Narrative voice in *The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat*

A text that remains of anonymous authorship to this day, *The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat* is in many ways liberated by this lack of attribution: indeed, the epistolary format of the prefatory address appears designed to highlight the absence of a specific authorial identity. Christopher Flint has suggested that ‘Object narratives explicitly displace and disembodied the human agent, simultaneously freeing the author of liability and exposing his or her limited cultural power’.\(^1\) Here the direction of the preface to ‘The Wits’ at the popular ‘White’s’ chocolate-house and ‘George’s’, and Sam’s\(^2\) coffee houses not only identifies the text as intended for distribution within such locations, but also adds to the sense of a removal of human agency in the creative process, thus contributing to the sense that it is the Waistcoat that is really narrating this story, whilst also to some extent establishing autonomy for the text as an object in and of itself.

Conflictingly, however, the text begins with what is quite obviously a human narrator and it is left to the initial setting of the pawnbroker’s shop to inform the reader that it is this narrator’s interaction with objects, in particular clothing, which is important here, with the personification of his Sword and Tye Wig as his ‘Companions’ thus immediately highlighting the importance of objects not just as things, but as entities with individual character and life force. Chloe Wigston Smith has suggested that ‘object narratives attempt to render sartorial commodities safe by placing them under human control, emphasizing the human subject’s agency over those items worn closest to the self’,\(^3\) yet here the anonymous author seems keen to involve his readers with a kind of parallel world in which objects and not humans are the key players.

Wigston Smith also asserts that object narratives concerned with clothing ‘often [begin] at the moment at which the object has been severed from the body and lies in disuse’\(^4\) in a location such as a pawnshop, and in some ways this correlates very well with the apparent autonomy of the waistcoat established through authorial anonymity: indeed, in the second volume of the text, *In Which is Introduced The Episode of A Petticoat*, only the briefest of mentions is made at the end of the narrative to the man through whose agency this story was originally apparently being told. However, while the waistcoat might appear individualistic in its anthropomorphised state, its personality is largely a duplicate of the rakish character of its original libertine owner: as suggested both by the coat’s vanity, exemplified by its ‘secret wish’ that its interlocutor had ‘seen me in my days of Exaltation’,\(^5\) and through its voyeuristic enjoyment of its various owner’s sexual encounters, eventually culminating with a reference to the romantic intrigues of one of its owners as ‘Favours’,\(^6\) almost as if the individual is arranging the intrigue for the benefit of the waistcoat rather than for his own enjoyment.

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\(^1\) Christopher Flint, ‘Speaking Objects: The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction’ in *PMLA*, 113:2 (Mar. 1998) 212-226 (221)
\(^4\) Ibid, p. 367
\(^5\) *Adventures of an embroidered waistcoat*, p. 4
\(^6\) Ibid, p. 13
Underlying this is a palpably ironic tone, apparently laughing at the genre itself and thus complying with the ‘generic self-consciousness’ that Caroline Lupton has identified within It-narratives of this period, and which she believes constituted ‘almost from […] inception, a hackneyed and reiterative form’. When the Waistcoat narrator intrudes in the second part to explain that he is including the petticoat’s story only because ‘Episodes, in all modern Novels, are become fashionble’ the joke is not just against the vanity of the Waistcoat, but also perhaps against a tendency of the whole sub-genre of It-narratives to ape novelistic originality whilst in reality always conforming to a typical pattern of ‘progressive material loss’ identified by Wigston Smith. Contributing to this light-hearted tone, therefore, the Waistcoat’s frequently countereffective delicacy when referring to matters of a sexual nature thus draws the text into a slyly burlesque mode (as when he suggests that his and the petticoat’s ‘Masters and Mistresses were both asleep, or doing somewhat else’). The identification of the Waistcoat as a kind of extension of his owners’ identity thus essentially facilitates a prurient preoccupation with the bodies that inhabit the clothes that are discussed.

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8 Memoirs and interesting adventures of an embroidered waistcoat. Part II. In which is introduced, the episode of a petticoat. (London: J. Brooke, 1751) via Eighteenth Century Collections Online. 1/6/2004. <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2119/ecco/infomark.do?type=search&tabID=T001&queryId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28BN%2CNone%2C7%29N011137%24&sort=Author&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&version=1.0&userGroupName=oxford&prodId=ECCO> [accessed 23/10/2014] p.6
9 Wigston Smith, ‘Clothes Without Bodies’, p. 372
10 Adventures of an embroidered waistcoat. Part II, p.6