1984: Literary background

Ever since the fourth century BC, when Plato wrote his *Republic*, authors have been sketching imaginary societies as a way of expressing their ideals of what the world should be like and challenging the assumptions and customs of their own day. The best-know book of this type is *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516) and, because of this, all such imaginary societies are now called utopias. The utopian tradition also includes what have come to be called dystopias, portraits of imaginary societies which are much worse than our own, devised in order to show up unhealthy values and warn against future developments. In the first half of the twentieth century, H.G.Wells, one of Orwell's favourite writers, was the most influential creator both of utopias and dystopias. Orwell had been highly influenced by Wells in his realistic novels and in his thinking (even his pen name "George Orwell" echoes "Herbert George Wells") so it is not surprising that he again followed Wells when he decided to warn readers against totalitarian trends in society through dystopian science fiction. Of all Wells's books, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, a tale set in a centrally controlled state in 2100, is the one with the most influence on 1984, though the figure of O'Brien may also owe something to the sinister title character of a much better book by Wells, the *Island of Doctor Moreau*. However, the chief sources for his book were two works of dystopian science fiction from the years between the two world wars, themselves highly influenced by Wells, *We* by Yegevny Zamyatin and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

*We* was written in Russian around 1920 but, because it was banned by the Soviet government, it did not appear until 1924 and then only in an English translation. However, it remained little-known in Britain .The only copy that Orwell himself could get hold of was a French translation. In 1946 he praised the book's "intuitive grasp of the irrational side of totalitarianism - human sacrifice, cruelty as an end in itself, the worship of a leader who is credited with divine attributes". Zamyatin's story is set some time after the thirtieth century in the "One State", ruled by a terrifying figurehead called the "Benefactor". The people have numbers instead of names, wear identical uniforms, are under constant surveillance by the "Guardians" and have strictly controlled sex lives. The main character keeps a diary which encourages his sense of individuality, falls in love and enters a conspiracy of rebels, but after a brainwashing operation, he betrays his lover and watches her being put to death. Although Orwell was not influenced by Zamyatin's adventurous and original style of writing, which does not seem to have survived the translation, he clearly took many components of his plot from the Russian masterpiece.

*Brave New World*, published in 1932, supplied further ideas and must also have helped clarify Orwell's key themes. He took a special interest in the views of its author, Aldous Huxley, because he had been a pupil of Huxley's when the latter taught at Eton. Huxley satirises trends in the modern world which are eroding the idea of human beings as unique individuals responsible for their own affairs. His twenty-fifth-century World State is regime which deliberately uses modern science to intensify these trends. Society s divided into rigid classes, ruled by an elite of intellectuals who deprive even themselves of knowledge and freedom and who abolish genuine art, scientific research and history. Normal human feelings are replaced by artificial ones. The family is abolished in order to wipe out private emotions. Huxley speculates on the future development of television as a means of social control and on the use of cinema as a purveyor of sick fantasy, contrasted with writing as a potentially more authentic way to explore experience. Language is deliberately altered to redirect thinking, although Orwell elaborates this idea and makes it more central to his book. His Two Minutes Hate is a more aggressive version of Huxley's Solidarity Service. O'Brien, an apparently sympathetic but finally all-powerful manipulator, is a more villainous version of Huxley's Mustapha Mood, the Resident Controller for Western Europe. Less obviously, Winston's sexual frustration and fixation on a woman whose outlook is very different from his own recalls the relationship between John the Savage and Lenina. Orwell had serious reservations about Huxley's dystopia, which he felt was "a brilliant caricature of the present" rather than a likely prediction of the future, but he valued its cynical questioning of what constituted progress and he was willing to adapt some of its features for his own world. *Brave New World* opens with a sentence which, by describing a thirty-four-storey building as "squat", disturbs the readers and makes them feel they are reading about a very strange world. Orwell follows exactly the same path by describing the clock striking thirteen. Despite all the similarities between *1984* and *Brave New World*, the books "feel" very different from each other. One reason is the technique of narration. Huxley gives us a detached, satirical view of his characters by using several points of view and creating situations which prevent us identifying with anyone too closely, whereas Orwell ensures that we see the world almost entirely through Winston's eyes, experiencing the horror of life in *1984* intimately and intensively.