

Vid Stevanović

Objective Observers – Curious Commodities
It-Narratives in the Long 18th Century

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by
Vid Stevanović



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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.