

“No Words Attached:” Physical Objects in Orwell’s *1984*

Much has been written on the malleability of language in George Orwell’s *1984*, and its applications to molding thought and shaping consciousness. Much less has been said, however, on the importance of objects in the dystopian world of Oceania. While the Party’s manipulation of Newspeak is critical to the novel, one other important aspect that is often overlooked is the ability of physical objects to subtly wage a war against the Party simply by existing. In *1984*, Orwell uses material things to symbolize resistance against the Party, because their sensory language conjures the repressed past without verbal language and offers up a potential future to citizens. However, even though objects may seem to be impervious to the Party’s manipulations and brainwashing, they are just as vulnerable as a person’s mind is to being destroyed.

Nevertheless, these objects have the power to convey both resistance against the Party and hope for the future.

1. Material objects are able to carry on a history that is unchangeable by the Party because they lack a verbal language. Winston, as a worker in the Ministry of Truth, specializes in re-making and falsifying records so that the Party-dictated “past” is kept up-to-date with the Party-dictated present — therefore, he ensures that the past as a concept ceases to exist, because it is no different from the present. If the “past” is just a copy of the present, there is really no “past” — two things cannot be indistinguishable and also be distinct. Winston acknowledges the fact that the past doesn’t exist anymore when he tells Julia, “the past, starting from yesterday, has

been actually abolished ... Nothing exists except an endless present” (137). Orwell’s use of the word “abolished” here drives home the point that the past hasn’t just been changed by the Ministry of Truth; it implies that the past has been fundamentally altered to such a degree that it, as a concept, has been put to an end and done away with. The Party is able to accomplish this because they are only changing the words the past is recorded in, and since words have no physical basis, they are easily manipulated or destroyed. At the Ministry of Truth, this is done by making sure that “[e]very record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten... every statue and street and building has been renamed” (137). Crucially, the things that change about the past here are all based in words: “records” and “books” are rewritten, and the objects — “statues,” “streets,” “buildings” — are renamed. The statues, streets, and buildings themselves aren’t and can’t be changed, but the words attached to them can be. In this way, material objects make the past solid, and encapsulate it in a way that the Party cannot corrupt like it can a newspaper article, except by destroying them. Winston sums this up by saying that “[i]f [the past] survives anywhere, it’s in a few *solid* objects with *no words attached* to them, like that lump of glass there” (137, emphases mine). In this way, material objects function as immutable embodiments of the past, subtly waging a war against the Party as they continue to survive.

2. These objects, though they lack a verbal language, are not mute, however. They are able to convey a sense of the past to characters simply through the sensory experiences associated with them. When Winston comes across the paperweight for the first time, he notices its “peculiar softness, as of rainwater, in both the color and the texture of the glass” (84). Orwell lavishes attention on the paperweight, spending an entire paragraph characterizing its qualities; he notes its “color,” its “texture,” and the “peculiar softness” that pervades it, and as a result of

his zoom into this object, we experience Winston's fascination with the paperweight's appearance firsthand. Winston muses that what appeals to him about it is "not so much its beauty as the air it seemed to possess of belonging to an age quite different from the present one" (84). Even at the very first glance, Winston is able to discern that the paperweight is from the past — and because of this immediate understanding and Orwell's rich sensory description, we see that it must be through its very physical qualities that the paperweight is able to convey a sense of the past. Crucially, this is a past that is untainted by the Party's manipulations, and so the paperweight in its evocation of the past serves as a quiet, nonverbal rebellion against the Party, deliberately offering up a unorthodox past. The fact that objects have no verbal language attached to them does not hinder their ability to communicate things about the past, and, as I have discussed, even improves the quality of communication, because since the communication lacks words, the Party cannot manipulate the message transmitted through individual sensory perception.

3. The glass paperweight thus provides the impetus for Winston's realization that the past is something concrete and not completely moldable by the Party; however, in his article "Orwell's 1984," Troy Place argues that the paperweight accomplishes this not by evoking the past, but by serving as a metaphor for control of the present: "Winston compares the glass to rainwater, which implies purity and rebirth. The coral and the objects that Winston guessed that the glass contained — a rose or a sea anemone — are all living things, suggesting that the paperweight symbolizes the suspension of life" (Place 109). In this view, the paperweight doesn't communicate the past, but rather allows Winston to suspend his present inside the "rainwater" of the paperweight. Orwell seems to support this interpretation, writing that Winston "had the

feeling that he could get inside it, and that in fact he was inside it, along with the mahogany bed and the gateleg table . . . and the paperweight itself. The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own" (130). This suggests that the room above Mr.

Charrington's shop also functions as a mechanism for "suspending" the present — in this room, Winston and Julia are able to get away (or at least, they perceive that they have gotten away) from the Party's control over the lives of its citizens, and the paperweight symbolizes a sanctuary away from the constantly-changing outside world, helping support the idea of escaping Party control. In this way, the paperweight also seems to suspend and enclose a potential ideal future away from Party control; it contains both the present and a possible future inside of it. George Lyons would disagree, however; in "George Orwell's Opaque Glass in '1984'" he writes that "[the paperweight] represents a little chunk of history the Party has failed to corrupt" (Lyons 44), which matches my interpretation of its function as mentioned before. However, even in Place's view, the paperweight still does function to remind Winston of the past, since, as the Party slogan goes, "who controls the present controls the past" (30), and since Winston and Julia have, with the paperweight's help, effectively moved outside the Party's present and constantly rewritten history, they are able to understand the concept of the past as concrete. As a result, since the slogan also states that "who controls the past controls the future," the paperweight offers up a potential future and allows Winston to be in command of his own future for the first time. In this way, it continues to function as a means of resistance against the Party's control — it not only keeps a bit of history unchanged and alive and conjures up a hopeful vision of the future, but it is also able to share this idea with the characters in the novel.

4. Since the Party cannot manipulate objects, and life cannot continue without a certain number of objects, it works instead to strip away any nonessential sensory detail that might communicate without words from those necessary objects. For example, cigarettes, coffee, and gin are all typically associated with sensory pleasure — whether it be an effect of consumerism or an effect of pleasant sensory perception, one enjoys the physical act of consuming them. However, as Victory Cigarettes, Victory Coffee, and Victory Gin, supplied by the Party, they are reduced to two-dimensional, sterile shells of what they used to be; for example, the gin is “colorless liquid with a plain white label marked ‘VICTORY GIN’” (4). Orwell’s use of the bleak words “colorless” and “plain white” contrast starkly with his vivid depiction of the paperweight as discussed earlier, and he does not mention anything approaching the level of detail of “texture” or “peculiar softness.” The design of this gin bottle is indicative of its intent: the label is not colorful and exciting, inviting the consumer to partake and enjoy, instead, it is “plain” with no-nonsense text that only indicates its contents. As such, we see that the Party has provided its citizens with gin that serves only the purpose of gin and nothing more — there is no beauty in it, no detail that might evoke a feeling that the Party cannot control. In addition, the lunch served at the Ministry of Truth demonstrates further the Party’s tight control over the sensory experiences of its citizens; this lunch consists of “pinkish-gray stew, a hunk of bread, a cube of cheese, a mug of milkless Victory Coffee, and one saccharine tablet” (Orwell 44). Here, Orwell’s parallel structure (“a hunk of bread, a cube of cheese, a mug of... [c]offee”) emphasizes the repetitive, mundane nature of the meal. When combined with the complete absence of adjectives, we get a sense of how unmemorable the entire meal is. It only functions as sustenance, and is devoid of the pleasure of eating. The Party’s stripped-down objects with

generic packaging and its bland food mirror its desired state of living for the citizens of Oceania: plain, featureless, “colorless” existences, unmarked by moments of physical pleasure from food or drink and without sensory delight at all. It is in this way that the “Victory” in these products’ titles really makes sense — they represent a “Victory” of the Party over its citizens, one more modicum of control over their lives squeezed out by removing communicative sensory details from everyday objects.

5. The Party’s control over sensory experience seems to be in order to avoid letting objects communicate the past to citizens; however, George Lyons writes in “George Orwell’s Opaque Glass in ‘1984,’” “[t]he Party is opposed to a reality based upon the senses because such a reality is private and so not completely under the control of the Party” (Lyons 44). While I agree that a reality where objects can communicate the past is not completely controllable by the Party, are those sensory experiences truly “private?” Both Winston and Julia experience the smell of real coffee in the room above Mr. Charrington’s shop, and while Julia may not experience a sense of the past as Winston does (to him, the smell “seemed like an emanation from his early childhood” (125)), there is no denying that both of them are affected by the evocative characteristics of this coffee, which shows them that that this coffee isn’t sterilized of all sensory pleasure. However, Julia’s excitement seems to stem not from the fact that she has memories associated with the fleeting smell of coffee, as Winston does, but from the fact that she is rebelling against the Party. She tells Winston about her black market goods, saying “It’s all Inner Party stuff. There’s nothing those swine don’t have, nothing” (125). Orwell’s use of the word “swine” here as well as the choppy structure of Julia’s statements and repetition of the word “nothing” to punctuate the end of her statement demonstrates her resentment against those who have what she does not. Though she may be resentful, Julia is still clearly excited by the prospect of having these items from the past — she comes in “rather hurriedly” with the exclamation “Just

brought... You can chuck [the Victory Coffee] away again, because we shan't be needing it. Look here" (124). The breathless sense of "[j]ust let me show you" and "[l]ook here" show us that she is excited about these items — because they are novel, because they are from a time that isn't the current one. Therefore, her appreciation for the coffee is not, as Winston experiences it, due to a sense of the past resurfacing, but due to a sense that she is getting something special *that is from the past*. As such, communication through sensory experience may be, as Lyons describes, "private," in that it can't be shared between people, as only Winston feels the object's communication about the past. However, this does not discredit the fact that the communication occurs. As Regan Forrest, a visitor experience researcher for museums, writes in a post about the way we interact with objects, "objects do speak, at least some of the time, although we as visitors may not necessarily be conversant in the language any given object speaks. And if not, the object is as good as mute to us" (Forrest). In this case, Julia is not conversant in the language of the past that the coffee offers up to Winston, however, that does not mean that sensory communication is necessarily "private," as Lyons claims. It may be private in the sense that it is hidden away, not under the Party's thumb, but it can be shared between people.

6. In effect, because they are able to control the past in an alternate way, objects are able to inspire a future and serve as symbols of revolt against Party control. Simply through their sensory characteristics, objects are able to purely and immutably embody the past; they cannot be, as words are in Newspeak, "[stripped]... of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all

secondary meanings whatever” (268). Any characteristics they have are set, and cannot be mutilated or manipulated to convey some other meaning as words can be, except by destruction entirely. When an object like the paperweight or, seemingly, Emmanuel Goldstein’s book is run through the Party slogan “who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past” (30), we can see that since these objects have their own mechanisms for controlling the past, they are additionally able to offer up a future outside of Party control. Winston demonstrates this power of objects when he finally begins to read *the book*: he “[appreciated] the fact that he *was* reading, in comfort and safety. He was alone... The sweet summer air played against his cheek... in the room itself there was no sound except the insect voice of the clock. He settled deeper into the armchair and put his feet up on the fender. It was bliss, it was eternity. Suddenly, as one sometimes does with a book of which one knows that one will ultimately read and reread every word, he opened it at a different place” (164). Orwell creates an almost dream-like state here using the soft words “sweet summer air” and the familiar, comforting images of settling into a armchair and putting one’s feet up, and the net effect is that this moment seems to be from a different, ideal world, and too good to be true. The fact that Winston believes he “will ultimately read and reread every word” adds to that feeling of a peaceful future, and contrasts sharply with the beliefs he expresses at the beginning of the novel and throughout, the feeling that it was only a matter of time before the Thought Police got him — “he had always known that the grave was there and waiting for him” (141). The book thus provides the power to make Winston believe that he *has* an “eternity” — it places him in an alternate world with an alternate future, one where he is not eventually caught by the Thought Police, where he and Julia continue to live out their lives in happiness and secrecy, where he can

read in “comfort and safety” when in reality he is never safe from the telescreens. This power is accented by the way Orwell describes the book before Winston begins reading; he lavishes attention on it in much the same way as he did for the paperweight: it is a “heavy black volume, amateurishly bound... The pages were worn at the edges, and fell apart easily, as though the book had passed through many hands” (163). Orwell crucially gives us the sensory details here, demonstrating that through the sensory language of objects, they are able to communicate the past and offer up a future, both apart from the control of the Party.

7. Because they lack verbal language, objects may seem to be impervious to the Party’s endless manipulation of history; however, in reality they are just as vulnerable as the human mind is. When the past is simply a concept, it is malleable; however, once it is given solid form in an object like the paperweight, it seems as if it might be permanent. This is not the case, however — one obvious limitation in the efficacy of objects as resistance is that while the Party cannot manipulate objects, it can easily destroy them, as in the case of the paperweight, which, as Paul Roazen writes in “Orwell, Freud, and 1984,” “the Thought Police are quick to smash... when they arrest [Winston]” (Roazen 29). In its broken state, Winston muses that the paperweight’s true contents seemed insignificant once exposed: “The fragment of coral, a tiny crinkle of pink like a sugar rosebud from a cake, rolled across the mat. How small, thought Winston, how small it always was!” (198). Orwell’s use of repetition here in the exclamation of “how small... how small” underscores the seeming futility of the paperweight as an emblem of the past, mirroring the futility of Winston’s dreams of overthrowing the Party and the way he must feel as he is betrayed by Mr. Charrington and surrounded by the Thought Police when he is wrenched out of his sanctuary room. However, even though objects may seem useless because

the embody the past only temporarily until they are destroyed, just as Winston's resistance is destroyed, they serve crucial functions as mechanisms for resisting the Party's control of Oceanic life. As Troy Place writes, "The smashing of the paperweight... begins the end of the consciousness for which [Winston] had worked. However, Winston's vision is not necessarily special or singular, but it is human. The picture [of Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford] that he found, which motivated him to become fully conscious, was a wonderful glitch in the system. There shall be many more" (Place 110).

As long as these "wonderful glitches" continue to occur and objects from the past live on, hope lives on as well. Winston writes that "If there is hope it lies in the proles," (61), but it lies in physical objects as well. The physical embodiment of the past is a powerful thing, one the Party does not overestimate but cannot fully control, and it is this that may inspire the next generation of rebels. While the ending of 1984 may seem depressing and indicative of the ultimate superiority of the authoritarian state, in objects Orwell has given readers a symbol of hope for the future. While they may be ephemeral, as long as objects exist, some form of the past outside of Party control continues to exist, and therein hope lies for the future.