GEORGE ORWELL'S OPAQUE GLASS IN 1984

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The narrative techniques of George Orwell would seem at a glance to do no more than get his grisly message across. His career is something like that of Tolstoy. Both of them began by writing thinly disguised personal narratives and ended by using only the most didactic forms of literature — the parable and the fable. The difference between the point that each makes is a measure of what has happened to man's hopes in the last half century. Tolstoy's late fables now seem unsatisfactory because of their naive hope; Orwell's last grim tales describe a world in which the machinery of coercion and destruction already seems dated, almost as though he were presenting a dark version of Chaplin's "The Great Dictator."

When we read the fables of Tolstoy there is the certain impression that his vision preceded his vehicle, that he is as successful as he hoped to be in overpowering literature with his moral. Many have had the same impression about Orwell for the comments on his later work dismiss his technique as only occasionally successful or even pedestrian. The consensus has been that Orwell was a keen observer of incidents, a nice manipulator of irony, and an expert at gentle persuasion; but that he was really so much more interested in what he had to say than how he said it that his works often show moments of haste and downright slovenliness.

In "Why I Write," Orwell's final review of his career, he said that his intent was always to raise political writing to an art. Certainly the flatness noted by the critics in his most political works is consistent with the tradition of political satire. Such is obviously the case with Animal Farm. Like the writer of detective stories, he may not wish to create any but stereotypes in a work like 1984 because all of the characters are suspect of grave spiritual crimes perpetrated in a flat, two-dimensional world. In the case of Winston Smith the flatness involves self-deception, and in this respect he is comparable to Lemuel Gulliver. Indeed he is a pawn in the same literary tradition.

The influence of Swift on 1984 is not accidental. In an essay on
Gulliver's Travels Orwell notes that Gulliver is characterized by the inventory the Lilliputians make of his possessions. Orwell especially mentions Gulliver's spectacles, "which make several appearances." \(^2\) One way in which Orwell may have intended to raise political writing to an art could have been suggested by Swift's use of such details as Gulliver's spectacles. In 1984 O'Brien is usually characterized simply by the manner in which he puts on his spectacles. Six times throughout the novel (on virtually every appearance) O'Brien resettles his spectacles on his nose. This could appear to be a way to get the usual descriptive business of literature out of the way so that Orwell can get back to the demonic tenets of Ingsoc. But when such narrative shorthand is examined in relation to other techniques involving glass and lenses the whole seems to take on a significance, and suggests that in this case Orwell saw his theme in his vehicle.

The life Orwell describes in 1984 is just about as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short as it can be. He shows this through direct statement and illustration. We are not only presented with the frightening theoretical documents of this society, but every incident from the daily Two Minutes Hate to the brainwashing of Smith completes this picture. Even the love affair with Julia seems more sordid than pathetic. The reader's sense of a tawdry world is also intensified by the absence of any but hard and brittle objects in Winston Smith's life. Perhaps the varicose ulcer on his leg and his recurrently anal concerns show a too facile technique, but the various appearances of glass assist the theme of the novel in a subtle manner. From the very beginning there is a reversal of the usual function of glass. Smith is seen in his room where the telescreen is always on, possibly spying on him, ready to pounce on the least deviation from the required expression of intent optimism. Such a screen would normally be thought a device which would let him see into the world, to extend his horizons, or to escape (in the good or bad sense). But here in Smith's world the screen is "like a dulled mirror" which cannot be turned off. (p. 3) \(^3\) It offers no pleasure, only painful calisthenics and dull statistics. It follows him everywhere for there are telescreens where he works, in public squares, and they are most vigilant in lavatories. Their prying is a nuisance, but at least that is silent. The voice of the telescreen is worse, for it "seemed to stick into his brain like jagged splinters of glass." (p. 102)

Opposite the telescreen there is the window, but this looks on to a cheerless scene. "Through the shut window pane, the world looked
cold," and overhead Smith sees a helicopter of the Police Patrol peering into windows in hopes of detecting heresy. (pp. 3-4) Smith is lucky to have a window, for in most of the houses they are broken and boarded up or the panes are filled with cardboard. And the windows remain this way for long periods, for every repair of even the favored "Victory Mansions" where Smith lives has to be passed on by a committee, and the mending of a window pane may take two years. (p. 22) The result is that the people of Oceania live in a world where the usual devices that let men see into and know about their world to let them make independent decisions work in a reverse fashion so that each person lives isolated and loveless.

It is not only a matter of the windowless, monolithic structure of the Ministry of Love, or the long windowless halls in the Ministry of Truth where Smith works — all this he seems to accept, but he is often in situations where he feels he should be able to see through glass, and sometimes thinks he does, but cannot. There is the dingy pub where Smith tries to find from an old man how things were before the advent of Big Brother. The anecdotes he hears from the prole are useless to Smith because he can only interpret the revealing incidents in terms of his own distorted experience and the perverse slogans of Ingsoc. When Smith enters the pub he observes that its windows "appeared to be frosted over but in reality were merely coated with dust." (p. 86) When Smith first sees the old book with the fine paper which he buys for his incriminating journal it is through the window of the "frowsy little junk shop" run by the deceptive Carrington who spies on him. (p. 7) So even when he thinks he sees into a world beyond his own immediate experience he does not. Perhaps the closest he comes to realizing the perverted function of glass in Oceania is when he hurls his inkwell through his window in disgust, as Luther is supposed to have thrown his inkpot at the Devil.

It is not only the world of things which is obscured and distorted by windows in 1984, but people are invariably shut off from one another by spectacles that hide rather than magnify their eyes, the traditional windows of the soul. O'Brien is not the only one to wear glasses, for all the Party intellectuals wear them. Emmanuel Goldstein, the renegade object of the Party's hate, wears glasses on the end of his long, thin nose — which is just where O'Brien wears his. (p. 13) Smith feels that he is spied on by Tillotson, who works in the neighboring cubicle and twice darts him a "hostile flash." (pp. 42, 46) It is the hard and reflecting artificial eye rather than the eye itself
that seems hostile. This is emphasized when Smith sees one of his co-workers in the cafeteria eating with Julia:

His head was thrown back a little, and because of the angle at which he was sitting, his spectacles caught the light and presented to Winston two blank discs instead of eyes... this was not a real human being but some kind of dummy. (pp. 54-55)

The eyes of these intellectuals have no depth or character; they even lack shape or color. At one point in his interrogation Smith is questioned by “party intellectuals, little rotund men with quick movements and flashing spectacles.” (p. 245) This recurrent image informs the situation in which Smith feels himself. He is increasingly aware that he is essentially alone, but he does not completely see that there is nothing within himself to which he can retreat, because in his world there is no past and no value and never a human kindness.

The very nature of Smith’s work, which is to alter historical documents in the Ministry of Truth to suit the current and ever changing Party needs, might suggest the way to a private and stable form of truth. When he is at work he puts on his own spectacles before he picks up his speakwrite to dictate a new version of the past—as though he could himself put on the blank and conscienceless face of the Party whenever he performed its functions. But because there is no private life, the hard and mirror-like face of the Party becomes his own. Before he surreptitiously reads the note from Julia—the note which reaches out with the message “I love you”—he puts on his glasses, and the love affair that follows becomes in his own mind a political act.

Winston Smith deceives himself into believing that there is something in him that is apolitical, even though he can’t define this other, and he hopes real, self. He is always searching for the naked eyes of others in hopes that the human truth outside of the Party may be found in this way. Yet he belatedly discovers that Julia’s eyes are brown (p. 121), and still later that she is only a revolutionary—as he puts it—“from the waist downwards.” (p. 157) Since his life is so dominated by political concerns his revolt becomes a political act, whereas any real salvation could only result from an apolitical act. Smith’s fascination with O’Brien is entirely political, for the hope that there is an underground Brotherhood in which O’Brien is a leader seeks a solution merely through another social organization and another form of hatred. He first suspects O’Brien of thoughtcrime when they exchange an evidently naked glance. O’Brien has a “trick of re-
settling his spectacles on his nose which is disarming — in some indefinable way, curiously civilized." (p. 12) At the end of the Two Minutes Hate during which Smith first becomes aware of O'Brien he feels that something hopeful and secret has passed between them:

O'Brien had stood up. He had taken off his spectacles and was in the act of resettling them on his nose with his characteristic gesture. But there was a fraction of a second when their eyes met, and for as long as it took to happen Winston knew — yes, he knew! — that O'Brien was thinking the same thing as himself. (p. 18)

Of course this all turns out to be a ruse, so that after many occasions on which O'Brien disarming resettles his spectacles, or almost smiles and then resettles his spectacles, or resettles his spectacles thoughtfully, it is especially painful when toward the end of Smith's process of again becoming sane in the eyes of the Party O'Brien's spectacles seem "to wear an ironical gleam." (pp. 158, 170, 248, 263)

Orwell’s point is that there is no alternative to Ingsoc in the world of Winston Smith — which, of course, is often like our world. What we know, or are led to believe, about the theories of Emmanuel Goldstein shows them to be no different than those of Trotsky were from Stalin, or Mussolini from Hitler. Indeed, the work Smith reads which is supposed to be written by Goldstein is really by O'Brien himself, and the whole opposition of the Brotherhood may be a figment created by the Party. When Smith is allowed to see the naked eye behind the glinting spectacles it has a look empty of everything but viciousness. This is clearest in the case of Carrington, the evidently sweet old gentleman with the "mild eyes distorted by thick spectacles" who runs the junk shop where Smith finds solace in what he thinks are relics of the suppressed past. (p. 93) When he and Julia are apprehended it is Carrington who orders the Party thugs in their work:

Mr. Carrington was still wearing his old velvet jacket, but his hair, which had been almost white, had turned black. Also he was not wearing his spectacles. He gave Winston a single sharp glance, as though verifying his identity, and then paid no more attention to him. He was still recognizable, but he was not the same person any longer. His body had straightened and he seemed to have grown bigger. His face had undergone only tiny changes that had nevertheless worked a complete transformation. The black eyebrows were less busy, the wrinkles were gone, the whole lines of the face seemed to have altered; even the nose seemed shorter. It was the alert, cold face of a man of about five-and-thirty. It occurred to Winston that for
the first time in his life he was looking with knowledge at a member of the Thought Police. (p. 225)

Smith feels that the reality he needs for his sanity may be found in history. But his own training in the mutation of history leads him to think of the past in terms of the Party slogans. When the old prole in the pub gives him history in the form of reminiscence Smith doesn't understand. The surest form of the past he comes across is the glass paperweight he finds in Carrington's shop:

It was a heavy lump of glass, curved on one side, flat on the other, making almost a hemisphere. There was a peculiar softness, as of rainwater, in both the color and the texture of the glass. At the heart of it, magnified by the curved surface, there was a strange, pink, convoluted object that recalled a rose or a sea anemone. (pp. 94-95)

This description of the paperweight suggests that it represents an inviolable and impossible sexual experience, and the heavy glass which he carries about in his pocket becomes a fetish for Smith. To him it represents a little chunk of history the Party has failed to corrupt, and in it he also sees the vision which leads him to rent the room over Carrington's shop where he and Julia carry on their affair.

The inexhaustibly interesting thing was not the fragment of coral but the interior of the glass itself. There was such a depth of it, and yet it was almost as transparent as air. It was as though the surface of the glass had been the arch of the sky, enclosing a tiny world with its atmosphere complete. He 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 clock and the steel engraving and the paperweight itself. (p. 148)

The heresy in which Winston Smith indulges is to add a sterile but sensory dimension to the psychological form of truth on which the Party doctrine is based. The Party can manipulate truth when the truth is psychological through certain stable laws of cause and effect; through pain it can create a sense of reality. The 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. Their intent, says O'Brien, is that even "procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are at work upon it now." (p. 270) It is such a sensory reality, or truth, in which Smith indulges. But even this is destructible, perhaps even more destructible than the psychological truth. Smith's
sense of the past is stated in sensory terms—the rainwatery surface of the glass paperweight. But the paperweight is a distorting lens so that his sense of the past is as incomplete and as false as his sense of the present. Its form is also brittle, and when he is arrested one of the thugs smashes the paperweight on the hearthstone, and even the false reality is gone.

It is impossible to believe that all of the glass that is seen through but darkly in 1984 is accidental. Orwell's use of brittle, hard, distorting, and reflecting lenses is blunt to the point of being tedious. The device does however convey the darkest aspect of Smith's world, which is his isolation. It also shows the kind of art which Orwell felt he was bringing to political writing. His use of the image of distorting glass is beautifully adapted to comment on the isolation of modern man. Orwell saw that the liberalism of Western society, which was its greatest glory, seemed only to lead through a process of reasoned social progress back to the sin of power. His lament was that the new forms of power were much more corrupt and corrupting than they had ever been in the ancient or medieval worlds. His hope was that this power could be avoided, but as it is illustrated in O'Brien the hope seems naive.

There remains a nagging impression that 1984 is not only an uncomfortable work but also an unsatisfactory one. What Orwell does not adequately do with his symbol is to show that the conditioners, such as O'Brien, have sold their souls in order to be on the other side of the lens so that they can see through it and past the dark opaque surface on the reverse side of the half-blind Winston Smiths. In the most astute review of 1984 Philip Rahv points out that it is the conditioners, not the conditioned, who are the really interesting figures. To anticipate, as O'Brien does, a subject's every thought is a hellish power. O'Brien sees through the world so easily and clearly that he ceases to be human. What we should want to know is how this inhumanity is arrived at and how it is lived with, but Orwell keeps Smith — and the reader — hedged by distorting surfaces.

I have suggested Swift as the source of Orwell's device. He might also have read C. S. Lewis' description of the damnation of the political conditioners in "The Abolition of Man":

The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to "see
through" first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To "see through" all things is the same as not to see.5

Curiously, in 1984, such damnation is astonishingly successful, and the escape from such success (an escape for which Orwell hoped) is not suggested.

FOOTNOTES
3 George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-four (New York, 1949). All page references in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.
4 Philip Rahv, "The Unfuture of Utopia," Partisan Review, XVI (1949), 748.