

**Neo-Victorian Things:
Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and The White***

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Abstract:

In this paper I analyse Michel Faber's neo-Victorian bestseller, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and its representation of objects. The first section provides a brief overview of the ongoing critical debate on consumption and the fraught question of the relationship between mind and matter. In the second section I argue that Faber's novel rewrites the paradigm of symbolic consumption by challenging the reciprocity between subjects and objects that is still a fundamental assumption of the discourse on material culture. My contention is that fantasies of identity, which figure prominently as one of the main social purposes of consumption practices and motivate much of the contemporary commoditisation of the past, are both evoked and undermined in Faber's novel. *The Crimson Petal and The White* thus stages symbolic – rather than economic – scarcity, one that emerges when economic capital fails to become symbolic prestige.

Keywords: identity, reciprocity, self-styling, subjects and objects, symbolic consumption, symbolic scarcity.

Firmly placed within the tradition of literary neo-Victorianism, Michel Faber's best-selling novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) chiefly chronicles the secret liaison between a well-read Victorian prostitute, Sugar, and William Rackham, a dandy turned successful businessman. After fleeing the house of ill repute halfway through the novel, Sugar first lives on her own as Mr Rackham's mistress and later moves into the Rackham's household as a 'governess' to meet her upper-class *alter ego*, the respectable Mrs Agnes Rackham. Entering the haven of Victorian domesticity, the narrator depicts Mrs Rackham's abode as a material space replete with symbolic meanings:

Admittedly, here in the Rackham house, [Mrs Rackham's] existence is more difficult to deny than in the streets of London and Paris, for there are reminders of her everywhere.

The antimacassars on the chairs were crocheted by her, the tablecloths are adorned by her embroidery; and under every vase, candle-holder and knick-knack is likely to lie some finely wrought doily or place-mat beautified by Mrs. Rackham's handicraft. (Faber 2002: 140)

The absence of Agnes Rackham to which the narrator refers is counterbalanced by the abundance of personalised objects. Deprived of agency in the public sphere, she nonetheless reasserts herself by projecting her image onto the vast array of objects that clutter the domestic space. Insisting playfully upon the cultural divisions of gender inherent in the ideology of separate spheres, the narrator also emphasises the role of objects in the construction of nineteenth-century domestic experience. However ironic, the depiction of the Rackham's abode evokes the anthropomorphic space that Jean Baudrillard first expounded in 1968 in *The System of Objects*. In the first chapter, he asserts that the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior stands out not only for its tendencies of accumulation, redundancy, and superfluity, for its hierarchical arrangement of functions, spaces and things, but also for the structural relationship between material reality and symbolic order that pertains to this interior. According to Baudrillard, the homology between house, human body and social body that permeates "the traditional environment" inaugurates a semiotic economy and a network of relations between subjects and objects:

the primary function of furniture and objects here is to personify human relationships, to fill the space that they share between them, and to be inhabited by a soul. The real dimension they occupy is captive to the moral dimension which it is their job to signify. (Baudrillard 1968: 16)

In Mrs. Rackham's parlour, in other words, the mute materiality of objects is replaced by a system of signifiers, while the act of consumption turns out to be an attempt to communicate both to oneself and to others a range of unstable signifieds. In an idyllic bond of mutual identification, objects are expected to embody the world of their possessors who, in turn, rule and recognise themselves in the surrounding world of things.

In this paper I discuss the representation of objects and consumption in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and The White*. The first section provides a brief overview of the ongoing critical debate on material culture, touching upon the fraught question of the relationship between mind and matter. In much recent anthropological and sociological research, consumption has come to be understood as a symbolic and cognitive activity, whereby subjects define their social and individual identities, making sense of their cultural and social world. Neither a means of self-estrangement nor a matter of mere exchange-value, the profusion of things surrounding contemporary everyday life is now claimed to be essential to the ways in which people make sense of themselves and the world around them. In this view, commodities are deeply embedded in a subject-oriented semiotics or praxis and are thus expected to negotiate and define individual identities and experiences. The second section focuses on the particular functions objects perform in *The Crimson Petal and the White*: I argue that Faber's novel rewrites the paradigm of symbolic consumption by challenging the reciprocity between subjects and objects that is still a fundamental assumption of the discourse on material culture. My contention is that fantasies of identity, which figure prominently as one of the main social purposes of consumption practices and motivate much of the contemporary commoditisation of the past, are neither satisfied nor indulged in Faber's novel. In my analysis, I will also address more general issues concerning the representation of objects in Victorian and neo-Victorian literature. Unlike many nineteenth-century novels, *The Crimson Petal and the White* stages symbolic – rather than economic – scarcity, one that emerges when economic capital fails to become symbolic prestige.

1. Materiality and Immateriality

“We have always lived off the splendour of the subject and the poverty of the object” (Baudrillard qtd. in Brown 2004: 8), Baudrillard claims, thus promoting and attempting a critical reassessment of the ontological supremacy of the subject in the postmodern scenario. The last few decades have witnessed a resurgent interest in material culture from a variety of social sciences and theoretical perspectives. Sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural scholars alike have discussed the ways in which individuals engage with and make sense of things within different cultural contexts and “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986: 15).

With its strong emphasis on both the cultural dignity of objects and the ever-increasing range of practices associated with them, the term ‘material culture’ – rather than commodities – epitomises a crucial theoretical shift. In Marxist and other critical approaches, objects are indeed important because they exemplify the fundamental processes of capitalist societies: alienation, exploitation and estrangement. The commodities that we use in everyday life – runs the Marxist argument – are the embodiment of exploited labour (Woodward 2007: 53). Because objects are products of human labour in a capitalist regime, in other words, they materialise exploitative labour relations. Lured by the delights of commodities and the ideology of consumerism, individuals do not realise that things never are what they seem and thus overlook their own exploited status within the capitalist system. This reductive model, however, has met with severe criticism. Among others, Michel de Certeau has reversed the conceptual primacy that the social field of labour is granted in (neo-)Marxist accounts:

A rationalized, expansionist, centralized [...] production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called consumption, and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it. (de Certeau 1984: 31)

To put it differently, the most serious objection to critical accounts of consumption is that they underestimate agency in their conception of the relations between objects and their possessors. The processes of singularisation that social actors use – more or less deliberately – in order to render objects meaningful and the ways in which objects are thus “de-commodified” are now claimed to be crucial aspects of how consumption works in everyday life (Kopytoff 1986: 64). In Daniel Miller’s seminal definition,

consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price-value to

being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations. (Miller 1987: 190)

The possibility of symbolic consumption emerges whenever goods are not perceived as mere exchange-values, but are used and re-worked in a number of ways so as to convey a range of different individual meanings. The bedrock assumption within material culture studies is that objects always transcend both their exchange- and use-values, standing for something other than themselves.

In their pioneering work, scholars such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss have emphasised the symbolic meaning of material culture by identifying the consumer as someone who creatively plays with signs to negotiate his or her identity. As Ian Woodward writes, “it is the *expressive* capacity of objects that affords individuals the opportunity to articulate aspects of the self through material engagements, in an attempt to communicate something *about* – and indeed *to* – themselves” (Woodward 2007: 135). Never exhausting themselves in the functions for which they are designed, objects become signs, thus standing as markers of class, status, prestige and a number of individual connotations. As a result, consumption chiefly implies weaving objects into a coherent signifying fabric, while consumers are perceived as speaking with or through things within their cultural universe. This is particularly the case, according to Andrea Semprini, in seemingly class-less societies where the demise of sumptuary laws and old hierarchies of cultural taste has given way to more ambiguous social differences. “Because I buy that object”, he writes, “I must necessarily be something” (Semprini 1992: 77, translation mine). Along with a logic of distinction and difference, modern systems of objects also sustain and articulate a “logic of identification” (Semprini 1992: 77), whereby individuals turn to goods and consumer practices in a deliberate attempt to reach a certain status or identity. Drawing upon the abundant resources of consumer markets, people use their belongings to define – and let other people understand – who they are or strive to be, their personal identity capital.

In short, the “deceptive, suspicious object”, which can be found in many Marxist and critical accounts of commoditisation, has been replaced by docile objects (Woodward 2007: 35), objects-signs that seem to come into full existence only to the extent that they acquire a number of symbolic

meanings. If there is an assumption that tacitly underlies postmodern accounts of consumer culture – as well as the rhetoric used by the advertising industry – this is the self-constructive function consumer practices are increasingly assigned. Whether referring to the “sex of things” or maternal objects (De Grazia, Furlough 1996: 1), talking objects and “biographical objects” (Hoskins 1998: 7), the rhetoric deployed in the discourse on material culture demonstrates how the material world is meant to reverberate Baudrillard’s “splendour of the subject”.

2. From Things to Things: A Capital without Prestige

The world of goods and consumer culture are crucial in Faber’s imaginary nineteenth-century London. On his nights out, William Rackham is shown to enjoy several low-brow concerts and freak-shows belonging to the rising popular culture. His wife Agnes repeatedly strives to fashion herself on the prescriptions of social etiquette and how-to manuals, and even his brother Henry Rackham’s ascetic attitude to possessions and his attempts to reject worldly gratifications might be interpreted as a deliberate, albeit dubious, tactic in the social field of consumption.¹

At a general level, Faber’s novel epitomises the theoretical shift hitherto described, in that it highlights the symbolic dimension of objects while moving away from the cultural anxieties – reification, exploitation, etc. – implicit in a more critical view of consumption. In so doing, Faber pinpoints the desire for uniqueness and highlights the relationship between subjects and objects as one of the tensions inherent in our democratised experience of consumption. At the same time, *The Crimson Petal and the White* addresses a public that can reasonably be claimed to be familiar with the commodification of the past in contemporary culture. The view of the past as a vast array of collectibles and memorabilia offered to the consumer gaze has fuelled much contemporary historicism – neo-Victorian and otherwise – and explains several aspects of the increasing popular interest in cultural practices such as heritage sites, museums, or literary re-writings of nineteenth-century fiction. However diverse, these practices share an interest in the trivia of everyday life, or an “appetite for inventory” (Bailin 2002: 43), which varies according to the different functions and roles that objects are asked to perform.

In their accounts of the preservation projects carried out in England in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, Raphael Samuel and Patrick Wright

have discussed the role of things implicitly popularised by heritage culture. Valued for surviving against the drift of modernisation, the bits and pieces of a private and interior life have become the symbols of a national identity in several heritage sites. Unearthed and restaged in certain sanctioned sites, such as National Trust properties or writers' and artists' homes turned into museums, the relics of the past thus gain cultural significance merely on account of their associations with particular individuals, events and eras. As it extracts objects from the social context in which they used to circulate and exhibits them in order to commemorate their original use, heritage culture produces a "re-enchantment of everyday life" (Wright 1985: 24), turning objects of study into objects of desire.

Objects are asked to play a similar role and thus contribute to aestheticising the past in other neo-Victorian cultural practices. In Rosenman's account of recent cinematic adaptations of Victorian best-sellers, for example, the detailed rendering of the material culture and living habits of past ages becomes the way through which historical plausibility is achieved. "Objects", she writes, "are sacred. They stand for history. If the physical world of the period has been faithfully (or better yet, obsessively) re-created, the integrity of the past has been fully realized" (Rosenman 2002: 54). As a result, the tensions, conflicts and anxieties that epitomise many Victorian responses to the emergence of consumer society are completely lost when the nineteenth century is re-imagined and offered as "a succession of beautiful objects" and readers are lured by the "pleasure of virtual shopping" (Rosenman 2002: 56, 55).

How does Faber's representation of commodities engage with the aestheticised past celebrated by other neo-Victorian practices, where period objects are exalted to high-art status? The flattering image of the past as a collection of memorabilia is repeatedly evoked, while readers are tacitly addressed as consumers eager to encounter a succession of museum pieces. The vicarious "pleasure of virtual shopping" is denied, however, whenever the narrator challenges the reciprocity between subjects and objects reproduced in the novel through the agency of the main characters.

Fantasies of consumption are vaguely evoked – if only to be dismissed – in the very first pages, even if pawnbrokers, moneylenders and shop-owners do not share the pleasures associated with symbolic consumption. "The shopkeepers", the narrator explains,

care nothing about the shadowy creatures who actually manufacture the goods they sell. [...] An order is put in for fifty cakes of Coal Tar Soap, and a few days later, a cart arrives and the order is delivered. How that soap came to exist is no question for a modern man, everything in this world issues fully formed from the loins of a benign monster called manufacture, a never-ending stream [...] of objects from an orifice hidden behind veils of smoke. (Faber 2002: 21)

The experience of modernity, the narrator seems to imply, is founded upon a deliberate act of cultural and ideological disguise. Indeed, exhibiting the goods through the art of window-dressing serves at least partly to conceal the unequal social relations implicit in the different social spaces of work and consumption. Lured by the delights of daydreaming and desire, modern individuals are thus unable to identify the “social history” of artefacts and the origins of everyday abundance (Appadurai 1988: 34). As a result, the manufacturing system and the social field of production can surface only in the shape of a “benign monster”. However, the goods displayed in the shop-windows do not sustain any fantasy of consumption. The social world described in these pages mainly includes pawnbrokers and their second-hand merchandise. The names of the goods put on display alliterate – “buns, boots, books or bonnets” (Faber 2002: 22) – as if to erase phonetically every trace of the “marginal differences” which, according to Baudrillard, are what consumption is all about (Baudrillard 1968: 152). The commodities are thus relegated to a single, indistinct category. In the lower social stratum of pawnbrokers, in other words, the material realm is immune to the strategies of singularisation and distinction that we have come to associate with the theory and practice of everyday symbolic consumption.

The images of the benign monster and the orifice are part of the ways in which Faber represents the world of things and, more broadly, the city and the bustling activities of its inhabitants. Throughout the novel, objects are endowed with a sexualised agency and human-like qualities. For example, the metaphor of “monstrous spills of semen” describes the snowflakes falling on St Giles streets (Faber 2002: 7), while crowds of clerks are “*swallowed up* by the embassies, banks and offices” (Faber 2002: 33, added emphasis). The activities of shopkeepers stand out for their lack

of decency and modesty, thus resembling the manner in which both the narrator and the prostitutes represented in the novel address their public – “let’s not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you’re too shy to name” (Faber 2002: 3). Likewise, the shop-windows “disrobe without warning” (Faber 2002: 23); the locks and shutters are opened as if to violate the modesty of the shop, where objects are thus indecently exhibited, while the second-hand character of the merchandise is revealed through an allusion to lost chastity. Imbuing the apparently docile materiality of objects with an ambiguous agency constitutes one of the strategies that Faber adopts in order to rewrite the contemporary discourse on consumption. “I don’t think”, Faber has pointed out, “that anyone could reasonably claim that *The Crimson Petal and The White* is one of those guided tours of a tourist 19th-century, where you go to look at all the pretty costumes” (qtd. in Farley 2010).

As the story moves socially upward from poor neighbourhoods to upper class districts, the reader is invited to experience more familiar forms of appropriation. Before inheriting a commercial empire and starting afresh as a respectable businessman, William Rackham is shown to be obsessed with his appearance. The image of the flamboyant dandy entering a department store in order to buy a new hat and reassert his self-esteem arguably flatters the reader by evoking the practice of self-styling, which has come to be identified with consumption at large:

Behind each of the windows is a showcase, offering for public admiration [...] a profusion of manufactures. [...] These objects seem already to have the status of eccentric museum exhibits, as though showcased for public wonderment alone. The whole effect indeed is so suggestive of the great Crystal Palace Exhibition on which the store is modelled, that *some* visitors, in their awe, are reluctant to buy anything, lest they mar the display. (Faber 2002: 49)

Omitting the price tag on the goods exhibited paradoxically materialises the possessor’s economic capital and thus represents a tacit strategy whereby those who “fear to ask and discover themselves insufficiently affluent” are silently denied the pleasures of shopping (Faber 2002: 50). The absence of the exchange-value and the recurring allusion to the “public admiration” and

“wonderment” might also evoke the contradictory fascination that commodities are usually claimed to exert on individuals: removing the objects from the marketplace and offering them for “public wonderment alone” might indeed function as a powerful drive to consumer desire, epitomising the longing for uniqueness and individuality. The allusion to museums and exhibitions seems to promise the pleasures attendant upon the skilfully aestheticised past in current re-enactments of the Victorian lifestyle.

At a more general level, the rhetoric adopted here by the narrator closely resembles the vocabulary used in several nineteenth-century narratives of consumption. In *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*, for instance, Andrew Miller has discussed how the literary imagination struggled to cope with the conflicts and tensions resulting from the emergence of commodity culture and new consumer techniques: “Both department stores and exhibition halls created spectacles before which people adopted an attitude of solitary and passive observation” (Miller 1995: 57). The passivity that Miller attributes to nineteenth-century spectators echoes the ambivalent role that many accounts of both Victorian and contemporary commodity culture ascribe to the consumer at large. Even as they try to secure their hold on the material realm and assert themselves as skilful observers, this argument runs, consumers’ self-reliance is undermined by both the gaze and the desire of others.² Oscillating between the clashing roles of subject and object, the consumer-as-spectator thus seeks to control the material world, while simultaneously being subjected to different techniques of surveillance and control.

In distancing itself from the cultural anxieties of reification and commoditisation, Faber’s narrative addresses the tensions implicit in our conception of things as a self-fashioning tool. In this respect, the novel repeatedly appeals to the rhetoric of consumption while at the same time undermining its ultimate meaning, that is, the reciprocity between subjects and objects. In the earlier cited episode of Mr. Rackham’s purchase, the practice of symbolic appropriation, shared by readers and characters alike, is portrayed as suspicious. “You must find it in you to become extraordinarily interested in why William Rackham considers himself to be in desperate need of a new hat” (Faber 2002: 45) – highly wrought and elaborate, the phrase denies both the interest of the reader and the necessity of the purchase, while it sets out to assert both, thus rendering the figure of the

prepossessing gentleman eager to boost his self-image in the space of commodities completely unappealing. Likewise, the text first dwells upon the self-confidence that William wishes to gain through the act of purchase – “he knows he can put an end to his humiliation by buying a new hat” (Faber 2002: 46). Soon after, however, the narrator suddenly intrudes, openly addressing the reader: “are you still paying attention?” (Faber 2002: 46). Readers are thus abruptly invited to turn their attention elsewhere, from William Rackham’s attempt to recognise himself in the world of goods, to Mrs. Rackham’s personal maid, Clara, as she boldly eludes her master’s surveillance and allows herself a treat with some errand money: “This is the beauty of working for the Rackhams: *he* pays but has no stomach to understand what he’s paying for, *she* has needs but has no idea what they ought to cost, and the accounts disappear in a chasm between the two” (Faber 2002: 50). The experience of shopping that Faber represents is neither solitary nor passive; rather, Clara’s purchase marks a departure from the traditional modalities of symbolic consumption. Capitalising on the tension between the apparently irreconcilable social and gendered fields of production and consumption, expenditure and work, Clara’s self-satisfying theft conjures up an altogether different form of possession, consisting only of silent and haphazard tactics, of subversive, impromptu attempts.

In other words, Faber’s narrative of consumption stages a new relationship between subjects and objects. Rather than reverberating the “splendour of the subject” – William, the new hat and his enhanced self-esteem – Clara’s act of consumption is so precarious and short-lived that it cannot be turned into a long-term symbolic investment in the world of commodities. At first lured by the “pleasure of virtual shopping” in the abundance of things described by the narrator, readers are later invited to identify with Clara and endorse the idea of appropriation implicit in her theft. The spectacular visibility that so often accompanies representations of objects in neo-Victorian practices – heritage sites, cinematic adaptations of nineteenth-century novels – is here superseded by a silent appropriation, while the paradigm of singularisation, the prolonged strategies whereby individuals turn the world of goods and exchange-values into a semiotic activity, gives way to a different form of consumer practice. Dictated by her social inferiority, Clara’s purchase is imagined as a strategy for survival, yielding only the uncertain, brief pleasures of the transient present. The servant’s gesture thus becomes a new source of readerly interest precisely

because it *cannot* reproduce the narcissistic circularity we have come to expect from our consumption practices. Committing a ‘theft’ under her master’s surveillance, Clara will be denied the crucial pleasure of displaying – both to herself and others – the corset she buys, the tangible trace of her self-image. The delight Clara derives from her hasty purchase is inseparable from the danger of being exposed and punished accordingly. If identity capital is the result of the ways in which people effectively define themselves and have others define them, Clara’s *invisible* purchase and her inevitably *hidden* corset both function as the reversal of the fantasies of identity insidiously ascribed to consumer practices. To put it differently, the corset does still activate ‘fantasies of identity’ by enabling Clara to possess an object above her status and imagine herself as a lady. However, as she cannot exhibit the tangible trace of her identity and have her idealised self-image socially validated, her self-perception cannot be anything other than a mere ‘fantasy’. As a result, consumption becomes not so much an exercise of ingenious self-fashioning and creative self-styling as the symbolic space inhabited by a multitude of actors, confronting and contesting each other and their respective self-perceptions. The social nature of consumption resurfaces in Faber’s novel as a set of implicit proscriptions and exclusions that problematise the desire for uniqueness implicit in the current-day practice of symbolic consumption.

Undermining some of the literary and cultural conventions underlying nineteenth-century realism, Faber’s narrative shares with many other neo-Victorian novels a revisionist agenda, which can be detected first and foremost at the level of plot and in the textual representation of social mobility. Propelled by Sugar’s rise in the world as governess, the narrative seems to chronicle a story of social redemption and success. The upward mobility in her trajectory is represented spatially as a move away from the shabby rooms of a prostitute to her ‘own’ middle-class parlour as Rackham’s mistress set up in a rented house, from the pawnbroker shop to the great department stores and, eventually, to the Rackham’s household. In spite of this upward movement, readers are repeatedly asked to shift to those lower-class districts and spaces, which also figure as the culturally neglected sites of memory. For instance, the tale of the origins of William’s villa is soon followed by Sugar’s return to the grimy streets of St Giles, while the upper-class refinement of the Rackham’s household is set in stark contrast to the smears in their kitchen, which function as a “humble

reminder” of the history of the servants and their work (Faber 2002: 23). Accordingly, the language of things also fluctuates between two registers. Throughout the novel, social mobility is marked by an unexpected abundance of things ready at the protagonists’ disposal. However, as they come to embody a number of more sophisticated wishes, things soon turn out to resist, rather than fulfil, the fantasies of possession projected onto them, thus undermining the story of social advancement of the main characters.

Alienation and reification are not the only cultural anxieties underlying the nineteenth-century social phenomenon of commoditisation. The symbolic and cognitive dimension of consumer culture and practices was already present in the critical accounts of its first sceptical interpreters. Focusing on the Parisian arcades as new techniques of exhibition, for instance, Walter Benjamin described the collector’s activity as Sisyphus’s task, which consists in “stripping things of their commodity character” and conferring upon them unique, personal connotations (Benjamin 1983: 168). In recent decades, a number of scholars from different fields have investigated how nineteenth-century social classes engaged actively with their material culture, especially in the domestic realm, and sought to negotiate and resist the ‘debilitating’ effects of commodity fetishism. As Thad Logan has claimed in *The Victorian Parlour*, for example,

the characteristic interior becomes increasingly full of objects, cluttered – to modern eyes – with a profusion of things, things that are not primarily functional, that do not have obvious use-value, but rather participate in a decorative, semiotic economy. (Logan 2001: 26)

As a result, the “ornamental exuberance” of Victorian households is an integral aspect of how middle-class social identity and experience were shaped (Logan 2001: 205), because to some extent it removed the domestic space from an economy marked by the spectre of scarcity and relocated it into a semiotic economy. In the modern scenario of increased social mobility, where distinctiveness no longer relied on hereditary title and land, objects also functioned significantly as signs of belonging (Cohen 2006: 84). The culturally neglected minutiae of everyday life became the very locus where fantasies of cultural and social identity were cultivated and

pursued. In other words, the contemporary paradigm of symbolic consumption finds a resonant echo in those nineteenth-century accounts of material culture – especially how-to manuals – which often showed their reading public how to reconcile economic and symbolic capital.³

Like their Victorian counterparts, Faber's characters strive to merge economic well-being and symbolic prestige, to turn their abundance of things into individual and social signs. Exasperated by a father who refuses to finance his flamboyant extravagances, William reluctantly turns from dandy to respectable businessman and family provider. Thus, social downward mobility and financial hardships no longer haunt him, after he inherits his father's fortune. However, his story of commercial success does not prevent the emergence of a different kind of scarcity, lurking even within the blissful condition of wealth and prosperity. Indeed, the "signs of straining" that pervade the anthropomorphic representation of William's residence articulate a different relationship between subjects and objects, material belongings and their possessors (Faber 2002: 155). "I get the impression from the way you're looking at the Rackham's house – at its burnished staircases and [...] its gaslit, ornately decorated rooms – that you think it's very old" (Faber 2002: 153). Even though the "ornamental exuberance" of Mrs. Rackham's parlour, to adapt Logan's terminology (Logan 2001: 205), has promoted a rhetoric of desire, readers are unexpectedly invited to forsake their fantasies of possession as they enter the domestic realm later on in the novel. "Inside", the narrator cautions,

there's really nothing in particular to impress anyone, except a foreigner like you. You may admire the many high-ceilinged rooms, the dark polished floors, the hundreds of pieces of furniture destined for the antiques shops of your own time, and most of all, you may be impressed by the industry of the servants. All these things are taken for granted here. To the Rackham's dwindling circle of acquaintances, the house is tainted: [...] deserted rooms where tables stand groaning with delicacies, empty floors ringing with the heavy footfalls of a forsaken host. (Faber 2002: 155)

The image of the domestic domain as a symbolic idyll, where the materiality of things is replaced by a number of individual connotations, gives way to its opposite. Dwelling upon the mute presence of the artefacts and the absence of guests and hosts alike, the episode signals the protagonists' inability to live up to the social status they have striven to achieve. Granted a human agency that the verb "groan" indicates, the materiality of the house does not sustain any symbolic order. If ownership and consumption mean participating in a semiotic activity where objects point to something other than themselves, here they can only be claimed to resist any fantasy of identity. When the text seems to come closer to the rhetoric of desire and possession or the "pleasure of virtual shopping", in other words, the narrator suddenly intrudes to undermine the reciprocity between objects and subjects that figures as one of the tenets of the discourse on consumption.

Much of Faber's revisionist agenda consists in articulating a new vocabulary of consumption and appropriation. In one of the episodes marking this counter-trajectory, the servant-girl Janey furtively slips into the dining-room and helps herself to her mistress's breakfast leftovers:

Hesitantly the girl reaches for a slice of cold bacon, one of three still glistening on the silver dish. Theft. But the wrath of God shows no interest in coming down upon her head, so she grows bolder, and eats the whole rasher. [...] Her hands are lobster-red, in vivid contrast to white china as she inserts her finger into the handle of her mistress's cup. Slyly she extends her finger, testing to see if this makes any difference to the way the cup lifts. (Faber 2002: 139)

In spite of Janey's humble expectations, extending one's finger does not make "any difference to the way the cup lifts". Here as elsewhere, the logic of the text rests upon a historical reversal of roles, values and beliefs. The wholehearted obedience and mutual trust between servants and masters that Victorian novels have trained us to take for granted now come across as highly suspicious. So, while the notion of upper-class respectability becomes unappealing, Janey's disrespect and insolence acts as a source of readerly pleasure. Fashioning the past as a history of the present (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: 2), *The Crimson Petal and the White* implicitly relies upon the

complicity of sceptical post-Victorian readers. By exploiting the benefit of hindsight, the novel fulfils, at least partly, the reader's expectations, by reversing some of the nineteenth-century literary and cultural conventions and stereotypes. Contemporary curiosity is rewarded, for instance, when Faber's revisionist narrative conjures up the marginalised sites of labour – factories, lavender fields, kitchens, etc. – upon which both William Rackham's wealth and his wife's propriety and decorum are shown to depend, albeit silently.

Here as elsewhere, however, the episode performs another function, marking a shift from the paradigm of symbolic consumption. Through her 'theft', the novel shifts from the rhetoric of personalisation to a different form of appropriation. Neither a strategy self-consciously developed over time nor a deliberate act of self-fashioning, Janey's gesture is here envisioned as an invisible and ironic re-appropriation, a silent tactic located in the ephemeral present. That her attempt is not meant as a symbolic investment, a singularisation, is further confirmed by the synecdoche adopted in the depiction of the servant-girl. Significantly, the text does not dwell upon the entire body of the girl and the self-image she might project onto the world of goods. Rather, the focus is on her hand, which seems to be as severed from the rest of her body as Janey herself is removed from the traditional pleasures of consumption and the rhetoric of presence, which objects are supposed to sustain.

The high incidence of episodes featuring servants and the love affair between a prostitute and her upper-class protector are both relevant in Faber's reshaping of the notion of consumption. Servants confront the world of commodities as a practice of social, rather than individual, negotiations. Realising that "God shows no interest" in her goings-on, Janey blithely falls upon her mistress's breakfast and goes so far as to ridicule middle-class manners. But before reaching this point, the servant is shown to confront the image of herself as defined by an invisible voice, which condemns her act as unacceptable. Implicit in the signifier of 'theft' is the simple recognition that what she craves actually belongs not to her, but to someone else. Part of the work involved in her appropriation thus consists in dispelling the interiorised principle of authority and the attendant sense of self-reproach and, more generally, the representation of herself implicitly produced by her social superiors. Rather than an act located in a social or cultural void or a celebration of unlimited individual agency, consumption is here re-imagined

as deeply embedded in a network of social relations. As a result, consumer practices become not so much a delightful exercise in creative self-styling, as the site where the ‘individual’ and the ‘social’ overlap, where the idealised self-image that things are supposed to reinforce inevitably intersects with the images and roles imposed on the self.

Seemingly driven by a desire to imitate her betters, Janey ultimately proves to be neither mesmerised by the “ornamental exuberance” of the Victorian house nor impressed by her mistress’s refinement. So, as she vomits her breakfast and swoons on the polished floor of the house in the following pages, her appropriation turns into a rejection of the traditional ways of consumption – symbolic, strategic, and subject-oriented – reproduced elsewhere in the text as part of the reader’s expectations. In shaking off her sense of guilt and ironically aping her mistress’s manners Janey performs an act of mimicry: thus she uses the world of things less to identify than to dis-identify with her social superiors and the image they inflict on her, to assert her difference by presumably repeating someone else’s manners. Rather than as a means of self-narration, consumption is here reshaped as the complex problem of the self’s relationship to an object and subject world already imbued with a number of implicit meanings. Consumer pleasures are thus rerouted and redefined as the ability to achieve a fine balance between oneself and a multitude of invisible others, to find an ironic voice within someone’s endless monologue.

In a recent essay, Silvana Colella has argued that the return of smells in *The Crimson Petal and the White* works to undermine the comforts of realism, “interrupting the ‘homely’ with the ‘unhomely’, the familiar with the uncanny” (Colella 2010: 86). According to Colella,

[t]he Victorian past is made to appear concrete, contingent, almost tangible [...] whenever it is evoked through the olfactory medium. On the other hand, the spectrality of the past is further reinforced by the reference to historical odours that function as mute signs, or silent traces of an object world receding into an unbridgeable distance. (Colella 2010: 86)

Borrowing from her argument, the same narrative logic might be claimed to inform Faber’s representation of objects, which produces a defamiliarisation of the familiar pleasures customarily related to consumption practices.

Dramatising the nineteenth-century “explosion of consumer goods [and] mass spectacles” (Richards 2010), Faber’s novel seems to promise the experience of imaginary, visual shopping offered by many other re-enactments of the Victorian past. At first glance, readers repeatedly confront scenes of conspicuous consumption and are thus implicitly invited to ‘experience’ the past as a collection of period aesthetic objects. Describing the Rackham villa as a “doll’s house” and a “toy”, or elsewhere evoking the “antiques shops” of our time (Faber 2002: 200, 155), Faber overtly addresses the commoditisation of the past in our contemporary historicist culture. The familiar desire for an aestheticised past is suddenly frustrated, however, as the plot dramatises one of the tenets inherent in the practice of symbolic consumption. Readers are abruptly invited to forsake the familiar pleasures of consumption whenever the protagonists cannot turn their possessions into a semiotic, subject-oriented activity. Functioning as the repressed of our cultural identity of creative, self-assured consumers, the ‘social’ nature of consumption resurfaces obliquely in the novel whenever objects and characters fail to sustain their blissful reciprocity and objects echo less with one’s ideal self-image than with the oppressive images of the self reproduced elsewhere in the text.

3. Sugar: Things and Im-materiality

Things also figure prominently in the story of Sugar’s social advancement. While spying incognito on William’s whereabouts, Sugar relies heavily on the semiotics of things. She ventures into upper-class districts and “tries hard to absorb the Notting Hillness of Notting Hill, trying to imagine what the choice of such a place for a man’s home reveals about him” (Faber 2002: 238). The image she receives – “pedestrians are few [...] and have nothing to sell”, “only curtains in the windows and birds in the trees” (Faber 2002: 238) – tacitly corresponds with her own idea of middle-class refinement as a symbolic idyll. Things seem to function as a valuable form of communication for Sugar as well as the reader. Both are invited to roam the Victorian metropolis and recognise the correspondences between subjects and objects endorsed by the language of things. Lingering in front of William’s villa, for instance, Sugar can easily interpret what things are supposed to stand for: so, “the way the brass ‘R’ [for Rackham] gleams, transmuted almost into gold by vigorous polishing” communicates in her eyes how William’s patrimony has increased (Faber 2002: 187), once he has

inherited his father's business. However, the language of things fails to sustain its reciprocity when Sugar tries to convert her unexpected wealth and abundance into a symbolic activity. Installed in a house of her own, Sugar begins to look at the profusion of things that her new status enables her to enjoy not as an end in itself, but as a means to social advancement. In one of the episodes describing Sugar's struggle to absorb middle-class tastes and habits, the protagonist enthuses over the abode that William has unexpectedly provided for her and the independence attendant upon it.

The place is crammed with bric-a-brac: useless, ugly, beautiful, ingenious, impractical: and all, as far as she can tell, expensive. [...] The more she explores her rooms, the more evidence she finds of his thoughtfulness: the glove-stretcher and the glove-powderer, the shoe-tree and the ring-stand, the bellows for the fore, the bedwarming pans. [...] Certainly, there are some queer objects lying around. How he craves to please her! (Faber 2002: 267)

The material gains crowning Sugar's successful attempt to work her way up the social ladder do not yield symbolic rewards. Rather, the gap between what objects are and what they should stand for is the trademark of Sugar's ambivalent upward mobility story and Faber's narrative of consumption. In the repertoire of knick-knacks "jostl[ing] one another on the mantelpieces" (Faber 2002: 270), Sugar is encouraged to find the visible traces of William's "thoughtfulness", personality and prestige. However, the rhetoric of presence fostered by material culture appears highly suspicious to the protagonist, as she realises that it is meant not to gratify her, but rather to reverberate William's complacent self-image: "how insatiable is his need for recognition!" (Faber 2002: 272). On the one hand, through the profusion of things she clearly achieves a release from a life ruled by necessity – "[I]t's all *mine!*", she triumphs, "It's all for *me!* [...] I'm *free!*" (Faber 2002: 272). On the other hand, however, the material abundance does not enable her to move away from the social role of prostitute, thus producing a sort of social scarcity. The presence of "queer objects" and the recurrent connotations of her apartment as "empty" suggest that Sugar's rooms fail to fulfil her fantasies of identity (Faber 2002: 270). What might and should become "the armour of an independent life" turns out to be indifferent to the

protagonist's expectations and is repeatedly described as both "luxuriant and silent" (Faber 2002: 274, 272). Refusing to communicate tacitly her ideal self-image – free, independent, etc. – her rooms are later described as "dead"; in them, the narrator points out, "she can say aloud, as often and as loudly as she pleases, 'This is *mine*' but she'll hear no reply" (Faber 2002: 313).

The rhetoric of presence and ideal reciprocity in the field of consumption is soon superseded by the reality of absence, of missing objects, which the protagonist enumerates as if to set them against the excess of things provided by her benefactor. The catalogue of useful objects and rooms she fails to find in her new rooms – a kitchen, a chamber-pot, etc. – contributes to enhancing the irony of the episode, which works to render William's prodigality and benevolence utterly specious. Moreover, to the extent that they are associated with the protagonist's most basic needs, the absence of a number of objects also performs another function in Faber's novel. The ever-flowing and irreversible profusion of things in the age of commoditisation is re-imagined, at least in Sugar's fictional trajectory, as a slow and imperceptible process whereby her most visceral instincts are erased and neglected. It is as if – the novel implies – the sophisticated technologies of self-care and self-styling, the inventory of consumer practices that Sugar allows herself to enjoy, soon engenders a misrecognition of her body. Accordingly, an order of needs is replaced, as it were, by a game of individual nuances; the "gross reality of Miss Sugar the sick animal" is likewise substituted by a denial of the materiality of her body (Faber 2002: 781). After becoming William's mistress, the protagonist easily neglects the imperatives of labour and turns enthusiastically to a range of aesthetic pleasures. "Why can't it be the factories", she wonders after a night out in a West End theatre, "that are smashed to the ground, the sweater's dens that are consumed in flames, rather than the opera houses and the fine homes?" (Faber 2002: 413).

In the meantime, even the revengeful novel she has long conceived as "the first book to tell the truth about prostitution" seems to come to a standstill (Faber 2002: 412). Before the novel turns out to be a children's history picture-book, the recurring image of the ink blots covering the written pages – "hieroglyphs which have lost their meaning" (Faber 2002: 412) – brings forth Sugar's inability to mirror herself in her own literary writing. In one of these episodes, Sugar is absorbed in her book and, while

trying to adjust the plot to suit her new delightful experiences, she suddenly starts at the image reflected by the opposite window:

In amongst the greenery of her garden hovers her own face, perched on an insubstantial body that wafts out of the ground like smoke; [...] her hair, motionless in reality, swirls and flickers with every gust of wind outside, phantom azaleas shiver in her bosom. (Faber 2002: 411)

Rather than reverberating an ideal self, Sugar's home gives back the image of a dematerialised, "insubstantial body". As she adapts to the vocabulary of middle-class social experience by absorbing a whole range of domestic pleasures and removing any visible trace of labour from her body, Sugar becomes increasingly ethereal. Consumer goods de-materialise her, tacitly erasing the reality of her body and its instincts.

Such a view is further reinforced by the social invisibility imposed on Sugar in her roles of detective and, later on in the novel, as governess. She becomes increasingly familiar with upper-class material culture not through reciprocal sharing of practices and habits, but in a solitary and silent way. For instance, to prevent William's family circle from finding out who she really is, Sugar must attend theatres and opera-houses hiding herself behind a fan. When she enters the Rackham's house as governess, she is described as "silent as a wolf or a fairytale ghost" (Faber 2002: 546), and she gains access to the domestic space and its inhabitants only in a furtive way, that is, by eavesdropping or secretly reading Agnes Rackham's discarded diaries. Caught in the attempt to familiarise herself with the language of domesticity, she can do so only by way of an increasing invisibility, a further erosion of her materiality. This trajectory reaches its climax when Agnes Rackham mistakes the protagonist's identity, substituting the evanescence of a guardian angel for the 'gross reality' of the prostitute. Throughout the novel, indeed, the protagonist becomes an intangible and ethereal figure in the eyes of Agnes Rackham, the angel who eventually comes to rescue her upper-class *alter-ego* from domestic seclusion.

The narrative visibility that Faber's revisionist agenda grants to the neglected figure of a prostitute is offset, at the level of plot, by the social invisibility Sugar experiences as she seeks to adapt to a range of upper-class

aesthetic and domestic practices. It is no wonder that, when the reality of her body somehow reasserts itself and Sugar finds herself pregnant in the last pages of the novel, she is immediately dismissed from her master's abode and leaves the narrative unexpectedly. However naïve, then, the kernel of Sugar's trajectory lies in her failure to achieve a social redemption in spite of the material abundance to which she grows accustomed. But the lack of coincidence between material rewards and symbolic scarcity that the text repeatedly registers in her story best condenses the ambivalence of Faber's representation of objects.

4. Conclusion

Reading a number of neo-Victorian novels against the backdrop of "secondwave feminism", Cora Kaplan has claimed that *The Crimson Petal and the White's* female characters are the only sympathetic gender in the novel: "In countering Fowles's suspicion of intelligent manipulative women with a more 'feminist', supportive take on them [...] Faber inverts without really altering the antagonistic structure of gender in Fowles's novel [*The French Lieutenant's Woman*]" (Kaplan 2007: 100). The gender reversal that Faber operates becomes more nuanced, however, not least because it intersects with the representation of consumption offered in the novel. Whether demonised as compulsive, avid shoppers or idealised as the custodians of the semiotic economy in the domestic sphere, women were customarily the main actors in the nineteenth-century gendered field of consumption. In Faber's revisionist novel, both lower- and upper-class female characters are repeatedly denied the pleasures of symbolic, subject-oriented consumption. This reversal, however, does not imply an overt analysis of the gender hierarchy – if any – implicit in our democratised field of consumption. Nor does the female characters' inability to mirror themselves in the world of commodities simply reproduce the nineteenth-century stereotype of women's ambivalent role – as agents and objects of exchange – in the marketplace.

As I have argued, *The Crimson Petal's* representation of objects moves away from the cultural anxieties – commoditisation, reification, exploitation, etc. – underlying the nineteenth-century discourse on material culture. While acknowledging the symbolic dimension of consumer practices, however, Faber addresses the tensions inherent in the current-day practice of symbolic consumption. In this respect, Faber's novel does not

romanticise consumption and its usually celebrated potential as a self-fashioning tool or emancipatory practice. Lured by a rhetoric of desire, readers are repeatedly invited to forsake the vicarious pleasures implicit in an aestheticised past, whenever the text dramatises the fraught relationship between individuals and their possessions. Defined as the site of a real or imaginary co-presence, where the experience of being perceived prevails over the act of self-perception, consumption in Faber's novel thus complicates the relationship between the world of goods and narratives of the self. If self-styling, personalisation strategies and the desire for uniqueness now figure as the ultimate truth of consumerism – at least, as promoted by postmodern atomistic theories and advertising industries – *The Crimson Petal and the White* stages the repressed social nature of consumption. This surfaces in the text, albeit obliquely, whenever the narcissistic circularity of consumer practices is denied and every attempt at the game of singularisation becomes an endless negotiation between one's complacent self-image and the oppressive images imposed by others.

Notes

1. George Letissier has claimed that “with its emphasis on the emergence of consumer society and the production of luxury commodities through Rackham's perfumeries”, Faber's novel should not be regarded as “merely another instance of *déjà-vu*” (Letissier 2009: 113). Focusing on the interplay between Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction, his essay nonetheless suggests that, as I hope to demonstrate, Faber's representation of objects does not “pander to the aesthetic tastes of the modern consumer” (Letissier 2009: 113).
2. For a similar discussion of the nineteenth-century literary representation of commodities, see Christoph Lindner, *Fictions of Commodity Culture* (2003).
3. This is not to deny the variety of Victorian responses, both critical and enthusiastic, to the emergence of commodity culture. My point here is simply that the symbolic dimension of the world of things – now celebrated as one of the tenets of current-day consumer practices – can also be found in the critical accounts of nineteenth-century commentators, who first recognised commodities and consumption as a valuable means of self-narration.

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