

Prologue

The Thing spoke itself.

—Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*

This book explores the difference between objects that serve human purposes and things that don't. The properties of objects of most interest to us are their mobility in the world of exchange, expressed as commercial and symbolic value, and their interpretability as specimens and curiosities, expressed as knowledge. We are interested in their contribution to the circulation of information, goods, and money because of the importance it imparts to us, the owners of them. Things, on the other hand, are obstinately solitary, superficial, and self-evident, sometimes in flight but not in our direction; they communicate directly only with themselves, and have no value in the market that they reckon. It has been suggested recently that this difference between objects and things is only apparent, a paradox of portability or an illusion of commodity fetishism that allows objects to masquerade for a while as lonely literal things, until such time as they re-enter the system of communication as figures, characters, and signs (Plotz 2008: 26; Freedgood 2006: 9). To be sure, many a thing has been an object until it was changed, like the three hats, one cap, and two non-matching shoes Robinson Crusoe sees lying on the beach after the shipwreck; but these particular items are never to be valued again, either as objects to be exchanged or used, or as signs of a definite idea. What makes them so sinister or implacable (to use Adorno's word) is their irrelevance to any human system of value, even though humans once made, bought, and wore them. The transformation from object into thing tends to be final and irreversible, not dialectical. When they ride away on their speckled horses, Edward Lear's sugar-tongs and nutcrackers have gone for good: "They faded away, and they never came back" (Lear 2002: 273). Once having made the change, things do not return as anthropomorphized items in the systems of exchange and symbolic labor. They are positioned starkly in opposition to objects that represent other objects, or descriptive facts that serve as metaphors, or sheer surfaces that advertise hidden meanings.

Hobbes's definition of an idol does very well for a thing: it is a "Material Body" made of "Wood, Stone, Metall, or some other visible creature"

which represents (on St. Paul's authority) "*nothing*": nothing in the sense that all there is of it is present in the material of which it is composed; and nothing in the sense that there is no surplus over and above its substance which it is concerned to represent (Hobbes 1996: 448–9, 445). It is as full of itself as it is empty of every thing else. It subsists in a material universe where "there is no reall part thereof that is not also Body" (269). For a human who is, in Hobbes's use of the term, a person, that is to say, a civil subject defined by a political system of representation, the encounter with such a thing is unnerving because it stands in an unrecognizable space where nothing is represented and nothing stops a thing demonstrating this. An unmediated meeting between a thing and a human will result therefore in these alternatives: either its emptiness will be derided as unmeaning matter, or its fullness (its faculty of being exactly what it is) will be worshipped. In the latter case the passions of the spectator—bewilderment, fear, hope—are invested in the thing and instantly it is transformed into a personification or a god. At this point, a perfect alignment has taken place between Hobbes's bodily thing and Hume's "empire of the imagination" (Hume 1978: 662). The idol's incontrovertibly physical nature absorbs the impressions it has made on the human imagination, and there it stands the visible cause of its fantastic effects. The thing, the idol, and the personification are all exempt from what Hobbes and Locke identified as the limitation of empiricism, namely, that objects striking on our senses do not leave reliable prints of themselves: "the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another" (Hobbes 1996: 14). The thing (or the idol) is both things at once.

Of course, it is strange that Hobbes should offer such a contemptuous account of idols since his own Leviathan appears to be a very good example of one. The loose and flying elements of a crowd are impelled by fear to worship the shape of a mortal god who confers unity upon them on condition they agree to mortgage the sum of their authority in return for the preservation of their lives; thus the Commonwealth comes about. There is a critical difference, however, between Leviathan and other idols inasmuch as it emerges from the consent of the crowd to be represented as a person. One of the impulsive causes of fear allayed by Leviathan is the emptiness of non-representation (Esposito 2010: 141). Now everyone is represented, and each citizen confronts the other as a person; even things may be represented as persons by other persons, who derive their power from the person of what was once a crowd or multitude. Bruno Latour has observed how representation silences the thing, equally in Hobbes's Commonwealth and in Boyle's laboratory, leaving a parliament of mutes represented by a sovereign or a witness who, in speaking for all, says nothing for certain that a thing or a fearful human might say for themselves: "We shall never know whether representatives betray

or translate” (Latour 1993: 143). Why does Hobbes’s idol exhaust the energy of a thing? The answer must be that representation introduces a medium between the materiality of the thing and its effect—its image, fancy, or passion—that diverts power to the figure of the sovereign, the person of the personate multitude, who is (unlike the crowd from which he derives) distinct from the material of which he is composed. Hobbes distinguishes the truth of his mortal god from all other material fictions of things and idols on the basis of the real political and historical effects of representation. Latour calls Hobbes’s achievement a reconstruction of the vertical relation between the three orders of gods, humans, and non-humans, one that successfully obscures “the separation between humans and nonhumans on the one hand and between what happens ‘above’ and what happens ‘below’ on the other” (Latour 1993: 13). All gods except the mortal one are an illusion, and active matter, including things that speak themselves, are supplanted by the fictions of their representational form, for “there are few things, that are incapable of being represented by Fiction” (Hobbes 1996: 113).

Oddly, it is in fiction that the disturbances are to be found that restore the vertical divisions that Hobbes had concealed. Before he describes the sea-wrack of headgear and footwear, Crusoe says, “I walk’d about on the Shore, lifting up my Hands, and my whole Being, as I may say, wrapt up in the Contemplation of my Deliverance, making a Thousand Gestures and Motions which I cannot describe, reflecting upon all my Comerades that were drown’d” (Defoe 1983: 46). Immediately afterward his mood changes; he thinks that wild beasts will kill him, “and this threw me into terrible Agonies of Mind, that for a while I run about like a Mad-man” (47). This is one of the very few occasions—the footprint is another—when Crusoe’s passions are exalted and depressed by things so very much themselves they loosen and agitate his imagination, leaving him without a narrative or conjecture to explain what has happened. In an ecstasy of relief he raises his hands as it were in praise of a god, and in despair he places himself below the animals. “In this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished [he] see[s] the first obscure traces of divinity” (Hume 1956: 28).

Alternatively, humans finding a certain voluptuous satisfaction in beholding things purely as they are, when, as Defoe’s Roxana puts it, “the Sence of things . . . began to work upon my Sences” (Defoe 1981: 200), enjoy a reflection not of critical judgment but of pleasure so intense it evades representation, and culminates in idolatry. Basking in the “fullness of Humane Delight” with her lover, Roxana says, “As the Prince was the only Deity I worshipp’d, so I was really his Idol” (70). And when he carries her in front of the mirror, she stands in wonder at her own image, “all on fire with the Sight” (73). Excitements like these are risky, for it is

not long afterward that Roxana calls the prince a beast for falling in love with a whited sepulcher such as herself. However, the point is made by Defoe that in states of heightened emotion, provoked by things striking us as things, the three levels that Latour says are sacrificed to a system of representation come back into play. There are two terms or poles to this experience: idol and author. Things are idolized when their fantastic energy remains their own, which requires either that they desert the system of representation underlying the ownership of property and the circulation of goods; or that, never having been in it, they remain outside it. The return of stolen goods organized by Jonathan Wild before his death at Tyburn in 1725 provides many examples of commodities that rediscover themselves as things, attracting in the process such a zealous desire on the part of their former owners to transcend the limits of mere possession that it is not too extravagant to name such zeal worship or infatuation. Paradoxically, the intemperate longing of a human to own a thing beyond the limits prescribed for property can lead to the independence even of things as immobile as estates. The law of entail allowed mortals to contend for a kind of immortality in relation to land that, legally speaking, they could own forever. In the following pages, I shall show how the exorbitant desire to own a thing absolutely liberates it; also I shall examine five parallel examples of the transformation of humans into idols, which I take to be not figurative but real—Bottom the weaver, Gay's Thomas Peascod, Pope's Belinda, Captain Cook, as well as Roxana herself. Here the thinghood of a human is proved in the unmediated manifestation of a former person as fully and unconditionally another thing altogether. Cook is not like a god, he is one. When Bottom gives up playing games of representation, saying things such as, "I Pyramus am not Pyramus," he becomes the very idol of idols, half horse and half human, a metamorphosis he is incapable of representing. That these changes should occur beyond the walls of the city, or at the limit of the known world, out of reach of justice and common sense, is consistent with the freedom of idols, whether animate or inanimate, to subsist in their material form immune to the pressure to mean or signify anything of value to civil society.

To the word "author" itself I attach the same primitive meaning Hobbes assigns it, namely, a solitaire endowed with undefended natural rights occupying a vulnerable condition outside or on the rim of civil society, without the advantages of covenants, mortal gods, personate selves, and representations. Authors are distinguished not only by their nakedness and isolation, but also by their delight in being looked at, especially in mirrors, by their hostility to being symbolized or interpreted, and by their impatience with language that does not say the thing which is, including the thing each author is. Like other things, they experience the peculiar

reflexive exactness of entities, whether they are things, personifications or gods, who do what they are and embody nothing but what they do. Like those pieces of nature in Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* vitrified by the river which has licked its own back into a mirror ("Where all things gaze themselves, and doubt/ If they be in it or without" [Marvell 1971: 1.82]), human figures turned to things accomplish themselves, such as the mower who mows himself with his own scythe, or the poet who sits in the shade of a tree and thinks nothing but green. Reflexivity of this order, as Steven Knapp has pointed out, is the product of a degree of self-experience unmatched in empirical consciousness, and is therefore difficult to express in words that are not part of the reflection. Authors are to the civil subject what things are to objects; consequently, they are not often read or viewed in a manner faithful to their own active and immediate conceptions of themselves. The hostility growing up between them and their audience accounts for certain ruptures in their narratives and fissures in their self-portraits. This kind of authorship is evinced by Lord Shaftesbury, the Author of Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, Lemuel Gulliver, John Dunton and Laurence Sterne, to name a few.

What then can a thing say, if it is isolated from all relative and conventional modes of significance? Without the vestige of a common language, it cannot find a seat even in that mute parliament of things proposed by Bruno Latour. Its circumstances resemble not so much those of a representative body as of Hobbes's state of nature, where community, law, letters, and time are not yet operating. In Ovid's metamorphoses, the change of an object, most often a human one, into a thing is accompanied by the attenuation of voice into a cry, gesture, or tears, spontaneous expressions of emotion that bid farewell to a specific language community. If metamorphosis is the material form taken by passions reacting to an unparalleled emergency—crystallizing into flowers, birds, or stones—then color, sound, or volume are their natural language, and they mean what they neglect explicitly to say. Like Humpty Dumpty's portmanteau, "impenetrability," or his impudent commentary on the word "brillig," the words used by things and idols cannot say what they mean; they may only mean what they say: the sound comes first and meaning afterward. The words and names they utter mean them: "My name means the shape I am," says Humpty Dumpty. Language of this order strikes the senses as a powerful aesthetic or synaesthetic event, heard by the eye and seen by the ear, as Bottom testifies, a dramatic and overwhelming encounter with matter, moisture, noise, pigment, and (in the case of authors) ink. The portal of this aesthetic language is constructed from decaying words, so that we understand what Hecuba is saying before she starts barking as a dog, and what Actaeon has tried to say before he weeps as a deer. Metamorphosis of kind and tongue go in lockstep. Passion transforms what was formerly

socially human—a person or a commodity with a social life and a repertoire of representational options—into a thing at the same moment as words turn into the things things say, the expressive material creature of what belongs solely to them.



With Charles Gildon's strange story of talking gold coins, *The Golden Spy* (1709), a genre of fiction was inaugurated in Britain that shadowed its senior colleague, the novel, for well over a century. Autobiographies of inanimate things proliferated—of coins, ornaments, utensils, land, clothing, vehicles, and furniture—and of animate ones too, such as dogs, horses, insects, and body parts. Soon afterward, the same two-step was performed by fiction in France. The stories themselves are episodic, usually recording a series of unhappy encounters between things and humans, in which the things come off badly. Furniture and vehicles are involved in events they would rather have avoided. Coins and chattels get used up, and are forsaken or destroyed. Animals provide a little diversion and then are tortured or killed. The narrative usually begins when a thing comes out of circulation and looks back at its career, sometimes nostalgically, but mostly with incomprehension, disapproval, or resentment. Gulliver's memory, for instance, is organized by his identification with horse-kind, and as he reaches back through the era of his humanity, he is overcharged with disgust and horror.

In a landmark essay on the topic, Aileen Douglas called these stories “novels of circulation” (Douglas 1993 [2007]), a term that alternates with “it-narratives” and “object-narratives” in the important subsequent work of Christopher Flint, Deidre Lynch, Barbara Benedict, Lynn Festa, Markman Ellis, Cynthia Wall, and Mark Blackwell. With varying degrees of emphasis these scholars have understood the generic self-consciousness of the fiction of things in the eighteenth century to reside generally in notions of property and specifically in the market for print. Without a broad and consistent demand for ephemeral literature, it-narratives would have remained under the horizon, never more than a branch of didactic fables for children. In Flint's powerful argument, the development of Grub Street as a center of print capitalism was the *terminus a quo* for this novelty, as Swift's Author partly demonstrates in *A Tale of a Tub* when he reports that the tales of Dick Whittington's cat, Tom Thumb, and the Hind and the Panther have acquired new currency and importance in the market (Swift 1920: 68–9). This development had nothing to do with the intrinsic merit of the tales, rather with an industry that required a certain mass of printed material to be offered to the public week by week, branded as new even if it wasn't. The story of a cat

or a tub is to be understood therefore not merely as a transitory event in a commercial process, but more particularly as a token or emblem of its *terminus ad quem*, the phenomenon of circulating popular print. The story is the occasion for the existence of a manufactured product—written, printed and bound, and offered for sale—whose brief life on the huckster’s stall and in the hands of readers is as it were the story of the story. Its passage from hand to hand is re-enacted in the shifting of clothes from back to back (*Adventures of a Black Coat* [1760]), vehicles from place to place (*Adventures of a Hackney Coach* [1783]), or animals from owner to owner (*The Adventures of Pompey the Little* [1751]). Flint closes the circle with stories such as ‘Adventures of a Quire of Paper,’ published in the *London Magazine* 1779, in which the materials of print become themselves directly the subject of the narrative (Flint 2007: 172–73).

This important insight into the invention and consumption of it-narratives lies at the heart of one of the most thorough-going of recent revisionist histories of the novel, Deidre Lynch’s *The Economy of Character* (1998), in which she suggests that the reader’s experience of a circulating object in print is continuous with the circulation of commodities and money at large. For example, the fictional memoirs of fiduciary paper such as *The Adventures of a Bank-Note* (1770) and an actual endorsed bill, with the history of its transfers written on its back, are reporting an identical set of events. An it-narrative uses print to make legible the series of exchanges that all marketable goods have as it were written on their backs, what Lynch calls their *characters*, fully exploiting the pun on character-as-sign and character-as-identity. Such a narrative gives literal and material point to the function of character as some sort of inscription, commodity, or specie that will pass in the market as a sign of value, “character . . . ascribes discursive centrality to the marketable products of the press and to the voluble . . . face of the page” (Lynch 1998: 97, 38). Coaches, coins, clothes, and other mobile appurtenances are objects whose histories as commodities are delivered in the “character” of type, impressed on sheets, and circulated in the vast web of contracts that constitutes civil society. Between one sign and another, whether it be manifest in print, metal, fabric, or flesh, there is an unbroken continuity. Characters take their places on the whirligig of the commercial and fashionable worlds, a situation, as Pope puts it, “Where Wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive,/ Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive” (*The Rape of the Lock* 1.101–2). These are worlds where there is little to choose between the human and the material character, for they all move, speak, and are valued in the same sociable way.

Ever since Arjun Appadurai published the important collection of essays, *The Social Life of Things* (1986), the idea governing the critique of

it-narratives has been commodity fetishism of one sort or another. The volubility and activity of things was derived from an equality between manufactures and humans that was claimed when the former usurped the latter's modes of sociability. The exuberant celebration of exchange value that goods exhibit in Marx's *Capital I*, for example, where tables dance on their heads and convivial commodities congregate to preen themselves, proclaims the commonalty of things and people in this regard at least, that they come together for the purpose of exchange and the determination of value. But this assumption concerning commodity fetishism relies on two others that many it-narratives neglect to illustrate, namely, that active and talkative things want to be like human beings, and that they always function as property. For example, the bank-note mentioned above talks indignantly of the venality of bankers and their hideous method of putting paper-money to death (anon. 1770: 207, 167). That is to say, it assigns itself an importance outside the scope of its service to humans. In Gildon's *The Golden Spy*, the stories told by money of human depravity are so alarming that the guinea's tale has to be edited, "for fear the Sense of Things should destroy all Confidence betwixt Man and Man, and so put an End to human Society" (Gildon 1709: 116). The realism of these narratives—the "Sense of Things"—is not intended, as Johnson in his fourth *Rambler* paper supposed modern realist fiction did intend, to expand and ameliorate conversation with mankind. Often it identifies such a radical distinction between the interests of things and humans that there can be no question of the one wishing to be like the other, or of participating willingly in the transactions which make up the sum of its woe or disgust. Since the passions of things are a measure of resistance to the laws of the market and the actions of those who stand in it, might there be another means of tracing a connection between a Grub Street author and the story of a thing than through the meshing of the cycles of exchange?

In the comic romance of *Don Quixote*, the termini cited by Flint for the narratives of things are entirely reversed. The *terminus a quo* of the knight's adventures is the expanded market in print, calculated to have produced some 200 million volumes by 1600 (Anderson 1983: 41), whereas its *terminus ad quem* is a world of enchanted things, such as windmills, sheep, and barbers' basins, all harking back to the origins of fiction in romance and fable. Is it possible to suppose that this Quixote-effect—the return to the metamorphoses of ancient fiction via the extensive circulation of modern romances within the print-market—is in fact the restoration of a forgotten genre of fiction under the guise of modernity, much as Swift's Author suggests? Huet says the old romances were closely linked to fable, that their common theme was metamorphosis, and that their invention of "Imaginary Spaces and Impossibilities"

corresponds to the “restless Emotions which continually actuate the Mind of Man” (Huet 1715: v, 13–99, 125). His favorite examples are the stories of humans turned to asses, told variously by Lucius of Patras, Lucius Apuleius, and Lucian. Here, the wilder improbabilities of fable are attuned to the extravagance of romance, and in Apuleius’s inset story of Cupid and Psyche the adjustment of extreme passion to the activity of things such as rocks, water, and birds, culminating in the transformation of a mortal into a god, brings the art of fabular romance to its apogee.

The introduction of an older form of fictionality on the back of the modern distribution of print is of special interest to Cervantes, whose hero is animated by restless emotions that are at first aroused and finally quelled in his encounters with books. The story begins with the burning of Quixote’s library by the barber, the curate, and the housekeeper in a futile effort to purge the knight’s brain of fiction; and it ends shortly after he goes into a printing house in Barcelona, where he finds a workman printing off sheets of Avellaneda’s counterfeit sequel. “I have heard of that Book before, said Don Quixote, and really thought it had been burnt, and reduc’d to Ashes for a foolish impertinent Libel” (Cervantes 1991: II.473). Between the first mention of incinerated books and the last, the hero’s reinvention of himself as a knight-at-arms and his transformation of the localities of La Mancha into an imagined space of wonders combine to secure him an unparalleled and unique identity, and to cast over all the quotidian things in his circuit a luster that may only be lost by enchantment. A wineskin is a giant until it is reduced by magic to the common thing it only seems to be; by means of spells and charms, Mambrino’s helmet is made to masquerade as a basin; Quixote himself is transformed by envious enchanters into Alonso Quixada, a non-armigerous yeoman. If Descartes supposed a malign genie had transformed the sensible world into an improbable fiction so that he could secure the single certainty of being a solitary individual thing that thinks, no less does Cervantes’s hero exalt himself by regarding all empirical phenomena surplus to his mission as part of a fantasy wrought by his enemies. This proviso ensures that nothing in the real world is not continuous with his idea of himself, even the author of the story in which he appears, who begins Quixote’s second sally by imagining how the knight imagines the author’s beginning of this very adventure. Such blurring of authorship and action Hobbes set aside as pure fiction, “the internal gloriation of mind” of those braggarts for whom no lie is too enormous (Hobbes 1994: 50); but here in the very romance he cited as the model of such mendacity it achieves a subtlety outside the reach of simple distinctions between what is probable and what isn’t—a subtlety that is not lost even when print turns enchanter, and transforms the truth of this fabulous history into a fake, and the fake into a commodity.

The authority of the improbable which impels the story of Don Quixote was appreciated by the inventors of it-narratives, whose tales—equally improbable but on a lower level—were responses not simply to a widening circulation of printed products, but also to a world that challenged their imaginations. The authors of the lives of things, sitting in garrets in Grub Street and racking their brains to invent the thoughts and deeds of a corkscrew, a dog, or a coat so that they could eat or pay the rent, doubtless dipped into their own circumstances for anecdotes, reminding themselves as they did so that market forces were not phenomena for which they felt much esteem. The result of finding some equivalence between their own situations and those of the things they were ventriloquizing was less likely an insight into the social lives they shared with artifacts and animals than a rueful sense of their common lot as unaccommodated singular things. But in that recognition lay an opportunity imaginatively to transform the world they didn't like into one they preferred. Swift's Author in *A Tale of a Tub* is lonely, poor, diseased, periodically insane, and well-apprieved of the fickleness of the market for print in which he is trying to trade, as well as of the venality of the booksellers who are its brokers. He tries to exercise a social role, listing himself as the delegate of corporations of poets, modern authors, political groups, even the insane; but it is a feeble pretence. Rather than social relations, the terms that seem to define the production of print-ephemera in this writer's world are solitude, faction, and war—pretty much the state of nature described by Hobbes, a philosopher to whom he several times refers. When the Author considers his tub, it is not as a successful commodity bustling in a commercial world; it is a thing like him perched on the edge, awaiting annihilation. He and it are atoms of the same quantum of matter, little more. Even if the material circumstances of the Author were less dire, his bewilderment in the face of a market where the analogy between clothes and the qualities of the mind strikes him as exact, where the only reason for people to gather together seems to be to fight, and where by means of ink and paper words are made into missiles, is enough to tempt him into a thoroughgoing Lucretian materialism. If a surface declares all there is of the essence of a thing, and if a human soul can inhabit a shoulder knot, why may he not stop pretending that shapes are emblems of occult meanings and that skin is a disguise? He turns instead to enjoy the meaningless beauty of varnish and tinsel, and to let his pen leave its pointless trail of ink on the surface of the page. Print is made to serve his turn by restoring a sort of fabulous immediacy to nonsense.

I have said that things resume the clarity of their being when we who handle or view them are shocked or disturbed, like Crusoe on the beach. In Grub Street, the fragile and uncertain state of the market itself was the reason that the imaginations of writers responded so directly and vividly

to the life and vocality of things. Far from enjoying the buoyancy of production, marketing, sale, and consumption, creators of the raw material of print capitalism were subject, as Charlotte Lennox put it, to “slavery to the Booksellers” (Gallagher 1994: 197), tormented in body as well as brain, as Fielding’s Mr. Wilson attests. With a very slender assurance of the comforts of civil society, they were inclined to idealize their loneliness as virtuous privacy, and to consider their enforced participation in the routines of exchange as an injury that dispossessed themselves of themselves (Gallagher 1994: 145–202). That is to say, they began to treat themselves as things by considering their public emptiness as a private plenum, and finding in the lives of animals and artifacts an existential simplicity with which they could sympathize. Plagued by fears and anxieties they were unable to lodge in the body of Leviathan, authors invested them instead in lapdogs, slippers, and non-current cash.

No one understood better the effects of market uncertainties upon the imaginations of people than Mandeville, in whose *The Fable of the Bees* (1724) the unintelligibility of commercial society reaches shocking proportions, with virtue depending for its efficacy upon vice, prudence finding itself inseparable from heedlessness, and chastity colloquing with licentiousness. Anyone acknowledging even a fraction of truth in Mandeville’s analysis had reasons for intense personal anxiety, because it left them unable intentionally to prepare for what was coming next. Mandeville was exploiting a common fear about civil society that was seldom expressed as anything but moral outrage aimed arbitrarily at examples of hypocrisy, lasciviousness, or greed, as if their shaming would insure the system against further shocks:

One, that had got a Princely Store,
By cheating Master, King and Poor,
Dar’d cry aloud, *The Land must sink*
For all its Fraud; And whom d’ye think
The Sermonizing Rascal chid?
A Glover that sold Lamb for Kid.

(Mandeville 1988 [1924]), 1: 27)

But the problem, as Mandeville well understood, went much deeper. With the market, human beings had invented an engine that they could not control. It operated according to laws they could neither fathom nor influence. Credit, like public opinion, taste, and fashion, was a mystery that left their ability to order the chain of events at the mercy of Fortune; and this perplexed considerably their ideas of identity and human agency, not to mention reality (Pocock 1985: 111–13). Whether they wanted to or not, men and women living in these circumstances were forced to *imagine* who they were and how they related to things.

Mandeville's choice of genre, an expanded version of the Aesopian fable he had learned from translating La Fontaine fifteen years before, in which creatures allegedly dumb speak out loud of human infirmity, struck him as ideal for this modern confusion, in some respects so like primitive times.

Before the Reign of buxom Dido,
When Beasts could speak as well as I do,
Lyons and we conversed together,
And marry'd among one another.

(Mandeville 1966: 41)

The story of the lion and the merchant told in Remark P of *The Fable of the Bees* brings ancient times up to the present, specifically the present of trade and exchange, in which it seems appropriate that beasts resume their voices in order to quell the pointless vanity of creatures whose worth derives from nothing more important than the circulation of goods. However, Mandeville does not wish to treat this encounter as a homily, any more than he means the "Moral" of his *Fable* to function as instruction. Unlike Ogilby, he is not using fable in order "to make Men lesser Beasts" (Ogilby 1651: 1. [i]); instead, like Aesop and La Fontaine, Mandeville is aware that fables are inconsistent, as likely to recommend opportunism and bad faith as equitable dealing, and that, taken as a whole, they add up to nothing very much. Fables such as "The Fox and the Mask" or "The Camel and the Driftwood" advertise their own emptiness; that is the extent of their boast, that there is nothing in them, and if they are to say anything at all, it will emerge from the angle at which they are approached (Henderson 2004: 58). As La Fontaine puts it: "Il dépend d'une conjoncture/ De lieux, de personnes, de temps" (La Fontaine 1865: 215; [*L'Horoscope*, VIII: xvi]). When such a conjuncture occurs then it becomes clear, but only for a moment, how power, nature, and chance are configured: "And sure the wolf is only wrong/ When he is weak and you are strong" ("*Bergers, bergers! Le loup n'a tort/ Que quand il n'est pas le plus fort*"—La Fontaine 1865: 274 [*"Le Loup et les bergers,"* X: vi]). Having told the story of a cat who defends its friend the sparrow from another bird by killing and eating it, only to find a relish for the food and to finish his meal upon his friend, La Fontaine demands, "Quelle morale puis-je inférer de ce fait? / Sans cela toute fable est un oeuvre imparfait; J'en crois voir quelques traits, mais leur ombre m'abuse" (La Fontaine 1865: 313 [*"Le Chat et les deux moineaux";* XII: ii]). In Remark P the lion, briefly in a strong position vis-à-vis humankind, explains to the merchant shipwrecked on his desert shore how the colossal and urgent hunger natural to lions might now be appeased, at which point the merchant faints. British novelists flirt with these possibilities, not simply by inserting fables into their stories, a technique of which Richardson was

inordinately fond, but by their alignments of humans with animals and things. The hero of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) describes in one of the alternative endings how he is turning into a thing: "I wonder which is the man, I or my chair" (Godwin 1988: 334). Robinson Crusoe, covered with the hair and skin of goats and echoed by a parrot, fears that his solitude amidst the stranded trophies of world trade might have left him with no other narrative than a fable called "The eminent History of a Dog and two Cats" (Defoe 1983: 64).

In his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), Hume reflected at length on the commotions of mind that confound, as Latour says, what happens above with what happens below. He suggested that in ancient times the surge and tumult of imagination excited by inexplicable events and broken sequences resulted in a visible union between the material and spiritual worlds that left a void in the human zone between.

Convulsions in nature, disorders, prodigies, miracles, though the most opposite to the plan of a wise superintendent, impress mankind with the strongest sentiments of religion; the causes of events seeming then the most unknown and unaccountable. Madness, fury, rage, and an inflamed imagination, though they sink men nearest to the level of beasts, are, for a like reason, often supposed to be the only dispositions, in which we can have any immediate communication with the Deity. (Hume 1956: 42)

In this distracted state there was a strong propensity among human-kind "to rest their attention on sensible, visible, objects," with the result that along with the personification of the moon, stars, waters, and forests, divinities were found even in "monkeys, dogs, cats, and other animals" (38). Swift's Author runs up and down this scale in the eighth section of *A Tale of a Tub*, where the fancy sports amidst ideas of what is highest and best until it "becomes over-short, and spent, and weary, and suddenly falls like a dead Bird of Paradise to the Ground," or alternatively it begins in the abyss of things—spermatic fluid or dunghill vapors—and rises by degrees into visions of empire and philosophy (Swift 1920: 158). The digression on "The Use and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth" synthesizes the materialism of modern religion. Devotees locate their gods in casks, clothes, and wind; followers of fashion adore the tailor-idol, whose associate divinities are a flat-iron and a louse, whose hell is a rag-bag, and whose product is fabric assembled in the human figure. The difference between Swift's examples and Hume's is that he is talking about the earliest phases of ancient polytheism, while Swift is dealing with the modern age. Hume is describing the kinds of transformations that occur in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, where the superstitious curiosity of the hero precipitates his transformation into an animal until, purged by pain and the humiliation of inhabiting the body of the lowliest

of working creatures, he is fit to join the cult of the goddess Isis. Swift is exhibiting a kind of hopeless fetishism that cannot elide the fact that the empire of imagination terminates in an idol of which “there is no reall part thereof that is not also Body” (Hobbes 1996: 445). It is not that things act like humans but the reverse. “What do I see from the window,” Descartes had demanded, “but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines?” (Descartes 1996: 69). Swift gingerly goes the next step in his Author’s history of clothes: “These *Postulata* being admitted, it will follow in due Course of Reasoning, that those Beings which the World calls improperly Suits of Cloaths, are in Reality the most refined Species of Animals, or to proceed higher, that they are Rational Creatures, or Men” (Swift 1920: 78).

Like Mandeville, Adam Smith considers the fragility of identity to arise from commercial pressures which aggravate the imagination. The paradoxes heaped up by Mandeville to illustrate the amorality of market-providence are deployed by Smith to show how its exorbitances are controlled by an invisible hand that structures the contradictions of supply and demand, ease and industry, individual aspiration and social equity so that they operate for the benefit of everyone. Mandeville typically puts the case more cynically when he says of his bees, “They mended by Inconstancy/ Faults, which no Prudence could foresee” (Mandeville 1988 [1924]: 1.25). But Smith, though as deeply attached to the Stoic doctrine of self-control as to the self-regulating principles of commercial society, knew that no amount of self-inspection could guarantee moderation, and no system of providential oversight could preserve a just equilibrium. To keep human beings from fits of excess such as those Hume identified in ancient times and Swift in modern ones, it was necessary in extreme cases to adapt not reason or reflection but the imagination, the very faculty responsible for immoderate passions, for the cure for them.

He located the problem (as Hume had done) in an imagination alarmed by whatever interrupts the rhythm of daily life: natural convulsions, prodigies, miracles.

Nature . . . seems to abound with events which appear solitary and incoherent with all that go before them, which therefore disturb the easy movement of the imagination; which makes its ideas succeed each other. . . . by irregular starts and sallies; and which thus tend, in some measure, to introduce those confusions and distractions . . . this chaos of jarring and discordant appearances . . . this tumult of imagination. (Smith 1980: 45–6)

The singularity of these disturbances may be mitigated however by a further effort of imagination. If an individual is able to communicate or receive the pain of an alarmed imagination by means of sympathy, that is,

by “an imaginary change” of situation with another person (Smith 1982 [1976]: 317), then a social force counteracts the natural one. Imagination tames the anguish of imagination. However, a licensed imagination is much less biddable than self-critique. Smith conceded at the outset of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that sympathy might well exceed its brief, and out of the imaginary change of situation create a scene of horror. He says we often indulge an unavailing sympathy with the dead, stunning ourselves with the misery of their forlorn situation by as it were putting ourselves into it. “It is from this very illusion of the imagination, that the foresight of our dissolution is so terrible to us, and that the idea of those circumstances, which undoubtedly can give us no pain when we are dead, makes us miserable while we are alive” (Smith 1976: 13). Imagination that is to say brings us back to the tumult and confusion from which it was supposed to free us by exchanging a social fiction (“imaginary change”) for a fantasy of perpetual isolation (“this very illusion”). Thus, each individual is found in that castaway or private situation in which the shrinkage of the ego is proportionate to the salience of things and the power of their speech.

That Smith is not, like Hobbes, simply distinguishing between useful fictions (the persons of churches, hospitals, or bridges, for instance [Hobbes 1996: 113]) and the outrageous lies of Quixotic braggarts, is evident from the fact that an alarmed imagination reflects, if not a real state of affairs, then a level of feeling appropriate to what he calls the irregularities of Fortune. These may occur at any time; the traces of them scar public and private histories alike: so it is not mischievous or ridiculous to imagine them. His prime historical example of this irregularity is the institution of chattel slavery in the Caribbean and American plantations, of which he says this: “Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected these nations of heroes [on the coast of West Africa] to the refuse of the jails of Europe” (Smith 1982: 206). The ravages of Fortune in private life he finds illustrated in tragedy. His prime exemplars are Sophocles’ Oedipus, Otway’s Monimia, and Southerne’s Isabella, characters whose innocent actions produce appalling consequences, so far from what they intended and yet so freighted with the guilt of parricide, adultery, and incest that they lose any sense of coherence in their lives (107). In history and tragedy the problem is that a narrative framed from predictable elements—moderate passions, social conscience, and moral agency—is ruptured by another belonging to Fortune, altogether tumultuous and unaccountable. The sociability based on the imaginary change of sympathy is usurped by the singularity associated with the illusion of a living death. The switch is radical, transforming what one thought was doing for the best into what has happened for the worst. Deeds have turned into accidents. While Smith allows that the

finest and most compelling scenes of tragedy involve the disclosure of these unintentional crimes, it is clear that in history there is no discernible form of providence capable of justifying the transformation of humans into saleable items and working beasts, a transformation effected not only by men and women rendered brutal by avarice but by the precedents of common law. This is something that has happened to us all, though very few of us intended it or did it. Can we mend that state of affairs by prudential inconstancy? Smith thinks not.

Around the issue of Fortune Smith weaves a discussion of what was known in Scottish law as *piacular* guilt, or faultless trespass. Not meaning to do what you did was not regarded in law as a mitigating factor; nor was the instrument by which the trespass committed, say a horse or a cow, any freer of guilt than its owner, although both were acknowledged innocent of evil intent. In the course of these meditations Smith considers how even in the passages of ordinary life the passions aroused by accidents, and the metamorphoses they provoke, are parallel to those identified in the law of the *piaculum*, and affectively justify it. We blame the stone that bruises our foot; we curse it for its malice and would like to destroy it (94). On the other hand, there are inanimate objects for which we feel an adventitious and irrational love, such as the plank of wood that saves us from shipwreck, or a favorite snuff-box. Just as we demonize the stone, we deify these. “The Dryads and the Lares of the ancients, a sort of genii of trees and houses, were probably first suggested by this sort of affection, which the authors of those superstitions felt for such objects, and which seemed unreasonable, if there was nothing animated about them” (94). Similarly, human beings anciently projected their passions as gods—at first the worst, such as lust and revenge, and then latterly feelings more friendly to humanity, such as indignation and admiration, “And thus religion, even in its rudest form, gave a sanction to the rules of morality” (164).

No matter how providential this advance from the vengeful tumults of imagination to the amenities of true religion is supposed to be, it is clear that early in the process humans endowed things with the force of their passions and what was left of their reason; animating them with an energy impossible to construe as human. Unintelligible accidents provoked furor among the passions and imagination, forcing humans to confront a wild animal or worship a god. It is the same sequence that Hume had traced, whose modern versions are repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, in the philosophies of Hobbes and Descartes, in the despair and joy of Crusoe the castaway, in the erotic delight experienced by Roxana, and, by way of mockery, in the materialism of Swift’s *Tale*. What Smith manages to make clear with the example of slavery is that the ameliorative narrative

leading from savagery to civility may be interrupted at any time with accidents belonging to another agent, one who controls a different story in which our actions are converted into passions, our deeds into events, and our expectations into horrors. Modernity is insured neither from this tumult, nor from the metamorphoses that go with it. Smith points out that the dominion of Fortune makes her a divinity for his contemporaries, and that the proof of it is seen in the transformation of humans into beasts. Hobbes's narrative of the origin of civil society is the naturalization of this shock, with a god set over affairs rendered less than authorial, and to that extent less than human. Civil society that is to say was the child of a rupture that shattered the narrative of feudal duty and obligation, replacing it with another that was just as liable to interruption. A disciple of Hobbes, Mandeville enjoyed pointing out how the offspring of the fiction of the original contract spawned the vast network of trespasses and contracts which constitutes the unpredictable cycles of the market, of all human inventions the one most fruitful in the kinds of irregularity Smith assigns to Fortune.

If we attempt to transpose Smith's idea of irregularity to the history of instrumental fictions such as the state of nature and the original contract, it seems that he has to suppose like Hobbes and Locke that there are two sorts, a fiction that obeys the laws of probability and serves our purposes, and another that is neither probable nor useful. In Smith's terms this would be the difference between the fiction of the imaginary change and the fiction of the isolating illusion. The first looks very like the emergent novel in recording those customary associations that allow us to entertain secure ideas of identity, trace the necessary connection between cause and effect, and judge of what we call the real. The other looks like romance or fable, or any other fiction that is told in contempt of our ideas of personal identity, moral consequence, and truth. As the learned doctor points out at the end of *The Female Quixote*, the best fiction (a category from which he explicitly excludes romance and fable) reflects the orderly stream of custom: "A long Life may be passed without a single Occurrence that can cause much Surprise, or produce any unexpected Consequence of great Importance; the Order of the World is so established, that all human Affairs proceed in a regular Method" (Lennox 1989: 379). The ideological function of the novel is not to reflect the real, however, as Johnson points out in *Rambler* 4. It is fiction because it reflects what may be imagined as real; that is to say, it is structurally aligned with the normalization of the shock out of which civil society emerges. It creates reality by acting *as if* what were imagined were real, that we really did come in from the forests as individuals and subscribe to a contract that made a mortal god whose dominion would be more powerful than Fortune's, as long and only as

long as we kept on believing in the reality of the consequences of having imagined that primordial scene.

Romance is a reminder of the older kind of fiction this new fiction replaced, which explains why so many English novels (along with English philosophers) try to lay the ghost of quixotism, the internal gloriation of the mind that reverses the values of the real and shows the stream of custom to be a figment or an enchantment. Fable, the earliest example of the slave narrative genre, reminds its readers that the dominion of Fortune has never ceased, and that at any moment they could change places with things or animals and start worshipping idols. This is why Mandeville, peculiarly alert to the delusions necessary to the regular conduct of civil society, chose fable to show that it was based on nothing but a congeries of imagined scenes created by imagined persons, each straining “all his Faculties to appear what his shallow Noddle imagines he is believ’d to be” (Mandeville 1982: 1.54). In the world of the fable, all these illusions are dispelled: there is no justice, no steady meaning, no identity, just conjunctures of bodies in given spaces. Caxton’s proleptic choice of Aesop as one of the first printed texts to be sold in England ties fable to the very engine that will multiply the possibilities of such conjunctures. Machiavelli, the most astute analyst of the politics of conjuncture, sets a short but devastating analysis of history within a framework of a romance he named, in honour of Apuleius, *L’Asino d’oro*.

The it-narrative is, among other things, a modern fable, the autobiography of something not human, formerly inanimate but now inspired with enough passion, reason, and speech to launch upon its own story. In what sense this narrative constitutes an “I” or first person is an important question to settle. There are some it-narratives (*Adventures of a Hackney Coach*, for example) which claim a sympathetic intimacy with humankind. In such a case, the relationship between the thing and the human is merely a variant of Smith’s temperate sympathy, an imaginary change of situation with another person or character in which the thing is anthropomorphized, awarded social relations and a personal identity. If on the other hand the thing is located anomalously beyond the limits of the proper, like a corpse, then it has no person to exchange and can function entirely on its own account, just like Hobbes’s “author” in a state of nature or like Swift’s Author in his garret, with obligations to nothing but itself. Such a thing is the antithesis of property, free from all human control and proof of Fortune’s dominion, although the language expressive of that freedom sometimes may be hard to distinguish from nonsense. Like slave narratives, the best it-narratives chronicle an emancipation that divides the portion of their earlier lives as property from their later lives as an unowned thing. So the first issue to determine is the

difference between property and what is no longer owned or ownable, and how the unowned thing finds itself idolized as a subaltern deity of Fortune. And then the road will be clear to determine more fully the difference between the two sorts of fiction, that of imagined change and that of horrid illusion, giving special attention to the differences on which it depends, namely, the differences between persons and authors, humans and idols, and objects and things.

