast to the specie-narrators discussed above, inscription and content are not fused

together in the bank note.¹⁶⁶ Rather, language acquires a certain degree of autonomy. The embodiment is replaced by a promise that must be cashed in. Thus, as the bank note's "connections" cannot refer directly to the material of value, they have to take a detour in order to fulfil their signifying function. The bank note could "live," that is, circulate, forever, but only if it can mobilize enough credibility concerning its convertibility into the value it promises. Evoking the right "connections", as opposed to the wrong ones, is the bank note's strategy for convincing the reader of its validity. For this, it is eager to emphasize its relation to other signifiers of value:

[O]nce, a dealer in sheep's heads [...] gave his creditor a dirty piece of paper, scarcely legible for its bad English, but purporting to be an acknowledgement of a vulgar tripe-man for the sum of ten pounds; which note, upon being questioned as to its intrinsic worth, was, in my hearing, affirmed to be 'as good as a bank note.' Now, conscious as I was of the stately place of my origin, and of the mean spot whence this sententious plebeian sprung, the first being the largest Edifice in the chief city of Europe, and the latter a subterraneous dwelling in Mutton-lane, I was, as it may well be imagined, put to my trial how to contain myself.
(*One Pound* 232)

In absence of the 'solid' claims of precious metal, the bank note can only refer to third positions, that is, positions of authority that are called upon to guarantee that value can indeed be realized by a sheet of paper. Thus, the bank note is under a constant injunction to prove its referentiality by showing that it has the 'right' connections. In its "apology" (*One Pound* 231) it refers to its birth in the "largest edifice in the chief city of Europe" (*ibid.* 232), that is, the Bank of England. This location is contrasted with the "subterraneous dwelling in Mutton-lane" (*ibid.*), where its rival, the private promissory note is thought to have originated. Although by the early 19th century, precursors of paper money (such as the promissory note) have been around for quite some time, bank notes issued directly by the Bank of England are a comparatively

¹⁶⁶ That is, the bank note is not epigrammatic in Lessing's sense, see Footnote 138.

new means of payment. In contrast to promissory notes, the bank (and with it, the sovereign) guarantees its redeemability. The “marks of finery by Nurse Newland” (*One Pound* 232), the signature of Abraham Newland, the chief cashier of the Bank of England, are called upon to add an institutional support to its claims to validity. This ‘mark’ of public authority comes to replace the function that the private signature of Julia in the passage from *The Adventures of a Sovereign* fulfils. Where a private debtor can always happen to default on a payment, the Bank of England, this is the it-narrator’s subtext, can be trusted. The bank note’s diatribe against the private note is thus also a struggle in defence of the institutionalization of paper money.

At its core, the conflict depicted in *Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note* stresses a transition from a particular to a universal monetary function. Unlike earlier promissory notes, the bank notes of the Bank of England do no longer carry interest, nor the signature of an individual debtor. However, unlike modern paper money, they are redeemable. This means that, although functioning in a nominalist fashion themselves, the currency issued by the Bank of England does in fact refer to a certain amount of precious metal. In theory, every bank note can be exchanged for the corresponding amount of gold. This gold standard serves as a defence against inflation. The bank can only print and issue money as long as it is ‘backed’ by the corresponding value in gold that is stored in its vault. For the semiotics of paper money, this means that there is a material referent to which the inscription on the bank notes points. However, the publication of *Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note* (1819) takes place at a time in which the ability to redeem paper money is suspended – for no less than 24 years.¹⁶⁷

167 While the Revolutionary Wars sweep across France and the continent at the end of the 18th century, the English economic landscape witnesses a similarly revolutionary disruption of its monetary system. When Britain enters the war effort on the side of the coalition and racks up ever increasing expenses, a banking panic ensues (cf. Chadha and Newby 2013: 2). The state sees its gold reserves – that are crucial for the war effort – threatened by a rush on the banks. In 1797, parliament passes the Bank Restriction Act, which temporarily suspends gold convertibility. When a quick victory for the coalition grows increasingly unlikely and the Revolutionary Wars turn into the Napoleonic Wars, the suspension of convertibility remains in place. Only in 1821 is the convertibility finally restored at the pre-war level (ibid.). For 24 years, Britain had effectively run a fiat currency. There were

The bank notes, now a truly nominal currency, are signifiers that can no longer rely on their connection to a ‘naturally’ valuable material. Bullionist ideology at the turn to the 19th century is thus highly sceptical of this new type of money that connects to the same anxieties as counterfeit. At one point, the narrator of *Aureus* touches upon this by evoking the genre tradition, as it talks about the narrating coin in *Chrysal*:

He and his high-born brethren [...] had experienced many vicissitudes; and, though highly esteemed wherever they went, at one time such a revolution took place in their value, that on account of their increased worth, they were all banished from Great Britain, and supplanted by a family which had absolutely risen from rags, and bore no other impress of their noble decent and current estimation, that what was stamped upon the thin waste-paper form in which they appeared. (*Aureus* 11f.)

Aureus elaborates on the twofold meaning of its status as a sovereign and develops it further, playing on the meanings of both national currency and royal houses. The revolution in value refers to a spike in the price of precious metals, which leads to their overevaluation compared to their nominal value and subsequently to the increasing export of silver and gold, causing the bullion shortages that were mentioned already. The family “risen from rags” does so quite literally, since the bank notes that are to supplant bullion are often made out of old clothing (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 350). The claim of the royal family is usurped by a new kind of ruler that is seen as illegitimate and thus not able to establish a social link that would grant true cohesion. This imagery is all the more present for the readers of *Aureus*, given that the French monarch had been deposed at the end of the century and replaced by a self-crowned de-facto monarch at the beginning of the next. Such anxieties are further amplified by the fact that in the same month when the Bank of England suspends gold conversion, in February 1797, France demonetizes 44 million Assignats, ending a catastrophic experiment with fiat

suspensions of convertibility before that, but only for very short periods. They occurred during events discussed here already: the Great Recoinage of 1696–97 and the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–1746 (cf. *ibid.*).

money that had led to hyperinflation (cf. Chadha and Newby 2013: 4). The breakdown of monetary stability goes hand in hand with the dissolution of the traditional social order, as can be observed in the French case, where the replacement of bullion by paper is preceded by the replacement of the king by the *Assemblée Nationale*. When the social link is not backed by a material promising ‘natural’ value, the contingency of the social order is exposed.

James Gillery’s 1797 caricature *Midas, Transmuting all into Paper* is emblematic of these anxieties. In this print, an ill-fated alchemy is at work, as a reverse Midas is shown turning gold into a mass of paper. However, it is not only paper that is derided here, but more precisely writing on paper. The tiny paper notes that are depicted all bear the inscription ‘one’, designating them as one-pound bank notes such as the narrator we have examined here. The disparity between valuable gold and valueless writing lamented by the caricature is brought to a climax in the crown of the sovereign. The British Midas wears a crown entirely made up of one-pound bank notes. The message is clear – to think writing could replace gold is ridiculous.¹⁶⁸

Such an apparently ridiculous equation of language and gold is taken up by one of the last it-narratives in the corpus of Blackwell et al., Robert Ainslie’s *The Life and Adventures of a Scotch Guinea Note*, published in 1826. This narrative emphasizes the precarious substitution of gold by language in its title. The term ‘guinea’ is not only one of many names for coins of different denominations, but a name that connects directly to the material the coin is made of, referring to the West African region of Guinea, where the gold is sourced (cf. Chambers 1885: 259).¹⁶⁹ However, the guinea (Charles Johnstone’s) is also considered the prototype of the it-narrator, as the reference in *Aureus* above indicates. This genealogy can be traced in how *Chrysal* establishes the tradition

168 A similar argument is found in Jonathan Swift’s satirical poem “The Bank’s Thrown Down”, that includes the following passage: “The Bank is to make us a New Paper Mill, / This Paper they say, by the Help of a Quill / The Whole Nation’s Pockets with Money will fill” (Poovey 2008: 45).

169 Incidentally, ‘Guinea’ serves not only the name for the much-used British coin but is also the place where Enlightenment public discourse locates – or rather, projects – fetishism (cf. Pietz 1988: 106f.). For the question of the relation of theories of fetishism to it-narratives, see the conclusion.



Figure 7: Midas, Transmuting all into Paper. Print by James Gillray, 1797

of giving proper names (in allusion to alchemic terms) to coins, such as Argal, Argentum, and Aureus, and in the many references to Chrysal found across other it-narrators we have seen in the introduction.

Robert Ainslie's late it-narrative derives directly from this tradition, featuring once again a guinea. Yet, this guinea is not a piece of valuable metal, but an inscription on paper, not stemming from a "lump of earth" (*Rupee* 34) but being "born in the Parliament Close of Edinburgh" (*Scotch Guinea* 5). In contrast to its predecessors, it does not use the form of the talking coin to set up picaresque adventures (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 1, 313) but reflects in a general manner on monetary issues. What other it-narratives have shown, the scotch guinea note tells.¹⁷⁰

At this point, there seems no trace left of the bullionist poetics that used to characterize the genre. Instead, the bank note's project is a defence of its real-life brethren. It intervenes in a debate that ensues from the failure of a number of English banks during the banking crises of 1825–1826 and concerns the proposal of a general ban on the circulation of notes under the value of five pounds. Talking about the beneficial effects of monetary circulation, it connects to the same arguments voiced beforehand by the Birmingham Counterfeit (cf. 40), and cites its "brother the golden Guinea, and [its] cousin the Rupee" (*Scotch Guinea* 5), thereby suggesting the same legitimacy as currency. It spends much of its narrative trying to distance paper money from historical cases of investment bubbles, the South Sea Scheme, and the Darien Scheme specifically (cf. *ibid.*). It is more of a pamphlet in that it uses the device of the it-narrator as a means for political intervention – an attempt to rehabilitate the bank note as a means of payment, mainly by distancing it from the taint of speculation. There is only one instance where the narrator returns to the satiric structure and the act of de-masking that is so central to it-narratives and that was discussed in the second chapter. The scene takes place as the narrator recounts its experience of being paid to a group of doctors:

I could not but be astonished by their apparent indifference about me, for, on getting me, they generally squeezed me into their breeches pocket, without so much as looking me in the face. But this I soon found out to be all fudge, and done in a kind of pretended modesty before their

170 As we will see in the last section of this chapter, this process prefigures one of the trajectories along which it-narratives will disappear as a genre.

employers; for no sooner were their backs about, than I was drawn out, when they deigned to peep at me fu' cordially. I came alone to them, from what were their apparent sensations when a few of us came together. In the first case they were dull and gloomy – and in the last, joy mantled in their faces. (*Scotch Guinea* 5)

The doctors, unlike the various shop-owners in the previous narratives, do not engage in the different techniques of suspicion when presented with money lacking bullion. Instead of examining the note, they are said to take the narrator “without so much as looking” in its face. Yet, there is no face to meet their gaze. One should remember that for coin-narrators, the talk of faces is no simple anthropomorphism, these narrators bear the faces of kings and queens. But unlike coins, British bank notes generally do not carry portraits of the sovereign, but, up to 1960, only writing.¹⁷¹ The indexical relationship that is still present in the way that coinage establishes a social link through the gaze of the monarch is replaced by ‘mere’ signifiers, the “promise” (*One Pound* 232) of payment as the only thing that the bank note can point to.¹⁷² According to Jean-Joseph Goux, in a society in which the social link is thus constituted in exclusively representative terms,

the relationship between language and being begins to be problematic. Just as in the economic sphere there arises the question of convertibility, that is, the existence or not of a deposit serving to back the tokens in circulation, likewise in the domain of signification the truth value of language will become a crucial concern. Language will no longer be conceived as fully expressing (or as being capable of adequately expressing) reality or being; it will necessarily be conceived as a means, a relatively autonomous instrument, by which it is possible to represent reality to varying degrees of exactitude. (1994: 17)

171 Given the observations made earlier about the association of the sovereign with currency, we could understand this to be in an attempt at distancing the sovereign from this ‘unreliable’ means of payment.

172 Colonial bank notes, such as the ones pictured above, frequently carry depictions of plants. When read in the context of the empiricist-bullionist discourse, this could be understood as an attempt at establishing a connection to the natural world.

Goux draws on an equation of linguistic and economic signifiers that can be traced back to the third quote that precedes this work. In the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian invites the reader to understand “language as currency minted with the public stamp”¹⁷³ (I.6.3).¹⁷⁴ While Goux does not refer explicitly to Quintilian, he argues that the theory of language is homologous to the theory of inconvertible money, thereby connecting to Saussure, whose theory of linguistics is itself informed by the economic concept of value (cf. Saussure 1959: 18 and 135). Value is understood as differential, in that its only property is its difference to other values. As such, it is inherently negative and can thus be understood only through what it is not, or differently put, for what it can be exchanged for. This is a quality that Saussure himself explains by example of a 5-Franc piece (cf. *ibid.* 115).

Thus, although Saussure uses the example of a coin, it is not commodity-money, but representative money. It is homologous to language in that its signifiers are essentially arbitrary, without ‘intrinsic’ values. This modern understanding of money has more in common with the paper bank note than with the bullion narrators in *Chrysal* or *The Adventures of a Rupee*. Goux frames this as a historical transition. With the emergence of representative money, the fantasy of language as a means for the unambiguous expression of reality is put in question. The direct relationship between language and being that the “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1691]: 318) strives for, becomes impossible. Instead, language acquires the autonomy of which Bacon warns his readers when he argues against “falling in love with a picture” (1999: 21). The present section has shown how this threat is negotiated in the stories of it-narrators who are legitimate money, yet concede to being born with “lie[s] in [their] mouth[s]” (*One Pound* 231).

173 See also the discussion of how the public stamps on coins guarantee for their purity in *The Wealth of Nations* (cf. Smith 1976: 1, 29)

174 The whole passage in the original reads: “Consuetudo vero certissima loquendi magistra, utendumque plane sermone, ut nummo, cui publica forma est” (IO I.6.3).

4.7 "A Naked Way of Writing" and the Voice of Objects

Just like counterfeit, narrators that represent paper money point to the fact that the functioning of money does not depend on 'intrinsic' value. This allows us now to return to the central observations about the claims to reliability in it-narratives and examine them in the framework structural psychoanalysis offers for understanding the experimental scientist's desire for a language purged of ambiguity.

For this, we will first have to recall how Saussurean semiotics refuses the idea of an anchoring in an extra-linguistic (or extra-monetary) space, thereby standing in contrast to the experimental scientist's ideal of direct referentiality. For the fellows of the Royal Society, an anchor has to be found in the natural world and its observation through objects. These are the instruments that replace the potentially unreliable human witnesses. Since they have to partake in ambiguous and thus problematic "language games" (cf. Wittgenstein 1958: 5) in order to transmit their findings, the fellows seek a language that would be purged of this ambiguity.

Albrecht Koschorke calls this desire for the establishment of sterile semantic spaces one of the obsessions of the Enlightenment (cf. 1999: 427). The 'sterility' of Boyle's air pump,¹⁷⁵ its ability to produce a vacuum, as well as the discourse of experimental science as a whole, draw on a language that wants to avoid the "varying and illustration of [...] works with tropes and figures" (Bacon 1999: 21) that Bacon attacks. In the wake of Bacon's empiricist rhetoric, the experimental philosophers of the late 17th century strive for a "naked way of writing" (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318). As in the case of counterfeit coins, wearing "coat[s]" (*Birmingham Counterfeit* 16) of precious metal, the imagery that informs the concept of the "naked way of writing" understands tropes as deceiv-

175 In the course of this work, we have also seen several texts that employ this sterility for different ends by using the island as a motif. In the writing of Swift, the island serves amongst others for the lampooning of science, in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* it is used for theological reflections, and its appropriation in the genre of economic writing gives us what Marx later calls the robinsonades of political economy. These are the sterile economic spaces used for the justification of the basic tenets of bourgeois political economy (Marx 1987: 17f.).

ing pieces of clothing. The infatuation of the 18th century with the legibility of class positions and the validity of monetary signifiers resonates with the empiricists' concerns over reliable language and provides a rich semantic field for its expression. However, the antirhetorical rhetoric of the Royal Society radicalizes the metaphoric content it takes from the discourses on sumptuary ethic. It does not call for the right garment, but for no clothing at all. Only nakedness can guarantee reliability.

The fantasy of such a naked language, 'stripped' of ambiguity, is what Lacan calls the *mathème*. In his later work, he develops two concepts that are surprisingly pertinent to the issues at stake in the rhetoric of the Royal Society. The first one, the *mathème*, refers to the aspect of language that is characterized by stringency and formalization, the "mathematical plainness" (1959: 113) that Sprat calls for (cf. Lacan 1998: 11; Dolar 2019: 77). The second, *lalangue*, designates its apparent opposite, language's propensity for homonymy and puns (cf. Lacan 1998: 44). It refers to what Bacon polemicizes against when he attacks "tropes and figures" (1990: 21). Going back to a classic distinction of the modalities of language, one can connect *mathème* to the letter and *lalangue* to the voice (cf. Dolar 2019: 77).

Mladen Dolar argues for the essential inseparability of the two functions. The disagreement between scholars on whether to salvage *mathème* or *lalangue* from Lacan's work is traced back to the foundational schism of philosophy between 'proper' philosophy and sophistry. Dolar illustrates how this schism is perceived by the proponents of the *mathème*: "[T]here is a choice to be emphatically made between the true philosophy and its counterfeit, between the philosopher and the impostor that is the sophist" (2019: 67). Whose words should be allowed to circulate, and whose should be removed from circulation as counterfeits? I argue that this fundamental split is restaged at the birth of experimental science, when empiricists seek to ground a discourse on the premise of a new kind of writing that avoids the pitfalls of linguistic appearances. The second chapter has shown how this rhetoric of the Royal Society informs the literary device of the it-narrator. The empiricist fantasy of looking behind deceiving appearances gives rise to the desire of unmasking constitutive of this satirical genre. This is the desire to be able to look behind social appearances and discover

counterfeit characters, that is, both the characters of people and the characters stamped on coins and bank notes. In a world of omnipresent deceit, it-narratives promise the reliable signification of the *mathème*.

However, from the first days of the genre, this promise takes the shape of a host of elusive voices. These are the "soft silver sound" (211) of Addison's Silver Shilling, the "hollow voice" (34) of Argal, the voice of a "spirit of the Atmosphere" (*Aerostatic Spy* 229), the "gentle, but peculiar voice" (271) of the ostrich feather, and the "voice, celestially harmonious" (*Chrysal* 1, 11), of the golden guinea, but, most importantly, the voice that inaugurates the genre in 1709. Woken up at night, the frame-narrator of Gildon's *The Golden Spy*, hears unintelligible sounds emanating from somewhere in his chamber:

[T]he former noise began to assume a Tone extremely (sic) like that of the Humane Voice, arriving at last to a Murmuring Articulation, some broken words of which reach'd my Ears, and seem'd to come from a Person just breaking from a profound sleep, and yet not conscious enough to make sense of what he utter'd. (4)

Thus, at the beginning of the genre, there is a voice. It does not signify anything, but provides a purely aesthetic impression, the "Murmuring Articulations". The aspect of language that corresponds to the voice, *lalangue*, is beneath or beyond meaning. As Dolar points out, such attention paid to the voice sabotages interpellation (cf. 2006: 3). The medium is foregrounded as the transmission of a symbolic content, the message, is obscured. The "profound sleep" evoked when the first it-narrator is about to begin its narration is thus also a sleep of reason. It is the opposite of the 'sterility' that enlightenment language, according to Koschorke, aims for (cf. 1999: 427). The voice connects to a sensual quality that is seen as a threat to reason¹⁷⁶ (cf. Lagaay 2011: 109) that aims to speak in the semantically sterile spaces. As the narrator of *A Month's Adventures of a Base Shilling* (ca. 1820) warns, there are "many things now-a-days [...] carr[ying] a fine sound with them [...] like the

176 See for example St. Augustine's meditations of the voice in church singing (cf. Lagaay 2011: 116).

fine speeches of some folks” (262), who are “found at lengths to have no more truth in them than a bad shilling was to have silver underneath” (ibid.). Finally, this also recalls the comments of Locke quoted earlier, who contrasts deceiving “sounds” with the “intrinsique” value that bullionists champion (1991 [1691]: 375).

The language that would constitute the sterile space of the *mathème*, thereby arriving at the truth obscured by such “fine speech”, is plagued by the overabundance of quality in the voice. Unlike language understood as inherently negative, made up by a system of differential relations whose sensory qualities are of no consequence, the voice is an aspect of *lalangue* depending on qualities and thus essentially positive (cf. Milner 2017b: 88). It is thus precisely this “soft silver sound” (*Silver Shilling* 211) of their “celestially harmonious” (*Chrysal* 1, 11) voices that puts the reliability of it-narrators in question.

However, even as these voices consolidate into the reliable narrators that go on to pass judgment onto a corrupt society in narratives that transform their voices into letters,¹⁷⁷ they remain a constitutive exception to the fantasy of a purely referential language that they uphold. As seen in the second chapter, the claim to reliability in it-narratives rests on a deeply counterfactual device. This device, the it-narrator, promises readers access to a knowledge that is not corrupted by the moral or epistemological failings of human narrators, but only at the price of a device that is itself non-mimetic. This paradox connects to the discourses of experimental philosophy. While Bacon argues against the “tropes and figures” (1999: 21) that distract from the “weight of the matter” (ibid.), it is precisely the trope of *prosopopoeia* that guarantees the functioning of the discourse of experimental science. In giving voice to inanimate objects, the ventriloquism of the experimental philosophers can claim *objectivity*.

The same basic structure holds true for the second trope that is constitutive of it-narratives and that I have called *chiropoeia*, that is, the conferring of a hand. In the second part of the book, the work of this device was examined in order to make sense of the way in which

177 See the found manuscript trope in many it-narratives that is examined in the second chapter.

it-narrators present the vagaries of their circulation. The idea of an invisible hand regulating the circulation of commodities confers structures of meaning on an otherwise contingent process. But the resulting organization is plagued by a similar return of disavowed elements. The invisible hand is one of the founding axioms of the new science of political economy that sets out to apply empiricist methods to the sphere of economic life (cf. Bitterman 1940). Yet it draws its imagery from a pre-modern cosmology and the theological concept of divine providence. The idea of the impersonal hand of the market goes back to nothing other than the hand of God. The operation that confers order is thus decidedly rhetorical.

In it-narratives, these contradictions manifest themselves in the plot structure, resulting in a tension between an orderly closure of the narrative and the suggestion of radical openness. It-narratives are caught between a narrative that would see 'fate' at work in the return of the commodity to its 'rightful' place and a drive towards openness that invalidates all closure and strives for perpetual circulation. In this, we see the return to the age-old split of the economic identified by Aristotle as the dichotomy of *oikonomia* and *chrematistike*, the first understanding economics as the allocation of scarce resources and the second as the perpetual acquisition of surplus wealth (cf. *Politics* I.9.1257a-1258a). This split in economic theory corresponds to the split between metaphor and metonymy as theorized in Jakobson's concept of the two axes of language (cf. Jakobson 1971: 90–95). In this sense, the money-narratives resist the closure and totalization that metaphor and *oikonomia* (or: *mathème*) often achieve for commodity-narrators. Instead, their narratives are pried open time and again by metonymy and *chrematistike* (or: *lalangue*).

The present chapter, on the other hand, has taken up these findings by focusing on the question of monetary validity. By examining the way in which bullionism tries to anchor value in the natural properties of precious metals, it has shown a process whereby language is discarded as untrustworthy and supplanted by the supposedly unambiguous signification of material. Since the struggle over the dominant monetary ideology that takes place between nominalism and bullionism is resolved in favour of the latter, the counterfeit coin becomes an

epitome of the threat to official currency and social order. We see how counterfeit it-narrators are removed from circulation, but their removal is often shown to be a performance staged for the public, while their circulation continues regardless of the purity of their material. Despite the official hegemony of bullionism, historical sources show that false and token money can circulate widely, and significant sectors of domestic and colonial economies depend on it. The counterfeit thus forms the disavowed centre that upholds the official doctrine of bullionism.¹⁷⁸

Proceeding from these observations, we can now see that the three operations examined in the three parts of this study – processes that want to establish reliability, orderly circulation, and validity – are constitutive of it-narratives. Each of them is dependent on the foreclosure of a disavowed element. At their most abstract level, the level of signification as such, these disavowals can be traced back to the fundamental split between the two poles that I have laid out in the Lacanian concepts of *lalangue* and *mathème*. The *mathème* promises a referentiality outside of the ambiguities of language proper, but can be transmitted by no other means than this language itself (cf. Lacan 1998: 110):

This kind of formalization that the *mathème* strives for only subsists if I employ, in presenting it, the language I make use of. Therein lies the objection: no formalization of language is transmissible without the use of language itself. It is in the very act of speaking that I make this formalization. (ibid. 119)

As Barbara Cassin suggests, the disavowal of *lalangue* in favour of the *mathème* might be nothing but philosophy fighting its own shadow in its battle against sophistry (cf. Dolar 2019: 67; Cassin 1995). This would

¹⁷⁸ Behind this doctrine lurks the dangerous realization that the social bond is guaranteed by nothing more than convention, that only a fiction is holding together the social order. We recall how Hamlet speaks of the king in the first section of this chapter, calling him “a thing” (IV.ii.27). Guildenstern takes the bait, asking “A thing, my lord?”, Hamlet answers: “Of nothing” (IV.ii.28f.). We can understand this as referring not only to the fact that the individual king can never fill out the body politic of kingship (cf. Caygill 2000: 111), but also as pointing to the fundamental lack at the heart of this institution. It is not grounded in a transcendental connection with God, but (like the currency that takes over its function in establishing the social link) in convention.

mean that there is no ultimate grounding on which these discourses could rely, no meta-language one could use to refer to things unambiguously. Or, in other words: The formalization of the *mathème* turns out to be the formalization of the impasse of formalization (cf. Zupančič 2017: 69). This impasse, I claim in the following section, is given poetic expression in it-narratives, through the way in which these literary texts foreground the work of their central tropes.

4.8 Prosopopoeia – Chiropoeia – Catachresis

We have thus far seen how the three discourses around reliability, circulation, and validity are structured around disavowed cores. The impasses that we have traced in the discourses of empiricist experimental science, political economy, and bullionist monetary policy, are restaged in it-narratives. As satiric texts, they aim at the unmasking of social hypocrisy, but they can only do so by help of another mask, namely *prosopopoeia*. The Greek word for this trope, we recall, goes back to *prosopon*, the word for both face *and* mask. Thus, the voice of the it-narrator, “the “silver sound” (*Silver Shilling* 211), “assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poiein*, to confer a mask or a face” (de Man 1984: 77f.). Yet, when we attempt to look behind the mask supplied by *prosopopoeia*, we only find a lack. Following Michel Rifaterre, we can understand such a lack as constitutive for this trope, which is “indeed no more than a mask put on something that may not even have a face” (1985: 108). This is indicative of a fundamental dialectics of *prosopopoeia*. It promises authenticity, a meeting ‘face to face’, but at the same time, the image of the mask evokes potential deceit, the act of putting on a mask in order to disguise or deceive (cf. Gzregorzewska 2013: 5). In the words of Małgorzata Gzregorzewska:

[P]rosopoeia denies identity: by imparting a face to someone or something, it reveals a primordial lack, evoking a being without a face. [...] In consequence, prosopoeia unmasks the emptiness that it attempts to conceal by putting on a mask. (ibid.)

As we have seen, both functions are inseparable in it-narratives. *Prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* both cover a lack, an observation that can best be understood through what scholars have identified as the central paradox of *prosopopoeia*. Richard Weihe notes how the mask that *prosopopoeia* grants gives rise to a certain ambiguity in that it imagines an underlying dimension (an original face that is masked) but does not necessarily depend upon its existence (cf. 2004: 17). As implied in Quintilian's characterization of the trope as "being beyond the real" or plain "unreal" (IX.2.33),¹⁷⁹ *prosopopoeia* is always potentially rooted in *catachresis*. In Quintilian's definition, this is a "term to describe something for which no actual term exists" (VIII.6.34)¹⁸⁰ and stands in opposition to metaphor:

We must be careful to distinguish between *abuse* and *metaphor*, since the former is employed where there is no proper term available, and the latter when there is another term available. (VIII.6.35, emphasis in the original)¹⁸¹

Unlike Jakobson, Brooks, and Lacan, who stress the function of metaphorical substitution for providing closure, Quintilian focuses on the object of this substitution as a means for differentiating metaphor from *catachresis*. While *catachresis* produces a new object where there was nothing before, metaphor replaces an existing term. Regarding *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia*, this connects to Weihe's observation: It could turn out that there is nothing behind the mask/hand that they confer. In covering up a lack, the tropes of *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* can thus be understood as always potentially *catachrestic*. Whether they *appear* as *catachrestic*, however, is another question altogether and depends on

179 In the original: "quia supra vera sunt", "quia vera non sunt" (IO IX.2.33). Since the edition translated by Butler is bilingual, the Latin quotes refer to the same work as the English translation.

180 The original passage reads: "Eo magis necessaria *catachresis*, quam recte dicimus *abusionem*, quae non habentibus nomen suum accommodat quod in proximo" (IO VIII.6.35).

181 The original passage reads: "Discernendumque est ab hoc totum *tralionis* istud genus, quod *abusio* est ubi nomen defuit, *tratio* ubi aliud fuit. Nam poetae solent *abusive* etiam in iis rebus quibus nomina sua sunt *vicinis* potius uti, quod *rarum* in *prorsa* est" (IO VIII.6.35).

what I have called the contenableity of a counterfactual proposition in the second chapter. The mask-giving of *prosopopoeia* can gravitate to the metaphoric pole if we suppose an underlying face, and towards the *catachrestic* if it points towards the underlying lack (cf. IO VIII.6.35). It is worthwhile to recall Quintilian once more, when he writes about the precarious use of *prosopopoeia*:

[G]reat power of eloquence is necessary for such efforts [of employing *prosopopoeia*], for what is naturally fictitious and incredible must either make a stronger impression from being beyond the real or be regarded as nugatory from being unreal. (IX.2.33)¹⁸²

The preceding chapters have shown how the new discourses that come to dominate the long 18th century, the empiricism of experimental philosophy and the emerging system of political economy, are keen to resolve this tension to the side of metaphor. In experimental philosophy, this plays out in the apparently paradoxical task of the scientific discovery of new ‘matters of fact’. As seen in the case of Galileo, Hooke and others, this is a question of ontology. Experimental scientists have to claim the previous existence of the apparently ‘new’ natural worlds they discover. Sceptics accuse the Fellows of the Royal Society of merely creating fantastic sights that were not there before. In response, they have to insist on the experiment as conducive in a (metaphorical) substitution of the description of an object by an updated, more accurate description of the same phenomenon. They claim to show what Quintilian calls the “somewhat similar meaning” (VIII.6.35), thereby aiming to avoid the “abuse” (ibid.)¹⁸³ of *catachresis* that suggests the subjective act of the creation of a new object. As we have seen, the hostility towards tropes in the tradition of Bacon expresses itself not in a language devoid

182 The original passage reads: “Sed magna quaedam vis eloquentiae desideratur. Falsa enim et incredibilia natura necesse est aut magis moveant, quia supra vera sunt, aut pro vanis accipiuntur, quia vera non sunt” (IO IX.2.33).

183 At the end of the 16th century, George Puttenham likewise identifies *catachresis* with abuse (cf. 2007: 264). 18th- and 19th-century scholars of rhetoric follow Quintilian and Puttenham in this regard (cf. Bollobás and Kövecses 2017: 122).

of tropes, but in the disavowal of the *catagoresis* that points to the lack at the heart of the trope sustaining the discourse of experimental science.

The discourse of political economy, on the other hand, suggests a metaphor for the ordering forces that emerge out of the free market, aligning individual and common interest. The rhetoric of the new economic science is in the same sense antirhetorical as that of the empiricist experimental philosophers. It glosses over any suspicion that its metaphor is not expressing but creating its object. In this case, this is done by conferring a sense of order on an essentially contingent system.

Finally, the doctrine of bullionism rests on the claim that there is an underlying natural value to commodity money expressed metaphorically by its purchasing power on the marketplace, instead of being conferred on it by political will or convention. This is achieved by drawing on ideas of reliability and circulation that are united in the question of monetary value.

All three discourses claim expression, not creation. *Prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* are merely special cases of metaphors they rely on for representation. Their discourses, as demonstrated in the second and third chapter, ultimately aim at making these rhetorical operations disappear in the guise of conventionalized metaphors. That is, they invest rhetorical strategies, the “great power of eloquence” (IO IX.2.33), in order to conventionalize (or, naturalize) these tropes.

In it-narratives, on the other hand, the work of these tropes is foregrounded ostentatiously. These texts point out the ‘unnatural’ fact of a non-human narrator time and again. *Catagoresis*, which Hayden White treats as a subtype of irony,¹⁸⁴ allows for “entities [to be] characterized by way of negating on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level” (1973: 34), that is, it allows for the device of the it-narrator to claim reliability and referentiality while representing an anti-mimetic entity.

These stories are counterfactual, but ostentatiously so. Let us recall the way in which the reader is asked to suspend disbelief in *The*

184 “The basic figurative tactic of Irony is *catagoresis* (literally ‘misuse’), the manifestly absurd metaphor designed to inspire Ironic second thoughts about the nature of the thing characterized or the inadequacy of the characterization itself” (White 1973: 37).

Adventures and Metamorphoses of Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol. The frame-narrator claims that everything that is being told is “capable of Proof, both from History and living Witnesses” (*Pocket-Pistol* 1), yet “desires but one Fact to be taken on his Word [...] to believe it possible that a Gun may speak” (ibid.). When *prosopopoeia* confers a mask where nothing was before, it-narratives provide an ‘I’ without a face (cf. Festa 2016: 141). Their narrative layout offers the screen on which *catachresis* is constantly foregrounded, repeatedly pointing the reader towards the lack at the core of that trope.

Nevertheless, while the realization of *catachresis* instead of metaphor is possible in all it-narratives, we have seen that the texts constitute a very diverse genre, in which this tension can play out in different ways. What is latent in all it-narratives, becomes manifest in the stories of counterfeit, since the counterfactual character of the story is projected onto the diegetic level in the counterfeit-identity of the narrator. The disavowed lack sustaining the whole of monetary – but also of poetic – representation is foregrounded.

The image of a lack or an absence that is not exceptional but integral to a system is central to a Lacanian understanding of ideology, particularly for its politicization in the works of Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau. In the tradition of structural psychoanalysis, we recall, ideology is understood to be a system of symbolic relations. It is a symbolic order that is composed of signifiers. This order, however, is structurally incomplete. Its incompleteness means that the signifiers are potentially shifting, unable to guarantee meaning. They are arrested by the symbolic pull of a master signifier, a stand-in for the lack in the symbolic Other. This master signifier guarantees the metaphoric operation that fixates the metonymic chain of signifiers and thus produces meaning.¹⁸⁵ Informed by such a Lacanian framework, Ernesto Laclau focuses on the question of the closure of a symbolic order, that is, the mechanisms by which their fundamental lack is concealed (cf. Laclau 1996; Glynos 2001: 198). Ideology is thus not located in the misrecognition of a pos-

185 Note that metaphor and metonymy here are again referring to the way in which these tropes are understood in the tradition of Roman Jakobson.

itive essence, but in the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity (cf. Glynos 2001: 196).

In this sense, Slavoj Žižek gives the definition of such an ideological formation as “a symbolic field which contains [...] a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility, while simultaneously disavowing this impossibility” (Žižek 2009: 98). In the texts examined in this project, these master signifiers are found in the *prosopopoeia* of the idea of the reliable object-witness and the *chiropoeia* that lies at the heart of the idea of a marketplace regulated by the invisible hand.

The internal tensions we have traced in *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia*, “function as that which simultaneously escapes-transgresses and supports (through this very transgression) the symbolic order” (Glynos 2001: 202). As such, they are inherently impossible. However, as it-narratives teach us, they are not any less efficient for their impossibility. Both the speaking object and the regulating hand are impossibilities that nevertheless structure a way of thinking. They operate *as if* they were real. This is the tension at the heart of these tropes that I have described as that between metaphor and *catachresis*.

In Laclau’s model, *catachresis* is understood as the tropological logic of the master signifier. This signifier is essentially empty as it corresponds to the lack in the symbolic Other (Laclau 2014: 84), but in an ideological framework it functions *as if* it possessed a positive content, *as if* it was a metaphor. As soon as something goes amiss however, and this tension is resolved to the side of *catachresis*, the ideological function of this master signifier fails.

This is finally the framework in which we can make sense of the disruptions found in it-narratives, that is, the failures of *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia*. What Mary Poovey writes on the topic of monetary representation is equally true of literary representation. It is “experienced as problematic only when it ceases to work, that is, when something [...] calls attention to the deferral or obfuscation of its authenticating ground” (2008: 6). We have found such a focus on the contradictions of the genre in the “monstrous” ‘abuse’ of the first person singular (cf. Festa 2016: 141) shown when *prosopopoeia* gives a mask/face to a narrator and asks the reader to imagine the “head” of a feather (*Ostrich Feather* 271), the “hand” (*Aureus* 438), of a coin, or the “mouth” (*One*

Pound 231), or “face” (*Scotch Guinea* 5) of a bank note, foregrounding the impossibility of these narrators. However, we have also found these failures in the tension between the finitude of textual form and the drive to indefinite circulation, shown in *Aureus*, *The Adventures of a Sovereign*, or *The Adventures of a Shilling*. In this chapter, finally, we have found such contradictions in the way narrators that are discovered as fakes remain valid through use, such as in *The Birmingham Counterfeit* and *The Adventures of a Halfpenny*. I want to suggest that when Quintilian understands the effect of *prosopopoeia* to be “beyond the real” (IX.2.33), we can understand this in a Lacanian sense. It is beyond the real (understood as the product of a given symbolic order) by touching upon the Real with a capital R. Unlike the former, the latter does not refer to a reality as the product of the smooth functioning of an ideological formation. Instead, the Lacanian Real denotes the very opposite of this functioning: the moments when the metaphorical operation fails and the *catachrestic* essence of the master signifier becomes apparent (cf. Lacan 1988: 168): The Real is the non-representable, the non-sayable. It is in this sense that *Aureus*, for instance, shows us that the it-narrator “often speaks unutterable things” (9).

However, as my work is concerned with the historical specificity of it-narratives, these observations must be brought into a diachronic framework before we can proceed to a final verdict on the question of genre. A common critique that is levelled against the understanding of ideology elaborated here is rooted in its indebtedness to structuralist frameworks. Yet, a closer look shows not only that we can understand the emphasis on contingency in these models as the very condition of historicity (cf. Glynos 2001: 206), but that the Lacanian project of structural psychoanalysis has a historical transition at its heart. It proceeds from the scientific and economic revolutions that come to shape modern subjectivity and the framework of its ideologies. What Samo Tomšič analyzes as a folding back of the scientific revolution into pre-modern Aristotelianism,¹⁸⁶ and what we have traced in the return to theological

186 In the words of Tomšič: “Capitalism then needs to be thought of as the restoration of pre-modernity within modernity, a counter-revolution that neutralises the emancipatory political potential of scientific revolution” (2015: 235).

concepts in the equally revolutionary theory of political economy, is also a central topic for Lacan himself. Lacan's own project often struggles with the definition of its scientific grounding in its defiance of positivist psychoanalysis. Of Ernest Jones, for example, Lacan says: "His bias is Baconian. We are marked by this in school where we are taught that the decisive axis of science lies in its recourse to the sensorium, which is qualified as experimental. The imaginary is not in any sense the illusory, in my view" (2006: 607). When Jones "defines the symbol as an 'idea' of the concrete, he already consents to it being but a figure" (ibid.). In contrast, Lacanian epistemology is crucially informed by the symbolic efficacy of the "tropes and figures" (Bacon 1999: 21) and their central role in constituting reality. In this, it connects to what I have called the way in which it-narratives demonstrate the symbolic efficacy of appearances.

The two discourses depending on *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* are crucial for the development of the modern forms of subjectivity that Lacan's work examines. Bruce Fink's comments on Lacanian epistemology bring these two aspects of modern scientific and economic thought together:

[I]t marks, in my sense, psychoanalysis' position in the epistemological break, insofar as the subject foreclosed from science returns in the impossible of his discourse through the Freudian field. There is, therefore, but one ideology Lacan theorizes: that of the [...] subject of scientific civilization, whose imaginary is theorized by a warped psychology in the service of free enterprise. (Fink 2005: 852)

This subject is thus both the foreclosed element in the epistemological revolution of experimental philosophy, where it is disavowed in favour of the speech of the object, and in the economic revolution of political economy, where it is disavowed in favour of the invisible hand of the market. The effects of *catachresis* that we have found are precisely figurations of this return of a foreclosed subject as the impossible core at the heart of these discourses. As symptomatic reactions, they offer an opening towards the disavowed Real of the ideologies they sustain.

That being said, it would be too hasty to assign such a function to all texts that I have subsumed under the label of it-narratives. While all

it-narratives draw attention to the tropological devices that sustain their narrative, the ways in which they point to the structural impossibilities at their core vary. My argument is rather that it-narratives as a genre provide the conditions of possibility for such a critique, the intensity to which it plays out is a question of the individual text. Finally, it is crucial to point out that the resolution towards *catachresis* is not structurally given but carries in itself a certain historical index. It relies on the effect of estrangement that is produced in these texts. To understand the ramifications of this, we have to return to the question of genre.

4.9 From Estrangement to Conventionalization

The previous sections have shown how the formal traits of it-narratives can subvert the dominant discourses of the long 18th century, laying bare the disavowed centres around which their ideologies are structured. This effect is in line with the explicit rhetoric of texts that are firmly tied to the generic conventions of satire. The focus of it-narratives on the act of unmasking and looking behind social appearances goes hand in hand with the design of satire “to attack vice or folly” (Griffin 1994: 1).¹⁸⁷ Yet, such attacks are executed by means of an innovative literary device, the “counterfeit voice” (Gzergrozewska 2013: 3) of *prosopopoeia* that speaks to the reader of it-narratives. We have found that the narrator who speaks with this voice, much like the story itself, relies on a certain suspension of disbelief in order to circulate. My wager is that counterfeit-narratives can be understood as a meta-genre inside it-narratives, playing through what is at stake in the poetics of these texts.

As pointed out earlier, the debates around bullionism provide a space in which the effects of the scientific revolution on the social link

¹⁸⁷ The late 18th century is of course also a time in which literary forgeries spark public debates. In 1760 McPherson publishes the first collection of epic poems he ascribes to the Gaelic poet Ossian. Nine years later, Chatterton – at age 16 – tries to pass off his writing as the work of a 15th-century monk. The public nature of the dispute concerning McPherson’s claims and the tragic death of Chatterton accentuate the period’s preoccupation with looking behind deceiving surfaces that we have seen in matters of clothing and currency.

become legible. In this sense, the narratives of counterfeit and non-representational money negotiating these monetary theories become a meta-genre of it-narratives, synthesizing the central poetical impasses resulting from their claims to reliability and their drive to circulation. As literary texts, their unique formal traits play through the rhetorical operations that are synthesized in this monetary ideology, foregrounding its disavowed core and offering a defamiliarizing perspective on a discourse central to the long 18th century.

Much like the Louis D'Or in *The Golden Spy* and the narrator in *Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note*, these narrators “wou'd not lye” (*Golden Spy* 175), but were “born with a lie in [their] mouth” (*One Pound* 231). Money is treated *as if* its material possessed inherent value, the it-narrator *as if* a thing could tell a story. As the stories of false coins converge with those of bank notes, ‘officially’ legal tender but under the same suspicion, the monetary problem of representative currency connects to the poetological problem of counterfactual narratives. Paper money is shown as the logical extension of the principle of representation that is figured in the counterfeit and that appears as the exception to the rule of intrinsic value. In terms of semiotics, paper money is the generalization of the exception that is the counterfeit – the function of value without valuable material.

However, I propose to take the homology further. Both counterfeit coin and it-narrator circulate despite not having a referent in the ‘extra-textual’ world. Just like the story of the non-mimetic it-narrator, the circulation of representative money requires a minimal suspension of disbelief. In both cases, circulation is shown to depend not on an extratextual referent, but on conventionalization. In paper money, this conventionalization is propped up by different means that facilitate its circulation by naturalizing an essentially new medium. Gold convertibility, for example, is such a device for naturalization, but also the different textual markers on the bank notes themselves, such as the signature of “Nurse Newland” (*One Pound* 232) quoted earlier.¹⁸⁸

188 Recall how Addison's shilling, a foreign coin, is “naturalized” (*Silver Shilling* 211) through “the face of Queen Elizabeth on one side, and the arms of the country on the other” (ibid.). We could even understand the patterns of individual leaves often used on colonial bank notes in order to make counterfeiting them harder as such an attempt of grounding their value in ‘nature’ (cf. Fig. 5).

This way of thinking about an economic genre is surprisingly similar to how literary theories have made sense of the circulation of narrative genres. Recent years have seen a considerable interest in non-standard narrative layouts in fiction, particularly in the work of scholars like Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Rüdiger Heinze, Brian Richardson, and others. Even though they employ different methodological outlooks, these scholars all focus on the concept of “unnatural narratology” and the aim to correct a “mimetic bias” in narratology (Richardson 2011: 23f.). As a response to Monika Fludernik’s concept of natural narratology, which, we recall, deals with narrative layouts that are modelled according to the parameters of real-life narration (cf. 1996: 12; 2003: 244),¹⁸⁹ unnatural narratology centres on narrative layouts in which those parameters cannot be drawn on and stresses the anti-mimetic aspect of fiction (cf. Alber 2013: 449).¹⁹⁰

Interestingly, Alber expands the theory of unnatural narratives in order to account for the evolution of genre. Studying unnaturalness across the diachronic axis allows for an understanding of how narrative forms not linked to experientiality come to appear ‘natural’ to us nevertheless. The prime example for this is the omniscient third person narrator (or heterodiegetic zero-focalization, in Genettian parlance). As we have seen already in the second chapter, the process by which these narratives are “turned into a basic cognitive category” (Fludernik 2003: 256) is called “naturalization” by Alber, who adopts the framework developed by Jonathan Culler (cf. Alber 2011: 42). Alber’s central thesis is that the process of naturalization of unnatural narratives can become a motor for development of literary genres “as physical or logical impossibilities are converted into a new perceptual frame” (cf. *ibid.* 43).

The novelty of this perceptual frame is illustrated in an early it-narrative, *The Secret History of an Old Shoe* (1734). Here, the author stages a discussion between the frame-narrator and the implied reader, with the latter protesting against the object biography and instead calling for

¹⁸⁹ As we have seen, these parameters give rise to what Fludernik calls “experientiality”, the “the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience” (1996: 12).

¹⁹⁰ Here we should recall what we have established in the second chapter: While all fiction produces the non-actual in the wider sense, unnatural narration is non-actualizable, that is, impossible according to real-world parameters (cf. Alber 2016: 3).

the established literary forms of the romance and the epic (cf. B. Blackwell 2007: 275). Yet, despite being conscious that such a work presents a “Scandal to the Muses” (*Old Shoe* 6), that is, departs from literary convention, the frame-narrator defends their decision of telling the story of a “good old Shoe” (6). This old shoe prefigures a new genre that comes with a new perceptual frame for the reader.

This perceptual frame emerges as the result of the naturalization of the physical impossibility of the narrating object. Here, the central homology to the historical development of paper money becomes apparent, as Alber also refers to this as a process of “conventionalization” (Alber 2011: 42). While earlier narratives treat bank notes with scepticism, *Aureus* draws attention to their gradual acceptance. Whereas the narrator paints bank notes as usurpers, “risen from rags” (*Aureus* 12), at the beginning of the story, it comes to find sympathy for these beings, “so much despised by the old aristocratical guinea” (179). Finally, Aureus is ready to “acknowledge their relation to [...] [itself] without adverting to the difference in [...] [their] specific gravity” (ibid.). In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the different genres of money are conventionalized to a degree that lets their differences seem incidental (cf. Poovey 2008: 4). Much like the increasing use of bank notes gradually conventionalizes this form of writing, the increasing popularity of it-narratives conventionalizes the literary device of the speaking object.

This conventionalization goes in two directions. For one, as Alber proposes, the device of the it-narrator, defamiliarizing the naturalizing discourses of experimental science and political economy, is itself naturalized as a new frame that the reader can draw on. There is ample evidence for this in the texts themselves as much as in other contemporary sources. The intradiegetic references to other well-known it-narrators have been pointed out already. *Argal*, *The Adventures of a Wig*, *Aureus*, and others, all thematize the popularity of it-narratives in one way or another. By the second half of the century, the genre is notorious. In 1760, a review of *The Adventures of a Black Coat* complains how:

[t]here are several unsuccessful attempts in our language of stringing a parcel of adventures together, by the feeble ties of an ill-designed personification; but unless the story be contrived in such a manner, that the

incidents have an immediate reference to the ground-work of the plot, the whole becomes tiresome, and even with the merit of sentiment and stile, will naturally sink into oblivion. (“Review of ‘The Adventures of a Black Coat’” 499)

Instead of sinking into oblivion, the text is reprinted several times in the next decades (cf. Blackwell et al. 3, 111.). The ensuing popularity of *Chrysal*, published in the same year, firmly establishes the genre on the literary marketplace. Till the end of the century, Johnstone’s it-narrative goes through 20 editions and gives rise to a host of imitators (cf. Poovey 2008: 145). As we have seen earlier, an author in the *Critical Review* stresses how popular such works have become: “This mode [of writing it-narratives] [...] is grown so fashionable, that few months pass which do not bring one of them under our inspection” (“Novels” 477f.). Since it-narrators often play on the conflation of physical and narrative material,¹⁹¹ the ways in which they comment on the slow breakdown of their material bodies also invite us to understand them as comments on the over-use of their narrative device by the time the genre is established. When the frame of the sedan breaks down due to too much “business” (*Sedan* 100), the king’s portrait on the halfpenny remains “scarcely legible” (*Halfpenny* 4) from circulating too long, or a black chair ends up as “a worn-out plaything” (*Tree* 345), the continuation of circulation is threatened, in the same way as the circulation of the genre is threatened by the over-use of the it-narrator, who has saturated critical taste by the late 18th century. A critic in 1783 comments on this process: “This mode [...] is almost exhausted; and the spirit and good sense which animated the imaginary Chrysal, was lost in the Hackney Coach, and scarcely breaths in the ‘Phantoms’” (“Review of ‘Phantoms’” 234).

Thus, the perceptual frame that allows readers to make sense of narratives told by things is certainly firmly in place. As a result, strategies that are used in order to naturalize the non-mimetic narrative layout

¹⁹¹ The paper in *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper* (1779) contains a sermon that is being read by the frame-narrator (cf. *Quire* 26), the brocade in *The Adventure of a Bale of Goods* (1766) plays on the fact that it contains both the gold threads and the narrative threads of *Chrysal/Chrysal* (cf. 6), just as Aureus claims to be composed of their material, in both senses of the word (cf. 11). These examples are elaborated in the conclusion.

of it-narratives wither away. Many early it-narratives are framed by a human narrator who encounters the speaking object in a dream (as in Addison's *The Adventures of a Shilling* or Johnstone's *Chrysal*). As we have seen in the introduction, this device becomes a commonplace very soon. In Christopher Smart's *The Genuine Memoirs of an Unfortunate Tye-Wig*, it is openly satirized when the human frame-narrator ponders the life story of a wig and concludes: "I shou'd walk home peaceably [...] and in the morning write a Vision upon this Occasion" (*Tye-Wig* 3). Towards the end of the 18th century, such framing becomes increasingly rare (cf. Link 1980: 65). Likewise, the found manuscript device begins to disappear, albeit at a slower pace.¹⁹² Instead, the it-narrators assume their stories right away, showing that contemporary readers need no introduction to the generic convention of a talking thing.

The genre is also conventionalized along a different trajectory. As shown in the first chapter, one of the central characteristics of the narrating objects is their materiality. They are not allegories of abstract principles or mere stand-ins for the abstract position of unobserved observation. In it-narratives, the narrative dynamics play out according to the specifics of the narrator. A carriage, for instance, will tell different stories than a coin.

However, there is a tendency towards abstraction from the concrete object of the narrator in later narratives. This tendency is illustrated vividly as early as in Thomas Bridge's *The Adventures of a Bank Note*, published in four volumes from 1770 onwards. Like many similar it-narratives, it follows the 'adventures' of a bank note, as it goes from hand to hand, relating the stories of its owners. However, from the third volume onwards, we recognize that something is amiss, as the story becomes less and less consistent. While the reader was told that the narrator was the only bank note endowed with the gift of speech and that a human 'secretary' is transcribing its story in the first volume, in the third volume, the bank note not only meets and talks to an equally

¹⁹² Most early 19th century it-narratives, such as *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* (1811), *The Adventures of a Bank Note* (1813), *The Memoirs of a Wig* (1814), *Adventures of a One Pound Bank Note* (1819), *A Month's Adventure of a Base Shilling* (1820) and *The Life and Adventures of a Scotch Guinea Note* (1826) lack both a found manuscript device and a framing by a human narrator.

chatty counterpart, but proposes using a pen itself (cf. *Bank-Note* 1, 166; 4, 71). In the fourth volume, the reader witnesses a remarkable scene when the bank note talks about reading a paper (cf. 4, 70). Indeed, one seems less and less sure about the identity of this narrator who now talks about possessing and pawning books (cf. 4, 87), drinking liquor (cf. 4, 71), and purchasing drinks by paying with other money (cf. 4, 75). The narrator goes on to talk about how it upset its “bowels” (ibid.) and finally celebrates its financial success by boasting twice: “[A]t present, I am a great man” (4, 201 and 204).

What happened here? Did the anthropomorphism of it-narratives go full circle and made humans out of its non-human narrators? During the first two volumes, the materiality of the object determines the structure of its narrative as well as its thematic focal points. In the third and fourth volume, the content of the episodes is increasingly separated from the bank note and allusions to the it-narrator fade out (cf. Poovey 2008: 150).

Taking the development of fiction as the point of reference, Mary Poovey sees in this transition a split between two genres of writing, the aesthetic and the economic. These genres are fused in early monetary narratives but branch off in the late 18th century (cf. Poovey 2008).¹⁹³ From the point of view of it-narratives, however, this transition tells the story of how a formerly innovative narrative layout and the ensuing perceptual frame are neutralized. It is indicative of a process of abstraction that erases the specificity and immanence of the it-narrator, leaving behind a formal device. In this process of abstraction, the device indeed becomes what contemporary critics at times make it out to be – a means of “stringing a parcel of adventures together, by the feeble ties of an ill-designed personification” (“Review of ‘The Adventures of a Black Coat’” 499).

Thus, as the genre develops, two trajectories emerge along which the naturalization of the it-narrator takes place, invariably domesticating a genre that, at first, was conducive to considerable effects of estrange-

193 *The Life and Adventures of a Scotch Guinea Note* (1826) is a good example for this transition. As we have seen above, the text is essentially a political pamphlet, the it-narrator is (almost) an empty formal device used for voicing a specific position on current monetary policy. For the two trajectories of naturalization, see. Link 1980: 159f.).

ment.¹⁹⁴ At the end of the long 18th century and the beginning of the Victorian era, it-narratives become increasingly didactic (cf. Blackwell 2012: vii). This is a trend whose roots go at least as far back as 1780 and the publication of Mr. Truelove's¹⁹⁵ *The Adventures of a Silver Penny* (cf. *ibid.* xlvi), which replaces the biting satire of its predecessors with pedagogical benevolence. In its wake, it-narratives such as Richard Johnson's *The Adventures of a Silver Penny* (1786), *The Adventures of a Silver Three-Pence* (1800), as well as Rusher's adaptation¹⁹⁶ of *The Adventures of a Halfpenny* (1830) are explicitly geared towards children (cf. Bellamy 2007: 132).¹⁹⁷

It-narratives are thus transformed by what Moretti polemically calls the "infantilization of the national culture" (Moretti 2013b: 23). According to Moretti, pre-Victorian bourgeois literature is on a trajectory of enlightenment disenchantment, expressed amongst others by a refusal of allegory and the quest for accuracy and objectivity (cf. 2013b: 130). This is an analysis that seems to capture some of the main concerns of it-narratives quite well. Victorian prose¹⁹⁸ departs from this trajectory by enriching the narrative world with ubiquitous moral significance, engendering a "moralized way of speaking" (Moretti 2013b: 130). In this process of an anti-Weberian re-enchantment of social relations (cf. *ibid.* 23),¹⁹⁹ I argue, it-narratives lose their satirical sting.

194 We find a similar concept of the neutralization of estrangement already in Shklovsky himself, who holds that the violation of expectations on which the effect of estrangement hinges loses its potential as a complicating device when it is assimilated in the canon (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 14).

195 A pseudonym.

196 There is a tendency in the later stages of the genre to adapt older it-narratives for a juvenile readership.

197 This process goes hand in hand with the displacement of things by animals: After 1800, half of the published narratives featuring non-human perspectives use animal narrators (cf. Blackwell et al. 2012: 4, xi).

198 Moretti's analysis focuses specifically on the use of adjectives in Victorian prose (cf. Moretti 2013b).

199 For Weber, disenchantment refers to the process of modernization by which culture is rationalized and society secularized (cf. Weber 1991). Moretti, like Jenkins, criticizes the unidirectionality of Weber's argument, pointing out tendencies of re-enchantment that runs counter to the processes of rationalization (cf. Jenkins 2000). What these scholars refer to as re-enchantment in a Weberian terminology can also be grasped as a dialectical tension inherent to the process of rationalization itself, as famously theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 2009).

By the middle of the century, it-narratives have traded the worlds of scientific polemic and commercial exploitation for the sphere of domestic happiness. While the British Empire goes through its second phase of expansion, scientific output increases at an ever-faster pace, and the circulation of people and commodities intensifies, the it-narrator remains as an aesthetic device separated from the function it once had.

We have seen how the device of the it-narrator, by informing Shklovsky's idea of estrangement, inspires one of the central concepts of literary theory. However, unlike the great novels that would rise out of the social transformations of the 19th century, the it-narrative does not leave significant marks in the literary canon. In 1871, it resurfaces at a point where even a modern reader might occasionally stumble over a narrating object. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, young Lydgate is shown at "ten years of age; [having] read through *Chrysal*, or *the Adventures of a Guinea*" (*Middlemarch* 153). As a child, he would certainly be seen as the appropriate audience for it-narratives by contemporary readers. Yet the narrator cites the book in line with other adult works as proof for the protagonist's 'serious' interests. *Chrysal* is "neither milk for babes, nor any chalky mixture meant to pass for milk" (*ibid.*), that is, it is not counterfeit. Something of the satiric sting seems to have survived more than a century between the publication of the two works: Reading *Chrysal*, "it occurred to him [Lydgate] that books were stuff, and that life was stupid" (*ibid.*).

The curious appearance of an it-narrative in one of the central texts of the British canon is not as coincidental as might seem at first. Eliot's novel is set in the last years of the long 18th century, shortly before the coming of the railway, the Reform Act and the end of the first industrial revolution fundamentally change the social landscape of Britain. In the time of the narration, the 1830s, *Chrysal* is indexical of a period that is already experienced as coming to an end. Many of the social forces and the discourses in which they are negotiated have already changed to a degree that calls for new concepts to describe them. It was the aim of this book to show how these forces and discourses shape the genre throughout the long 18th century and how it-narratives in turn offer solutions for the contradictions expressed in them. After the 1830s, the device of the narrating object (and more often, animal) persists for

some time, but its functions, I have argued, are now quite different. The conclusion to this work will provide a last change in perspective from which to understand the role of it-narratives in this historical shift.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary

Looking back, I began this book by showing how Sarah Ahmed and Sergei Tretyakov, each at a specific historical moment and informed by specific theories of materialism, call for a biography of the object. We have found this biography of the object in the long 18th century, in a number of texts that have received attention in the last years, but seldom for their function as a genre. It has been the aim of this study to rectify this and to understand both the formal traits of this genre and the nexus of historical discourses to which these traits respond.

The different parts of this work have examined the formal traits of it-narratives in relation to two of the central discourses of the 18th century, empiricist experimentalism and political economy. In the last part, I have shown how these discourses are taken up in the debates around monetary validity. By touching upon the social link and thus upon the bond that secures the cohesion of the social space in which these discourses arise, the debate around monetary validity was shown to synthesize empiricist experimentalism and political economy. In this endeavour, I have located and explained the traits that characterize the core of it-narratives, its prototypical texts, and thereby offered a “reverse gaze” (Ballaster 2005: 149), not only on the central non-literary discourses of the long 18th century, but also on its canonical literary texts.

In the following, I will go through the insights the three preceding chapters have yielded, before offering one last change of perspective. The conclusion of this work provides an opportunity to assume a “reverse gaze” on this work itself and to approach the question of genre from a different perspective. Shifting our focus on the industrial revolution will allow us to see a genre that tells the lives of things from the viewpoint of a process that fundamentally changes the importance things have in the lives of people. Concluding, I will then trace the after-life of the generic traits and formal devices of it-narratives and thereby frame this work by accentuating the historicity of it-narratives as texts of the long 18th century.

To recall the general structure of my book: We have taken our first clues from the questions of reliability and factuality as central claims of the genre that are oftentimes overlooked in contemporary studies on the topic. For this, I proceeded from the observation that it-narratives, in emulating (auto)biographical forms of writing, copy referential claims in their texts and suggest a semblance between text and extratextual world that hinges on claiming exactness of observation. This uncovered a central tension that defines this genre – the opposition between a counterfactual narrator and its claims to factual and reliable narration. We found that these claims are voiced in the framework taken from empiricist experimentalism and connect to the idea of the epistemological superiority of objects. By reading texts such as *The Sedan*, *The Adventures of MS Le Post-Chaise*, and *The Aerostatic Spy*, we have seen how it-narratives model their narration after the central principles of empiricist knowledge production. I have used the metaphors of the microscope and the Boylean air-pump to describe two different modes in which it-narrators present their reliable knowledge, the first tending towards disciplining the gaze and the second towards constructing a semantically sterile interiority. Taking this idea of semantic sterility as a clue for examining the publications of central figures of the Royal Society, we have found a general distrust of tropes expressed in the idea of a “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318) that is not corrupted by figurative language. Contrasting it-narratives with canonical satires on experimental philosophy, such as those of Swift and Cavendish, has allowed us to understand the complex role that these texts play in relation to the discourses of the new science. The trope of *prosopopoeia* was found as the disavowed core of the discourse of experimental science that is given poetic expression in it-narratives. Ultimately, by uncovering the effects of a reverse gaze that engenders a strong effect of estrangement in it-narratives, I specified the role it-narrators play in the broader history of satire. In Shklovsky’s analysis of Tolstoy’s *Kholstomer*, I located the it-narrator at the very heart of the theory of estrangement.

The following chapter focused on the second central trait of it-narrators, their circulation. Foregrounding the commodity-character of the vast majority of it-narrators, we explored their geographic and social mobility. Reading texts such as *Chrysal*, *The Adventures of a Shilling*

and *The Adventures of a Silver Penny*, it-narratives were situated in contemporary discourses on trade and imperial rivalry, particularly with the Spanish. As commodities that follow the networks of global trade, it-narrators witness the violence of colonial exploitation. However, travelling these networks also sets them on a trajectory for a “voyage in” (Said 1994: 216) that allows them to bring the reverse gaze to bear on the colonizers by estranging the familiar settings of the metropolitan centre. Once in the urban space, it-narratives are concerned less with geographical than with social mobility. Narratives such as *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather of Quality* contrast the mobility of a luxury item with the sumptuary ethic that attempts to ensure social positions remain legible. The ability of these commodities to “cut across classes” (Tretyakov 2006: 61) and their attempt to give an overview of a social totality were shown to prefigure aspects of later realist modes of writing. In the last part of the chapter, I have contrasted it-narratives and the English picaresque, finding crucial similarities that have helped to better understand the differences between the genres. Reading these two types of texts alongside each other, we have found a drive to accumulation that animates the stories of it-narrators. In opposition to this drive, my readings have traced the presence of Adam Smith’s idea of the invisible hand, reining in the movements of these commodities and ensuring a fortunate ending for their stories. I have coined the term *chirotopoeia* in order to describe the operation by which this is achieved rhetorically. Finding a propensity of commodity-narrators to submit to this operation and of money-narrators to transgress it, I have demonstrated how it-narratives express the tension between *oikonomia* (economy as the science of the management of scarce resources) and *chrematistike* (economy as the drive towards the accumulation of wealth).

Finally, the fourth chapter began by addressing the need to account for the large number of narrators that represent counterfeit coins. These coins were shown to figure in contemporary discourses as a threat not only to business, but to the social link as such. The image of the sovereign on the coin and the homonym of monarch and coin that narratives such as *The Adventures of a Sovereign* exemplify, testify to this crucial connection between monetary value and state power. Yet, counterfeit-narrators, like the real counterfeit coins of the time, are often

allowed to circulate despite being discovered as such. They perform the divorce of value from valuable material that is later conventionalized through paper currency and point us to the trope of *catachresis*, the operation of glossing over a lack (in this case: of valuable material). In the apologies of narrating bank notes, we have found an echo of the strategies of naturalization that it-narrators as a whole offer for their counterfactual narration. These bank notes highlight on the level of their content the central contradiction of all it-narrators. They are narrators who circulate and claim reliability and factuality even as they are ostentatiously counterfactual. Thus, the narratives of counterfeit and paper-money constitute a meta-genre of it-narratives, in confronting the genre with its own tension between counterfactual narrators and their claims to factuality and reliability. The conventionalization of monetary forms can provide a blueprint for the conventionalization, or in Alber's term, "naturalization" (2011: 42), of narrative form. When paper money is conventionalized around the turn of the century, so are it-narratives. They no longer rely on devices for naturalizing this narrative type, as it has become a new cognitive frame the reader employs for making sense of the text. However, it-narratives thereby ultimately lose the effect of estrangement that has hitherto characterized them.

In the course of these chapters, my study has found what at first appear as two different approaches to understanding the episodic and oftentimes fragmentary structure of it-narratives. For one, they can be understood as translating the methodology of empiricist experimentalism into their narrative structure. Throughout the stories examined here, particular observation and individual instances are privileged over universal judgment and general type. Yet, it-narrators often strive to present a social totality. The way in which their narrators present their knowledge is modelled after the epistemological trope Robert Stockhammer calls *complexio partium* (cf. Stockhammer, forthcoming). Instead of following the totalizing logic of the synecdoche, that is, representing a totality through one of its parts, it-narratives aim to achieve a totality by adding up all of its particulars. For this, it-narrators amass, repeat, and replicate observations, stringing them together into a chain of episodes. They discard the synecdochic epistemology of natural philosophy in favour of the endless task of inductive experimentation.

On the other hand, we have also seen that the vast majority of it-narrators circulate as commodities. The exchange-value that abstracts from their unique materiality was found to be the motor of their circulation. By being easily exchanged for money (or being money themselves), they circulate from hand to hand and string together the stories of individuals that would otherwise have no connection. The abolition of sumptuary laws and the end of mercantilist restrictions on trade mean that they are increasingly mobile, both socially and geographically.

In circulating thus, it-narrators share a central trait with the English picaresque. The affinity between those two genres enabled me to unearth a common tendency towards breaking off episodes and resuming new ones that can be understood through the psychoanalytic concept of the drive. Samo Tomšič's Lacanian understanding of the drive, not as an individual psychic force but as an economic dynamic inherent to capitalist accumulation, helped us discover thing-like qualities in the subjects, and connected money-narrators to the aspect of *chrematistike* as opposed to the closed circuit of *oikonomia*.

These two explanations, the scientific and the economic, are only rivalling interpretations on first sight. The modern separation of science and business is a conceptual anachronism for 18th-century audiences. From its inception, the project of experimental philosophy is closely linked to economic expansion. The longest passages in Boyle's instruction to travellers, the *General Heads*, deal not with cataloguing natural phenomena, but with assessing precious metals (cf. 1772 [1692]: 733–743), showing scientific interests to blend smoothly into colonial extraction. Guided by the directions of the Royal Society, the process of knowledge-gathering becomes an ever-expansive process of acquisition. The Royal Society's directions provide the blueprint for an "epistemic mercantilism" (Bauer 2003: 4), in which the colonial setting is mined for the resources from which the scientists at the centre can extract profitable knowledge. Consequently, Sprat speaks of the Royal Africa Company, originally importing African gold, later organizing the slave trade, as the "twin-sister of the Royal Society" (Sprat 1959: 407).

Most importantly however, this study discerned a shared rhetoric between scientific and economic discourses in the long 18th century, a rhetoric that is central to understanding it-narratives. Both merchant

vendors and empiricists, as Marc Shell remarks, “refuse to take things at face value” (1982: 158), be it coins or propositions. The “naked way of writing” (Boyle 1772 [1661]: 1, 318) itself is a testimony to the scientist as a businessman, with Thomas Sprat preferring the plain language of “merchants, before that of wits or scholars” (1959: 113).

These observations have led us to the central link between the chapters, found in the two tropes *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia*. The generic traits that set it-narratives apart from other literary writing, so I argued, can only be understood through the intricate ways in which the discourses that shape it are connected on the level of their tropology. This connection is corroborated by the strong homology in the tropes around which the discourses of experimental science and political economy are structured. Proceeding from the scenes in which it-narrators begin to speak, I have located a central anchor of the genre in *prosopopoeia*. The analyses of some of the founding texts of the Royal Society have shown that this trope stands at the centre of the discourse of experimental science, as well.

In the same vein, the discourse of political economy, codified by Adam Smith but tracing its origins as far back as the scientific revolution and the theories of Malynes and the fable of Mandeville, rests on a central trope. My neologism for this trope, *chiropoeia*, captures the imagery of an ordering hand, which Smith obtains through the secularization of the Christian concept of divine providence. Much like providence rules the movements of subjects, the invisible hand governs the movement of commodities, subsuming the sum of contingent exchanges in a greater purposefulness.

However, in the scientific and economic discourses examined here, the work of these tropes is disavowed. The ventriloquism of experimental scientists must necessarily erase the rhetorical operation by which they speak with the voice of an object. The violent anti-rhetoric in the tradition of Francis Bacon, styling itself as a new language (the “naked way of writing” (1772 [1661]: 1, 318) of Boyle), relies itself on the tropological operation of *prosopopoeia* for evoking the language of things. The resulting “nonrhetorical rhetoric” (Bender 2012: 68) of the Royal Society depends on the idea of an unambiguous signification of things and can be traced back to their motto – *nullius in verba*.

The discourse of political economy faces a similar challenge. It seeks to impose order on the seemingly contingent movements of commodities through an appeal to a quasi-natural force. This order is achieved through a tropological substitution through which the contingent acts of exchange are replaced by purposeful movements occasioned by an invisible hand. At the same time, the force by which *chiropoeia* turns private self-interests into public benefits must appear to reside in the logic of market exchange itself, not in the rhetoric of the economist or in the theological logic of providence that provides the disavowed source for its imagery. As in the case of *prosopopoeia*, *chiropoeia* calls for its own self-effacement as a trope. This resonates with Smith's own stance on rhetoric. Although not as adamant as Bacon, Smith favours the "plain" (1985: 7) style and dismisses works on tropes as a "silly set of Books and not at all instructive" (ibid. 26). Hence, the hand that confers this sort of order must remain invisible.

Ultimately, the counterfeit-narrators I examined in the fourth chapter of this book have pointed us to *catachresis*. This trope, characterized by Quintilian as an "abuse" (VIII.6.35) of language, is what lurks behind *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* alike. It thereby suggests the possibility that they are not substituting (or: expressing) a referent that was there before, but actively creating it. The reading of *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* as *catechresis* that it-narratives suggest, points the reader to the disavowal of subjectivity that is crucial for founding the discourses of both experimental science and political economy.

This finally allowed me to reconsider the way in which these tropes are operative in it-narratives. These texts depend on *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia* to shape their stories. However, they are not simply carrying these tropes over from non-literary into literary discourses. For one, it-narratives are neither simply fashioned after the discourse of experimental science, nor satires on it, such as the works of Swift and Cavendish. Instead, they incorporate the epistemology of experimental science in their poetic structure, literalizing the idea of a witnessing object. By this, they accentuate the contradiction between their claim to reliability and the impossible nature of their narrators, especially when pointing the reader to the "monstrosity" (Festa 2016: 141), the abuse, of the first person singular through unrepresentable anthropo-

morphisms (cf. *ibid.*). At the same time, they neither fully follow the idea of the secularized providence of the invisible hand, nor merely ridicule it. Instead, they model their narrative structure according to providential principles, while simultaneously pointing the reader to the impasses of this structure. The closed circularity of providence is actively contrasted with a drive to accumulation, leaving ruptures in the text and producing a tension that focuses attention on the work of *chiropoeia*. In this, it-narratives engage in what Franco Moretti, drawing on Antonio Candido, calls “structural reduction” (cf. 2013a: 156). It-narratives “imitate” (*ibid.*) certain ideological structures, but thereby also “*imitate*” (*ibid.* emphasis in the original) them, that is, they accentuate their central traits and thereby lay them open to critique (cf. *ibid.*). The result are the effects of estrangement that I have explored in these texts.

By virtue of these effects of estrangement, it-narratives foreground the work of *prosopopoeia* and *chiropoeia*, showing both tropes as forms of *catachresis* and pointing the reader to the lack that waits at their core. They emphasize the constructedness of their narratives by foregrounding the unnatural fact of a speaking object and the improbable or outright impossible attempts of conferring a final order on their episodes. Thereby, they provide a literary space for the negotiation of contradictions that must be disavowed in non-literary discourses for these discourses to claim authority.

In contrast to the tropes employed in the discourses of experimental science and political economy, which erase their own historicity, it-narratives are thus anti-fetishist. This might sound counterintuitive to a reader expecting the theory of commodity fetishism to account for the emergence of narrating commodities in fiction, yet a closer look can rectify this expectation. Writing about fetishism in a central passage of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx sketches a theory of how “productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life” and enter “into relation both with one another and the human race” (Marx 1996: 83). Famously, Marx clarifies in the same passage that it is the “definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (*ibid.*). Commodity fetishism translates a relation between people into a relation between things. It erases the social history of the commod-

ity, so that the value it carries – a product of the human labour that is expended in the production process – appears as an attribute of the commodity itself.

It-narratives engender precisely the opposite effect, not masking but drawing attention to the social history of the object. Tretyakov's Marxism, informing the idea of the object-biography, is much closer to describing the effects of it-narratives than a Marxist account that sees fetishist commodities in it-narrators. As I have argued in the second chapter, the autobiography of the object proves to be the biography of the people who interact with it (cf. Festa 2016: 136). The episodes that the it-narrator accumulates portray the various social forces that act upon the circulating commodities of 18th-century Britain.

This observation is corroborated when we consider the historical dimension of the concept of the fetish. In Marx' writing, commodity fetishism emerges in developed and industrialized capitalism, and thus reverses a central tenet of colonialism. The products of fetishes²⁰⁰ are no longer found in the animistic religions of 'savage' peoples, but at the heart of metropolitan life.²⁰¹ Everyday commodities of the metropolitan centres become fantastic entities, endowed with a life of their own. Iacono points out how Marx, in locating fetishism in the metropolitan centre, turns "the insider's observation into that of an outsider" (2016: 74) in order to shed light on this phenomenon. Marx' theory of the fetish thereby follows the structure we have seen employed by it-narrators who assume a reverse gaze to defamiliarize the observations they make. The fundamental structure of it-narratives connects to the concept of anti-fetishism in the Marxian sense. This anti-fetishism finally shows an anti-colonial aspect, when it-narrators in *Chrysal* (1760) or *The Aerostatic Spy* (1785) employ the reverse gaze to defamiliarize colonialist discourses.

However, we must also remember that the structures that give rise to the concept of commodity-fetishism are only in the process of becom-

²⁰⁰ Marx borrows the term from Charles de Brosses' *Du Cult des Dieux Fétiches*, which is published in 1760 and compares African tribal religions with those of ancient Egypt (cf. Iacono 2016: 11; Brosses 1988).

²⁰¹ For the relationship of Marx' theory of fetishism to earlier theories of this concept, cf. Iacono 2016: 101–130.

ing hegemonic at the time when most it-narratives are written. In the late 18th century, the British economy is on its way to being transformed by the rise of the factory system and the emergence of an urban working class. Recall, for instance, how *The Aerostatic Spy* observes the process of primitive accumulation by which the rural population flocks to London (cf. 240). Yet, these processes are far from complete. Economically, the long 18th century is a time when premodern modes of production coexist with capitalist ones, the latter being increasingly dominant, but not yet hegemonic.²⁰² Hence, I want to propose another perspective from which to understand the genre – a perspective that centres on precisely the changes in production that are about to transform the relationship of people and things at the moment when it-narratives are popularized. For this, I will turn to two it-narratives that foreground their own production, providing us with a perspective on the processes that lead to the development of commodity fetishism, and allow us to focus on what is implied in the metaphor Tretyakov uses for the object-biography: the “conveyor belt” (2006: 61).

5.2 Nostalgia in the Industrial Revolution

The distinctiveness that set it-narrators apart from their counterparts in other genres is gradually lost at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. We have seen this process prefigured by the abstraction that takes place in the later volumes of Bridges’ *The Adventures of a Bank Note*, a narrative in which the material specificity of the object slowly fades away. While this is a central insight of this study and an important result of my observations on the generic development of it-narratives, I want to conclude this book by drawing attention to two narratives that comment on the end of the genre in a different manner. Both *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper* (1779) and the *Transformation of a Beech Tree; Or the History of a Favourite Black Chair: Related by Itself* (1828) focus on different aspects of their narrative, compared to most of their predecessors. Whereas the stories I have examined so far

²⁰² For this, see the many instances in which Marx points out the persistence of older forms of social relations well into the 18th century. (cf. 1996: 102, 276, 279 and 341).

tend to direct the reader's attention to the observations that these narrators can make and/or the ways in which they circulate, these two stories primarily focus on the processes by which they are manufactured. The *Transformation of a Beech Tree* follows a narrating tree as it is cut down, processed into timber, and finally made into a chair. *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper* tells the story of a thistle that is miraculously transformed into a flax plant, being subsequently processed into linen and used in various items of clothing before being recycled as paper. The paper is bound into a sermon that is found by a frame-narrator who reads the story of the quire of paper. The reader of *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, holding the paper of this story in their hands, is forcibly reminded of the material presence of this it-narrator.

Interestingly, the completion of their production processes coincides with a rather gloomy narrative mood for both narrators. In *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, the narrator is split up into different parts. These “unhappy fragments” (37) are “thoroughly broken in spirit” (36) near the end of its narrative. The narrator of the *Transformation of a Beech Tree* does not fare better, lamenting a “melancholy turn in [its] fortunes” (346).

For both narrators, the scenery is ripe with the imagery of melancholia. The beech tree is secluded in a “gloomy lumber room” (350) at the end of its narrative, while the quire of paper finds its “misery complete” (33) after its transformation and feels an irreparable loss in the “bitterness of [its] heart” (34). Adjectives like these resonate with Robert Burton's characterization of the “bitter pangs” (Burton 2016: 93) of melancholia, and suggest the “anguish, dullness, heaviness and vexation” (ibid.) associated with it. The narrators' choice of words is thus instructive. They suffer from a melancholic sadness.

This state seems to be the specific result of the transformations the narrators go through, as shown when the quire of paper laments its lot. At the beginning of the narrative stands the thistle's envy of the neighbouring flax plants and its dissatisfaction with an existence in which it is “the highest of [its] hopes, to escape the notice of mankind” (*Quire* 27). This envy is sparked when the narrator witnesses how a meadow is turned into a flax field, longing to be “cultivated, cherished, caressed” (ibid.) like the valuable crop. Hence, the thistle wishes to enter the

sphere of human commerce by acquiring use-value. When its wishes come true and it is first miraculously transformed into a flax plant and then reaped for further processing, this enthusiasm quickly fades. What remains is a longing for return: “[E]very thought was wishfully turned, and every sigh directed to the dear dirt, and obscurity of that ditch, which had once been despised by me, but now appeared preferable to the finest place on earth” (*Quire* 33). The melancholic sadness that dominates these narratives towards their end, I argue, is specifically nostalgic.

The term nostalgia is coined at the beginning of the long 18th century, in 1688. Its author is the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who first describes it as the specific sickness afflicting Swiss mercenaries when they spend extended periods of time abroad (cf. Davis 1979: 1f.; Hofer 1934: 381). The concept thus emerges in medical discourse. The “melancholy” (346) the narrator of the *Transformation of a Beech Tree* laments is understood by Hofer and his contemporaries as one of the central symptoms of this new disease (cf. Davis 1979: 1f.). Although the concept of melancholia has a rich history of its own and certainly resists being entirely subsumed under the concept of nostalgia, for the present discussion, I will concentrate on its function as a symptom of nostalgia, as proposed by Hofer. Such a reading resonates with passages towards the end of the narrative in which the chair looks back on its former days as a beech tree and longs “to stand once more, like in the happy days of my youth, upon the green and flowery turf” (336). Using a similar vocabulary, the quire of paper laments the separation from its “unhappy fragments”, which are “sunk in filth and misery, and groaning day and night for a happy reunion with their fellows, in the form of the once despised thistle” (37). The sadness of these it-narrators takes the form of a longing for home.

Faced with their transformation into manufactured goods, both narrators reminisce about their former existence. The beech tree starts its narrative with the description of the picturesque scenery that is visible from the hill on which it “took root” (317). It dwells on the description of the natural beauty, the tree “clothed in rich colours” (318) and presenting a “modest blossom” (318). At long last, the tree matures and begins to bear fruit and seeds itself. The scenery is presented as essen-

tially static, without “any other change such as the seasons cause[...]” (317). When the narrator dwells on the passing of seasons, which is said to “renew[...]” (318) the tree’s beauty, it evokes the closed circularity of infinite natural renewal.

The quire of paper provides a strikingly similar picture of its origin. It starts its life as a thistle growing in a ditch surrounding a farmer’s meadow. It lives “an easy, quiet, and secure life, sheltered from every driving storm, and every rude hoof” as well as “the unpropitious eye, and adverse hand of the farmers” (26). The thistle, too, is part of a natural cycle of reproduction – its “blossoms [...] promised a future numerous progeny” (ibid.). Transformed into flax seeds, it is sown by the farmer and foresees in its growth a “much fairer resurrection” (28) still. Rural images such as these are finally mirrored on the level of the story’s frame-narrator. A country parson called Rusticus acquires the sermon into which the quire of paper is bound at the end of its story and starts the narrative by complaining about rural life and lack of preferment in church hierarchy. The frame-narrator of *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper* thus serves the same purpose as the first owner of Chrysal. Like Traffic, Rusticus mirrors the imagery of the dominant narrative theme. But in contrast to Traffic, his equally telling name connects him to the sphere of rural homeostasis. He points to the ‘rustic’ life from which the it-narrator is removed and serves as the implied recipient of the narrative’s moral message. As the it-narrator’s fate warns against the consequences of unchecked hubris, Rusticus learns to be content with his peripheral position in the Church of England.

As we have seen, both narratives mobilize a host of images connected to the idea of a primordially harmonious existence. These are images of a natural homeostasis, stressing the literal rootedness of the narrators in their native soil as well as their embeddedness in cycles of renewal. Thus, the transformations that they suffer when they are removed from their rural seats are for both narrators an “extraordinary change” (*Tree* 320).

The beech tree is visited by labourers, one of whom “with a sharp instrument [makes] several marks” (318) upon the narrator. The beech tree admits to not knowing “the fatal meaning of these wounds”, but, looking back, understands “that they were made as marks for [...] [its]

destruction” (ibid.). What follows is experienced by the it-narrator as “violent proceedings” (319):

They came up, and having examined the fatal marks which had been before made in my bark, two of the stoutest immediately fell to work, raised their mighty weapons, and aiming dreadful blows at my lower branches, completely severed them from my body, they next attacked my trunk, striking with prodigious force, and inflicting at each stroke deep and wide wounds, till these cruel gashes encircled my stem. (ibid.)

Unlike the it-narrator, the workers can read the marks left on the trunk, singling it out for felling. The anthropomorphic language, making “wounds” out of axe-strikes, adds a sense of dramatic immediacy to the scene. This traumatic action begins the description of how the tree is felled and cut into timber for further use.

The flax doesn’t fare any better. Like its wooden counterpart, it speaks of suffering “wounds” (*Quire* 29) when being reaped. However, this is only the beginning of what the it-narrator describes in terms of a martyrdom:

What need have I to repeat how I was beaten almost to mummy by the cruel flax dressers. How I was one while drenched over head and ears in water, and another while exposed to all the rage of the sun without my former delicious moisture from the earth. (*Quire* 29f.)

The narrative teems with passages such as the above, but most are found not in the agricultural setting, but when the narrator enters the sphere of manufacture. During its reaping, the flax bears its “wounds without murmuring” (29), still confident in the fact that the result of these processes will be beneficial. It is only when it enters the sphere of industrial production that this confidence in a final purposefulness fades away. While the flax is first turned into a piece of cloth, it deteriorates as it forms part of various items of clothing and ends up as a bundle of rags. Found by a rag merchant, the it-narrator is sold to a paper mill that employs state of the art technology in order to produce paper out

of old rags. The scene at the paper mill provides the longest and most dramatic of the episodes of transformation:

Think what horrors I endured when after being borne out of several dark apartments, I saw before my eyes a dreadful machine, whirling round with terrible velocity, and roaring with so hoarse and tremendous a voice for prey that every ear was deafened. Think what my situation must have been, when I discovered that *I* was the kind of *food* that this *monster* carved for, and among the number of its devoted victims. All language were weak to describe you the terror and anguish I felt when I was thrown between its gaping and voracious jaws, yet those feelings bore but a small proportion to my mortal agonies while its merciless teeth were grinding me to powder. [...] [M]y substance became absolutely different, and was reduced to a kind of impalpable pulp. (*Quire* 35, emphases in the original)

By being highly experiential, this passage harks back to the scenes of counterfeit production quoted in the last chapter. It stresses the narrator's embeddedness in the situation, repeatedly calling onto the reader to "think" what such a situation would be like. The machine grinding down the rags for further processing is animated, turned into a fantastical "monster" by a series of bodily metaphors. Like the narrator itself, this machine is given a voice. But here, *prosopopoeia* appears in a twisted guise. The machine is given a voice, but it is inarticulate. "[H]oarse and tremendous", this voice is not telling stories, but calling for its "*food*" – reversing the poetic impulse of it-narrators and no longer producing words, but consuming matter. The resulting scene connects the transformation of the it-narrator to the imagery of a digestive tract. Consumed and processed by such a machine, the object is left as a piece of "impalpable pulp". The machine in question is most likely a Hollander beater, a machine for the production of paper pulp out of cellulose fibres. It operates with a chopping motion and employs metal blades, producing the image of a grinding jaw. The gradual introduction of this machine in the middle of the century and its universal acceptance by 1800 manages to expand output significantly, satisfying an ever-increasing demand for paper (cf. Barrett 2021).

Towards the end of the 18th century, when *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper* is written, machines such as the Hollander beater become an increasingly important part of the production processes of a number of different industries, ushering in the first industrial revolution (cf. Deane 1965: 51 and 90–112)²⁰³. The changes that the industrial revolution brings affect production on different levels. Hence, this is not the only instance in which the it-narrator engages in a description of the results of new processes of production. At an earlier point, when the flax is first made into clothing, it emphasizes the new organizational processes that go hand in hand with this production process. It tells of the “thousand palpitations, and terrors” (*Quire* 30) that it suffers while undergoing “a variety of new processes under the hands of the combers, spinners, skainers, twistors, and weavers” (ibid.). By enumerating the different professions that are necessary for the transformation of resources into manufactured commodities, the it-narrator connects to observations Adam Smith makes in 1775, four years before the publication of *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*. At the very beginning of his argument in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith describes the production of a pin, stressing the increase in efficiency that comes with dividing the labour into smaller units:

One man draws out the wire; another straightens it; a third cuts it; a fourth points it; a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on is a peculiar business; to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hands, though in others the same man will sometimes perform two or three of them. (1, 8)

203 The specific timeframe of this (first) industrial revolution is contested. Arnold Toynbee, the first economic historian to use this term in the late 19th century, suggests 1760 as the beginning of the industrial revolution. Notwithstanding discussions that trace the seeds of the industrial revolution to the 16th century, a narrower definition nowadays tends to locate its beginnings in the second half of the 18th century and its end in the last decades of the first half of the 19th century (cf. Deane 1965: vii and 2–5).

Labour is thereby divided into a variety of short operations undertaken by workers uniquely qualified for that specific task. This process is one of the central preconditions for the transformations that the industrial revolution enacts (cf. Hartwell 1965: 167). Similar processes are shown in the *Transformation of a Beech Tree*. Instead of being processed by a single worker, the beech tree distinguishes a number of different people working on it. Months pass, until workers (different from those that marked it and those that felled it) arrive to collect the timber. The owner of the warehouse where the timber is stored cuts the bits of timber with a lathe.²⁰⁴ However, this person does not yet make a chair out of the pieces of wood. The it-narrator is transferred to the care of yet “another man, whose appearance and occupation differed much” (*Tree* 322) from that of the first. Only the work of this man, and another worker who stains the wood, turning “its pale hue into a jet black” (*ibid.*), produce the final chair.

Thus, both narrators portray the principle of the division of labour, which accelerates during the first industrial revolution towards the end of the 18th century and transforms the relationship between humans and things. Large parts of those employed in industrial production no longer work on the entirety of the product but only perform minimal operations on it. When working on their own, Smith notes, a worker can only hope to produce a pin a day (cf. 1975: 1, 8), whereas a single person can produce “up to four thousand eight hundred pins in a day” (*ibid.* 99) when the tasks are divided among a group of specialized workers. However, this increase in productivity also changes the relationship of the individual worker to the things they work on. It does not only reduce the number of tasks needed to be performed from many dozens to two to three but also leads to each worker now handling not one, but 4800 pins a day (cf. *ibid.*).

The worker is now faced with a vast number of commodities, on the production of which they have only minimal influence. Although a critique of this process can already be found in Smith, it will rise to prominence almost a century later, with the notion of the labourer being alienated from the product of labour (cf. Marx 1975: 275–282).

204 A turning machine that rotates the workpiece around an axis, performing cuts.

This is an effect that is partly dependent on, and certainly amplified by, processes of industrialization, through which increasingly complex machines such as the Hollander beater take over production. The quire of paper presents the monstrous machine that grinds down the rags as no less fantastical than the inexplicable force that transforms it into flax at the beginning of its narrative. In both cases, the transformation is presented as essentially unfathomable and miraculous.

These processes result not only in a considerably higher output of commodities, but also in their increasing uniformity. When the quire of paper reaches its final form, it is easily confused with other commodities of its kind. Placed in a stationer's shop where it awaits its use as printing paper, it fears parts of its papers being used separately. As we have seen in the third chapter, this is averted at the last moment: "In the hurry of business, I was mislaid, and other paper of my quality used instead of me" (*Quire* 39). The sheets are free from the blemishes and residuals of the production process – they are of one "quality" and thus virtually indistinguishable. The new production processes thus go hand in hand with a loss of the commodity's individuality. This is a development that we see foreshadowed in the passage quoted above, where the narrator laments that it is left behind as "a kind of impalpable pulp" (*Quire* 35). Accordingly, the it-narrator's greatest fears revolve around the idea of losing its distinct identity. When it is ground down in order to become paper, the it-narrator is quick to comment:

You might think possibly that a few of my lesser fragments were immaterial to my peace [...] Alas! no! it was the chief peculiar curse, of my destiny, acutely to feel as an *whole*, for the pain, or ignominy of my minutest part while it existed in the same nature with myself. (*Quire* 35, emphasis in the original)

It is precisely these acts of separation that enable what I have found to be the characteristic multi-strand narration of it-narratives. When the flax is first turned into linen, it is divided into several different fragments that witness a host of different stories, related by the consciousness of the it-narrator:

[O]n one and the same day I was the bandage to a sore leg, and the night cap to a battered beau. That here I served as the spitting cloth to an old General full of gout, tobacco and catarrh, and there, attended a guttling, waddling alderman to a turtle feast [...]. [O]ne tatter of me served a butcher to puff up a loin of veal, and another to represent a potted partridge. [...] [H]ere I wiped away the onion tears of a joyful heir, and there, the crocodile ones of a false mistress. (*Quire* 35, emphases in the original)

The narrator of this story literalizes the metaphor of multi-strand narration that we have examined earlier. Throughout its transformations, the only constant are the threads of flax that are first woven into linen and then become different parts of clothing, only to be ultimately discarded as rags and industrially rearranged into the fibres that make up the paper. This story of downward mobility gives the it-narrator the opportunity for describing different social strata. Like many it-narrators before, the quire of paper is conscious of the fact that its circulation allows it to portray all ranks of society, reflecting that “the scenes [it has] passed through [were] as various as human nature” (38). However, unlike most of its predecessors, this is achieved not by a chronological succession of owners, but by splitting up the initial commodity and suggesting a simultaneity of different experiences taking place “on one and the same day”. Such a synchronic experience serves to amplify the extensiveness of the social fabric that the narrator traverses.

However, as seen above, this fragmentation in space is experienced as the traumatic result of industrial labour and evokes anxiety in the narrator. Aden describes such fears of a loss of individual identity and people’s “desire to regain some control over their lives in an uncertain time” (Aden 1995: 21) as the hallmark of nostalgia. Likewise, in Davis’ influential study *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979), nostalgia is understood as the specific reaction to the discontinuities of life. It is “the continuing quest for personal identity, the attempt to salvage a self from the chaos of raw, unmediated experience” (Davis 1979: 33). From two different standpoints, both narrators react to the threat of losing their continuous identity in the production process. Despite being “hacked and tortured into a multitude of strange little forms” (*Quire* 32), the quire of paper retains a single consciousness, able to “feel as a whole” (35). The

beech tree remains a single object but loses all outward resemblance to the tree in the transformation. Once finished, it admits that “no inexperienced eye could possibly have traced in the polished black chair, any portion of the vigorous Beech of the Stoken Church Woods” (*Tree* 322). When it is stored for sale, it encounters “dozens of chairs formed like [itself]” (323):

They had all [...] suffered the same extraordinary usage as I had, and probably there were many amongst them which had formerly lived and flourished in the very same wood where I had been reared, nay they might have formed parts of the identical tree from which I was taken. The change that had been produced in us, however, was so complete, that it was impossible for us to recognize in each other our former neighbours and acquaintances. We all now were chairs, and it mattered but little where we had stood, or how we had grown before. (ibid.)

The narrator experiences the threat of losing its individual identity as a result of the erasure of its history. The “former” lives of things are meaningless in comparison with the “now” of their new existence as manufactured products. The tree shares this fate with the narrator of *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, who is ground down into the “impalpable pulp” (35) before being rearranged into a product that bears neither traces of the original flax plant, nor other marks that would set it apart from a myriad other sheets of paper of the same “quality” (39).

What role does this nostalgia resulting from the industrialized production process play for the argument of this work? For one, nostalgia is certainly not only pointing to the specific situations of these two commodities. Nostalgia, as Davis holds, is not only experienced individually, but also collectively, particularly at moments of social change (cf. 1979: x). Nostalgia “thrives on distortions, on subjective discontinuities that engender yearning for continuity” (Davis 1979: 49). It thrives not only on the discontinuity the object experiences in the process of production and commodification, but also on the discontinuities a society experiences for which these production processes mean a change in the relationship between subjects and objects.

If, as Davis suggests, collective nostalgia can only be understood in relation to an era of social change, then the industrial revolution is certainly an example for such change. Things are transformed increasingly rapidly, losing their individual characteristics and becoming parts of a mass of consumer goods. The people affected by these changes “wonder whether the world and their being are quite what they always took them to be” (Davis 1979: 49). In a paradigmatic instance of the “rude transitions in history, dislocations and discontinuities” (ibid.), the industrial revolution is a harbinger of collective nostalgia. This revolutionary process brings with it not only the loss of pre-modern social relations, but also a yearning for *The World We Have Lost*, as Peter Laslett titles his study of the many social changes brought about by the industrial revolution (cf. 2000).

Late 18th-century individuals are not only confronted with a new way of relating to things as their producers, but also as their consumers (cf. Fine and Leopold 1990: 151). The changes in production are connected to an unprecedented increase in consumption and the emergence of the first consumer society by 1800 (cf. ibid. 157). To prove this proliferation of available items, Fine and Leopold cite Archenholz’ comments on lower-class dressing habits and his critique of the disappearance of the sumptuary ethic in England (cf. 1900: 166f.). Suddenly, different wardrobes are no longer a privilege of the higher social classes. Yet, for all the drastic changes they bring, these processes are gradual and asynchronous, proceeding in certain industries with much greater speed than in others, resulting in anachronisms. Such islands of continuity are essential, as some form of continuity must remain for subjects to be able to envision a certain existential base for nostalgia (cf. Davis 1979: 49).

But the results of this process of industrialization must be traced back to a number of developments that precede it and that are associated more generally with the entry into modernity. Some of these developments, which concern the relationship between subjects and objects in one way or another, were examined in the course of this work. Looking back at the preceding chapters, we find traces of nostalgia in each of the three discourses in which it-narrators intervene. The scientific revolution at the beginning of the long 18th century institutes a new

authority of the object as an instrument of knowledge and a prosthetic of the human body, thereby connecting to a nostalgia that would use empiricist methodology to reverse an epistemological Fall. In the tradition of Francis Bacon, the fellows of the early Royal Society yearn for the return to a pre-lapsarian identity of things and words. The expansion of British trade and colonialism, understood as the early processes of globalization, brings in a vast number of colonial goods and resources, greatly expanding the number of commodities in circulation, as well as the velocity at which they change hands. This compression of time and space (cf. Harvey 2011: 230–259) associated with globalization is a major cause of collective nostalgia (cf. Chrostowska 2010: 61). It occasions a yearning for locality that is a nostalgic reaction to these processes (cf. Boym 2002: 13). This is the yearning that is found in the rural sceneries with which some it-narratives juxtapose the urban worlds of commerce. Such texts connect to the nostalgic aspect at work in the idea of the invisible hand, conferring a sense of order on a commercial life that appears unfathomable and chaotic. Finally, Boym cites threats to the political landscape as exemplary triggers for nostalgia, giving the French Revolution and the death of the sovereign as examples (cf. 2002: 31). This aspect was the focus of the fourth chapter, where the threat to the sovereign was shown to be mediated by his image on the currency and a nostalgic longing for a time of true referentiality in monetary values. Yet, while we have seen nostalgia as a concept emerge in the medical professions, it quickly shifts to other discourses in the wake of these revolutions. In “the eighteenth century, the impossible task of exploring nostalgia passe[s] from doctors to poets and philosophers” (Boym 2002: 34). As I shall argue in the following, it-narratives should be read as one of the main contemporary genres for the negotiation of nostalgia.²⁰⁵

Following Davis’ observation about nostalgia and social upheaval, we can read these nostalgic narratives as reactions to the social changes – scientific, economic, and monetary – that culminate in the industrial revolution. They present a sentimentalized but essentially hopeless attempt at conserving a direct relationship to things that is increas-

205 The discourse of sumptuary ethics we have explored in the third chapter provides another example for a nostalgic desire for a lost world, as it yearns for a time where dress provided unambiguous referentiality.

ingly hard to maintain. However, I will argue that the problem at hand is more complex. As Janelle Wilson notes, there is a long history of associating nostalgia with reactionary thought (cf. 2014: 7). However, already with Davis, such a reductive understanding is problematized, and modes of nostalgia are differentiated. Scholars of nostalgia such as Sylwia Chrostowska and Svetlana Boym follow with similar distinctions.²⁰⁶ Boym's distinction seems to me the most concise, essentially boiling down to two central aspects of nostalgia. "Restorative nostalgia" (2002: 19) captures the reactionary aspect that oftentimes dominates this sentiment. It stresses *nostos*, the way home, and imagines a transhistorical reconstruction of this lost home. This kind of nostalgia yearns for a return to a pre-lapsarian moment of original stasis (cf. *ibid.*). It thereby disavows its own status as nostalgia, rather thinking of itself in terms of tradition and truth (cf. *ibid.* 18). The other aspect, "reflective nostalgia", resonates with *algia*, longing. It delays the desired homecoming wistfully, but also ironically and desperately (cf. *ibid.*). In the words of Boym: "[A]t best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias" (*ibid.* 19).

In *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, this tension between the two modes of nostalgia is resolved in favour of restorative nostalgia. When it is processed in the paper-making machine, the it-narrator must resort to fantastical devices to explain how its original substance is not divided when its parts are separated:

You will wonder how I could avoid mixing my particles with those of a million of other rags in the caldron? But so it was; and in the transformation of these parts of me, I possessed the power of separating *my* atoms from those that did not belong to me. (35, emphasis in the original)

²⁰⁶ Chrostowska differentiates between capitalist nostalgia, which promises restoration, romantic nostalgia, which is aware of the irretrievable nature of the past, and philosophic nostalgia, which emerges when the insight of romantic nostalgia is systematized (cf. 2010: 64f.). This is very close to Davis' original distinction between simple, reflexive, and interpretative nostalgia (cf. 1979: 17–29).

To justify its hopes for restoration, it draws on a religious concept that we have already seen at work in it-narratives. The it-narrator understands its initial role as a thistle as being “appointed [...] by providence” (26). At the end of the narrative, it “foresee[s] that [its] sufferings will shortly be ended and [its] remaining parts happily united” (39). The narrative’s overall structure suggests the preference for ‘rustic’ life to the vagaries of the industrial society and city life.

The opposite is true for the tree-narrator. At first, it seems to show much the same nostalgic wish for restoration, but it is quick to rectify this in a couple of crucial passages. Although it uses the same dramatic language to describe its processing as the quire of paper does, this it-narrator is conscious of the figurative nature of such language: “I must, in honesty, confess that we did not really *feel* pain, nor were those *really* cruel who served us as I shall now tell you” (*Tree* 321, emphases in the original). While the quire of paper is transformed by an unknown higher power into a flax plant, the narrating tree knows that “time and industry, perform[...] those miracles that no fairy can effect” (320). Consequently, at the end of its narrative, instead of evoking a providential restoration to past glory, it surrenders to the grim reality of being “consigned to the gloomy-lumber room” or “the more probable havock of the flames” (350). Shortly before these reflections however, the narrator relates how, years after serving as a little boy’s favourite chair, it is rediscovered by the same child, now considerably older, in a storage room:

“Ah it is a poor old thing – pretty well gone to pieces,” replied the good-natured Thomas; “but I dare to say old Ralph can make it look tight again, if you wish it”. “That I certainly do,” said the lively Frederick, “and I will give him my two last weeks’ allowance if he can mend it so that it will do for Maria. I am too big for it myself, you know”. (347)

Instead of dwelling any longer on the past, its former owner puts an end to this nostalgic episode and gives the chair away to be refurbished for the use of his younger sister. Thus, at the end of the narrative, the nostalgic object is confronted with a nostalgic subject, who, like the contemporary reader, lives in a world where the relationship between

people and things changes at an increasing pace. However, instead of attempting to arrest this process, the former owner uses its encounter with the old object as a moment for reflection on the circumstances that have changed and finds a new use for it. At its end, this narrative provides us with a meta-reflexive commentary on nostalgia.

Although it is most clearly negotiated in these two texts, I argue that nostalgia is a hallmark of it-narratives as a genre. Jonathan Lamb shows a sensitivity for this aspect when he identifies the it-narrator's mood as "sometimes nostalgic" (Lamb 2010: xvi). But he is by no means the only one. Already Richard K. Meeker, in his study from 1955, finds a "melancholy attitude" (7) in the it-narrator. As shown in the second chapter, the genre is modelled after both autobiographical genres and adventure writing, such as the picaresque. These forms engender a temporal structure in which the narrator presents its life or its adventures in retrospect. An 'older' narrator usually recapitulates the vagaries of life from a perspective that invites nostalgic overtones. This is concretized in narratives such as the two above, which show how industrial production complicates the tracing of an individual object-biography. However, the tree and the quire of paper are not the only commodities that face these changes. Upon a closer look, similar themes are found in many other narratives. Confronted by a "gay white coat", the tattered narrator of *Adventures of a Black Coat* (1760) fears a loss of individual identity following its "approaching dissolution" (*Coat* 115) and prophesizes the reader a "gloomy and melancholy aspect" (*ibid.*), were they to have the same insight in the transience of worldly affairs. The narrator of *The Adventures of a Gold-Ring* (1783) is melted down and mixed with other metals, in order to "experience a resurrection, but never again in the particles of [its] *individual self*, to experience such a train of adventures as those with which the Reader has just now been presented" (*Gold-Ring* 94, emphases in the original). As with the preceding examples, industrial processes are experienced as violent, threatening the identity of the it-narrator. However, while tree and flax can hold

onto their identity, the ring's narrative ends on a rather pessimistic note, with its dissolution.²⁰⁷

The case of *Aureus, or the Life and Opinions of a Sovereign* is yet more dramatic. Here, the narrating coin tells the story of its forging. The coin is the product of a “violent concussion of the elements, accompanied with most excruciating torture [...] by some infernal machine” (19). The coin gives the year of its production as 1819, shortly after the mint is moved from the Tower of London into a building on Tower Hill, a move that comes with the purchase of elaborately engineered machinery (cf. Clancey 1999: 70). The further standardization of minted coins means that the narrator experiences itself as hardly separate from the “hundreds of thousands of objects like [itself], glittering around [it]” (*Aureus* 20). This is particularly striking when the coin relates scenes of its ‘infancy’:

I am one of a very numerous family of brethren; all of us so similar in appearance that we are not easily distinguished one from another. Indeed, the difficulty is so great that I have often been doubtful of my own identity, and have been sometimes obliged to say to my brother beside me, *Is it really you or I?* (19, emphasis in the original)

Coins, I argue, present a commodity particularly well suited for voicing such anxieties. They are things for which uniformity is a goal in itself,

207 Interestingly, the gold ring is not able to retain its narrative identity throughout industrial processes. Unlike the quire of paper, which mobilizes restorative nostalgia in order to cling to an image of the self that is long lost, the gold ring surrenders to change. Questions of the permanence of identity in it-narratives have already been explored on a more general level, unrelated to the question of nostalgia. Viktor Link, for instance, explores ideas of metempsychosis, that is, the travelling of souls from one body to the next, presenting an approach that anchors the tradition of it-narratives in Lucian, specifically in *The Dream, or The Cock* (cf. 1980: 41–68). In this tale, a cobbler converses with a cock who claims to be the reincarnation of Pythagoras. Jonathan Lamb likewise emphasizes theories of metempsychosis and metamorphosis in his reading of the genre (cf. 2001). As both Link's presentation of the focus on Lucian, and Lamb's reading of it-narratives through Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* show, this approach relies heavily on focusing on animal narrators. This is a subgenre that, as we have seen, foregrounds questions of human-animal sympathy and become increasingly influential as the genre transforms towards the end of the long 18th century. The identities of object-narrators in the narrow sense of the word, I argue, are better understood through my theory of nostalgia laid out above.

and where the technological innovations for achieving this uniformity are developed earlier than those for many other commodities, as we have seen in the fourth chapter. Citing Marx, Christopher Flint rightfully points to the remark that *pecunia non olet* ('money does not smell') (cf. 1998: 223), insinuating that money is particularly well suited to hide the history of its circulation (cf. *ibid.*). When being recast into a shorter cannon, the narrator of *The Adventures and Metamorphoses of Queen Elizabeth's Pocket-Pistol* laments how parts of it are "converted into *dirty Pence* to be handled by every *Shoe-boy* and *Flying-stationer*" (2). The transformation from a unique object to the "faceless heaps of copper coins" (Tretiakov 2006: 58) is experienced as a fall from Grace. Yet, in the texts examined here, we do not deal with the smooth and odourless mobility of monetary circulation, but with "*dirty*" (*Pocket-Pistol* 2) money, leaving traces and stains in the social space it traverses. It-narratives are concerned with precisely the question of "how it [money] got into the hands of its possessor, or what article had been exchanged into it" (Marx 1996: 120), they provide ideal spaces for the discussion of commodity identities.

This can also explain why coin-narratives sometimes carry proper names, in stark contrast to other texts which only refer to their narrators by the indefinite article. It-narrators such as Chrysal, Argal, and Aureus cling to their names as tokens of identity in a world where pieces of money are increasingly standardized and virtually indistinguishable. In this, they are money that is "not yet so cold and indifferent as Simmel proposes" (Lamb 2010: 226). They do not yet conform to the theories of modern money that see it as an abstract and featureless mediator (cf. Simmel 2009). We can find these residues of identity because the capitalist mode of production is not yet hegemonic, but also because it-narrators nostalgically cling to a time when this mode of production had not yet erased the traces of the individual lives of commodities.

If *prosopopoeia* and *chirotopoeia* always cover up an absence, then for it-narratives this is the absence of the individual object that can be told apart and whose life-story can be singled out amid the life-stories of all other objects. *Prosopopoeia* is thus also a "trope of mourning" (Miller 1990: 4). This insight resonates strikingly with an observation Davis makes about reflexive nostalgia that equally applies to Boym's concept

of reflective nostalgia. In the dialogue between present and past that the nostalgic mood engenders, “another voice is added” (Davis 1979: 21) through reflexive nostalgia, a voice “wanting to question, deflate, correct and remind” (ibid.). The voice Davis describes here is reminiscent of the satirical voice of it-narrators, constantly urging a corrupt world to reflect upon itself. This type of nostalgia does not try to reconstruct the lost home but might even defer homecoming itself (cf. Boym 2002: 81) – much like the money-narrators who seek to extend their adventures indefinitely. Like they, this sentiment is “enamoured of distance, not of the referent [of home] itself” (Stewart 2007: 145). As in Boym’s reflective nostalgia, such adventures result in “ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary [narratives]” (2002: 82) that defamiliarize home (cf. ibid.). This is a process seen at work in the reverse gaze. Thereby, the voices of many it-narrators not only yearn for a past state of affairs, but work through its passing. My wager is that it-narratives allow a 18th-century reading public to mourn the individuality of things, instead of remaining arrested in a melancholic and restorative nostalgia for a world they have lost.²⁰⁸

Finally, faced with either the disappearance of the object-status of the narrator, or the transitioning of the genre towards children’s literature, later it-narrators show a curious kind of nostalgia for their own generic tradition.²⁰⁹ Aureus refers back to the “beings of yesterday” (11) who have “so much pure and unaltered material in them” (ibid.), speaking of itself as “formed of a portion of the identical substance from

208 This function seems to grow more pronounced towards the beginning of the 19th century. While 18th-century narrators still frequently circulate in an impersonal commercial world, in Victorian object-biographies, objects are “endowed with particular and irreproducible features (so that sympathy for any given object comes to depend upon its difference from all others)” (Plotz 2007: 335). This might also explain why narrators with proper names that individualize them cluster towards the last years of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century.

209 This might be aided by the influence that Laurence Sterne’s sentimentalism exerts on the later texts of the genre (cf. Bellamy 2012: xlix) and that we have already seen at work in various it-narratives. Occasionally, this connection is made explicit, as when *The Adventures of a Bad Shilling in the Kingdom of Ireland* litters its pages with the characteristic asterisks of *Tristram Shandy* (cf. 139 and 141), or the narrator of *The Adventures of a Bank Note* meets the author of the same novel (cf. 4, 194). Thus, Sterne’s style could be seen as providing the vocabulary and imagery for the nostalgic longing in it-narratives. For the importance of objects (and money) in sentimental fiction and the associated nostalgia, see Lynch 2007.

which was moulded his renowned ancestor of the name of Chrysal, whose life had been handed down to posterity under the title of *The Adventures of a Guinea*" (ibid., emphases in the original). By citing the textual form at the end of its eulogy, the coin invites us to ponder on the double meaning of the "material" it cites earlier, understanding it not only in the sense of physical metal, but also as the literary material of its predecessors. This is a material that is degrading as Chrysal and its kind are "supplanted by a family which had absolutely risen from rags" (*Aureus* 12).²¹⁰ Ultimately, this connection compels us to read this passage not only as in the fourth chapter, as referring to paper money, but also as a reference to the texts of later it-narratives, printed on paper and thus literally "risen from rags", like the narrator in *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*. In opposition to the loss of personal identity that the narrator fears in such a situation, it refers us to its generic tradition by claiming its literal 'part' in it.

5.3 The Afterlife of a Genre

During the 19th century, it-narratives in Britain are slowly transformed into a genre of children's literature. This movement is gradual, and traces of the features I have characterized as central to it-narratives are occasionally still present. Tolstoy's commodified horse-narrator in *Kholstomer* (*Холстомер*, 1886), is certainly an example for a text fashioned after the it-narrative model in another cultural setting. However, this narrative is an exception. Most texts featuring narrating animals in the 19th century are written for children and tell their stories in order to teach empathy. Probably the most famous of these types of texts is Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), which carries the subtitle *The Autobiography of a Horse* and claims to be a translation from the language of horses. It spawns a number of sequels as well as film adaptations in the 20th century. Narratives from the perspectives of animals have been

²¹⁰ As we have seen already, the narrator in *The Adventures of a Bale of Goods* (1766) engages in a very similar play on words. The it-narrator is a piece of brocade, whose threads "have been gilt with what [...] an ingenious Jew had contrived to filch from Chrysal" (*Goods* 6). With this imagery, the narrative threads are literalized as the material threads of *Chrysal* that have been woven into its successor.

examined extensively in the field of animal studies in the last years, and the function of these texts is nowadays predominantly centred around a critique of the treatment of animals by humans.

Modern fairy-tales, on the other hand, include plenty of stories about things, most prominently found in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Flax* (1849) and *The Silver Shilling* (1862). The flax, like its relative in *The Adventures of a Quire of Paper*, goes through several transformations, only to be burned at the end of the story. *The Silver Shilling* connects to tales we have seen told by coins. Circulating in a foreign country, it is suspected of being counterfeit and thus also connects to the tales of counterfeit-narrators. Yet although Andersen's tales are focalized on objects, the narrator remains an implicit third-person voice and their stories have no satirical elements to them. These are tales with clear moral messages instead, and, in contrast to it-narratives, often show objects as actants (cf. Felcht 2013: 45).

Andersen's focus on the fantastical agency of things is also the focus of other works in the fairy-tale tradition, not only in prose. Think of Goethe's *Zauberlehrling / The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1797), featuring a broom, humanized and upside-down, not unlike Swift's in *Meditations upon a Broomstick* (but also of the Disney adaptation of the poem as a part of *Fantasia* (1940), or of Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995ff.) series). However, Goethe's poem also offers a keyword that enters the literary discourse on objects in the 19th century. Faced with the animated broom that will not return to rest, the apprentice complains: "Das ist Tücke!"²¹¹ ("Der Zauberlehrling" l. 54). Theodor Vischer coins the comic concept of the "Tücke des Objekts" ('the spite of the object') in his novel *Auch Einer: Eine Reisebekanntschaft* (1879). In this text, the narrator meets a person who believes that the inanimate world conspires against him, as he is plagued by a host of resistant and spiteful objects, which seem to actively sabotage him. In the 19th century, objects have become alien to us (cf. Asendorf 2009: 18) and are imagined not as passive observers, but as spiteful actors.

This stands in stark contrast to the texts we have examined so far, which, as I have argued, show little interest in the agency of things. Yet

211 'This is spite!'

this should come as no surprise, as the historical situation at the end of the 19th century is a very different one. Both the production processes and the economic and scientific discourses that help make sense of the products of these processes have changed. In other words, the idea of objects narrating their circulations in fiction changes as the material conditions that determine the ways commodities are produced and the ways in which we think about these commodities change. Literature concerned with objects now responds to different social contradictions.

Yet, the historical developments between the end of the long 18th century and the beginning of the 21st century are not only crucial for understanding how the formal traits examined here live on in responding to new social contradictions, but also for keeping in mind the specific historical position from which this study has attempted to understand it-narratives. The list of these changes certainly needs to begin with the hegemonic status of industrial capitalism in Western Europe by the end of the 19th century, but is much longer than that. In the following, I can only give a rough impression of these changes.

For one, even though objects still work as important correlates of memories, from the middle of the 19th century onwards, photography becomes the dominant medium, not only for objectivity (cf. Daston 2007: 131), but also for nostalgia (cf. Sontag 2020: 11f.). In the course of this century, the first industrial revolution is followed by a second one. The use of electricity, oil, and gas, as well as the development of the combustion engine revolutionize transport and production, bringing with them further standardization on a massive scale. Reacting to this, the arts and crafts movement responds with an emphasis on individual manufacture. This is a response to the standardization of commodities that is alive to this day, when 'manufacture' is a central keyword in countless marketing campaigns. Walter Benjamin studies the disappearance of the aura of the work of art in 1935 (cf. 2002). Only two decades later, optimized mechanical reproduction and a post-war production boom flood the markets of the first world with cheap consumables. While Heidegger envisions a sense of continuity against the loss of a direct relationship between subjects and objects, different forms of pop art embrace the new primacy of the consumer good (cf. Heidegger 1967; Asendorf 2009: 12).

These changes in production processes also affect circulation. Accelerated processes of globalization lead to outsourcing on a large scale and make tracing a commodity chain a virtual impossibility for the consumer. Responses to these changes include attempts to recover the itineraries of commodities by tracing their production history. A powerful artistic rendition of this can be found in Andrew Niccol's *Lord of War* (2005), whose opening sequence traces the 'travels' of a bullet from a Soviet weapons factory privatized and plundered in the 1990s, to the body of an African child soldier in an unnamed civil war. However, tracing the life of a commodity has also become a service that is itself included in marketing schemes and commodified in the promises of a 'fair' use of resources, in products that promise 'sustainable' sourcing, or in the 'Fairtrade' certificate.

The commodity that mediates the circulations of commodities is not unaffected by these changes. The way in which money functions has changed significantly since the late 18th century. While the end of Bretton Woods (the international monetary system that tied countries' currencies to gold) already effectively ended international gold backing of money half a century ago, this process of abstraction is not at its end. In the digital age, at least for consumers in the global north, money is now mainly experienced virtually, with discussions of a complete abolition of physical coins and bank notes under way. The culture that responds to these phenomena must necessarily differ from the framework of it-narratives. Ernst Wilhelm Händler's *Das Geld Spricht* ('Money Talks') (2019), for instance, offers a type of contemporary money-narrator. However, this is not an individual coin or a bank note, but money as such, not circulating as a physical object but speaking with a disembodied voice that permeates the narration.

Yet, the latest developments purport to counteract the process of abstraction that comes with digitalization. *Bitcoins* (฿) promise a currency backed not by state power, but by the fundamental laws of its blockchain, a point where digitalization goes full circle and offers to once again tie back money-supply to the physical world. It offers an alternative to state-sanctioned fiat money and understands value as

embedded in ‘nature’, not unlike 18th-century bullionists.²¹² In a similar vein, the short-lived hype around *Non-Fungible Tokens* (NFTs) wished to imagine a form of ownership beyond physical presence in digital objects, using the technology of the blockchain to identify ‘originals’ and thus reinscribe a fantasy of continuous identity in virtual objects.²¹³ The final effects of these changes on our relation to the inanimate world are not yet in sight. What would tales such as *The Strange and Surprising Adventures of 0.05 ₿*, or *The Travels of an NFT-Artwork* read like? To what social contradictions would their formal traits respond?

In the conclusion to this study, we have seen that some of the texts mentioned in this section can be connected to the tradition of it-narratives through their formal traits. However, they can only be understood in relation to the processes that have changed the relationship between subjects and objects, as well as producers and consumers, and that I have tried to briefly sketch here. As we have seen, they occasionally focus on one or more aspects that are characteristic for it-narratives, yet these aspects never again appear in the specific arrangement that was traced in this work and that produces texts that can be considered prototypical it-narratives.

In order to explain this, I have examined these texts from the standpoint of genre. In this, Alber’s theory of generic development supplemented the theory proposed by Moretti. I proceeded by understanding the specific traits of literary genre to emerge as a response to contradictions in their environment (cf. Moretti 2013a: 141). In the case of it-narratives, these traits take the shape of the anti-mimetic narrator who claims to report truthfully and the circulating commodity, which aims to arrive at its destined end against all odds. Alber’s theory complemented these observations by allowing us to understand the effects of

212 The computational capacity required to ‘mine’ them, that is, solve the necessary mathematical puzzle that the blockchain provides, increases as more bitcoins are mined. Since the proportionate ‘reward’ simultaneously falls, this caps monetary supply at around 21 million, providing a ‘natural’ grounding for a currency that is disconnected from material referents of value.

213 Using the structure of the blockchain, *Non-Fungible Tokens* allow for the construction of an ‘original’ copy of, say, a digital artwork. Despite remaining multipliable indefinitely, this one digital artwork preserves a token that can identify it as the one copy that is the ‘original’.

estrangement that these traits engender when they first emerge, but also how they are naturalized, forming a perceptual frame that effaces the effect of estrangement in the process and leaves these devices behind as vestigial features. These features are finally drawn upon and modified in new emerging genres that react to new contradictions.

The configuration which gives rise to it-narratives can only be understood through the debates outlined in this work. For one, tracing these debates has allowed us to understand the position this long-forgotten genre occupies in the history of literature and theory. We have come to understand it-narratives as the conceptual model for the theory of literary estrangement and as a popular genre of a time that is shaped by fundamental social changes.

On the other hand, this approach has presented contemporary debates in a new light. This happened in condensed and sometimes dichotomic pairs: Boyle and Hobbes, Hooke and Power, Smith and Malynes, Locke and Lowndes, or Newton and the counterfeiters. These very different social actors come together at the intersection of 18th-century discourses on reliability, circulation, and validity – a nexus that is held together by a rediscovered genre of storytelling objects.

Finally, in approaching these debates through the lens of it-narratives, this book has also attempted to challenge received ideas about their historical moment. It has shown the heroes of the picaresque as objects, Boyle as a businessman, Power as a poet, Defoe as a writer on the drive, Swift as a disgruntled drapier, Smith as a rhetorician and literary critic, and Newton as the Master of the Mint. In this, it-narratives have offered a reverse gaze for this work, a defamiliarizing perspective that challenges relationships we take for granted in the long 18th century.

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6.2 Figures

Fig 1. Boyle's air pump as depicted in *The works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, 1744.

Fig. 2. *Blunders in Style*. Printed by George Moutard Woodward, 1800. British Museum. Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1935-0522-8-48> (accessed September 12, 2025).

Fig. 3. *Pot Fair*. *Cambridge*. Printed by James Bretherton, after Henry William Bunbury, 1777. British Museum. Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_J-6-49> (accessed September 12, 2025).

Fig. 4. *The Fashionable Mamma, or The Convenience of Modern Dress*. Printed by James Gillray, 1796. British Museum. Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-6503> (accessed September 12, 2025).

Fig. 5. Colonial 5-pound note. Printed by David Hall and William Sellers, 1774. National Museum of American History. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_1881593%201> (accessed September 21, 2025).

Fig. 6. Mock Bank of England note. Designed by George Cruikshank, published by William Hone, 1819. British Museum. Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1978-U-955> (accessed September 12, 2021).

Fig. 7. *Midas, Transmuting all into Paper*. Printed by James Gillray and published by Hannah Humphrey, 1797. British Museum. Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-6604> (accessed September 12, 2025).

The long 18th century sees a particular heyday of tales in which objects tell their stories. It-Narratives, as scholars now call these texts, become a separate literary genre. This book explores the rise and fall of this genre, by situating it in the rise of experimental science, the development of political economy and the popularization of representative money.

By approaching these processes through the lens of it-narratives, this book challenges received ideas about their historical moment, while also showing how it-narratives stand at the center of the theory of literary estrangement. Making the familiar strange itself, it shows the heroes of the picaresque as objects, Robert Boyle as a businessman, Daniel Defoe as a writer on the psychoanalytic drive, Jonathan Swift as a disgruntled drapier, Adam Smith as a literary critic, and Newton as the Master of the Mint. In this, the book offers a defamiliarizing perspective that challenges relationships we take for granted in the long 18th century.

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