

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Yevgeny Zamyatin

We

My

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Yevgeny Zamyatin's (1884–1937) novel *We* is widely considered a founding work of the modern dystopian novel in European literatures and a forerunner of George Orwell's 1984. Zamyatin completed the manuscript in the early 1920s, and the novel first appeared in 1924 in an English translation under the title *We*. The first complete edition of the original Russian text, *My*, was published in New York in 1952. Although the novel was initially released abroad in English, it nevertheless attracted considerable attention within Russian literary circles during the 1920s (see: Flaker 2018). After a public campaign was mounted against him in 1929, Zamyatin left Russia in 1931 and spent the rest of his life in Paris.

The plot of Zamyatin's novel, as in most utopian and dystopian fiction, unfolds in the distant future. From this vantage point, the narrator D-503, a citizen of the One State, a mathematician and the chief engineer of the spacecraft *Integral*, addresses his readers through a series of notes. These notes are to be carried by the *Integral* on its future journey through space, primarily as an affirmation of the One State and a message to the inhabitants of other planets. In this State, citizens live within a space enclosed by the Green Wall, inhabiting transparent glass rooms and following the rigid schedule of the Table of Hours. Nations, wars, trade, and private property no longer exist. Privacy is permitted only for sexual encounters, stripped of both romance and reproduction, and is obtained by lowering the blinds on the glass walls. While the narrator D-503, who spends his allotted "personal" hours writing notes about his daily life, tries to offer an affirmative picture of the State, he often fails in his assignment. Inconsistencies, doubts, irony, and subtle parody progressively undermine the ideal of the State, and the author becomes fully aware of the impropriety and danger of his own work. Writing is allowed solely in praise of the One State; any literary transgression is punishable by public execution and celebrated in the verse of the surviving poets. After meeting a woman, I-330, D-503 begins to dream and to break the rules, until Election Day – expected to culminate in unanimous affirmation – ends instead in dissent.

While the novel's themes and plot elements provided a foundational model for the dystopian genre, its mode of narration, strategies and formal devices simultaneously renders it a kind of anti-model, shifting critical attention from its frequently discussed themes to the formal qualities of the text itself. The novel's chapters are neither linear nor self-contained; rather, they consist of notes and drafts. They are often fragmentary, associative, and poetic – almost stenographic, filled with pronouns and elliptical syntax. The narrator continually reflects on his own act of writing, collapsing the distance between the narrating self and the narrated self, and frequently comments on interruptions in the writing process, most often caused by the daily schedule. At the same time, he repeatedly addresses the reader directly, anticipating and commenting on the reader's expectations and reactions.

The political dimension of Zamyatin's novel thus unfolds on two interrelated and mutually reinforcing levels. In Zamyatin's work, the critique of totalitarian society goes hand in hand with a critique of all forms of utilitarian art and, ultimately, with a utopian vision of a new literature. Although the book has often been read as a critique of specific political systems in both the West and the East, it is, more fundamentally, a universal indictment of totalitarian society. Moreover, this critique is deeply embedded in the aesthetic principles on which the novel itself is constructed. Zamyatin's criticism of a completely regulated and predictable system of production, social organization, and private life – one in which every individual element is subordinated to collective goals – is realized through narrative strategies that implicitly reject the subordination of literature and art to a Taylorist framework of utility. D-503 gradually becomes aware of the “uselessness” and potentially destructive effects of his manuscript with respect to the collective aim; yet he continues to write, carefully hiding his pages from those around him. Behind his lowered blinds, instead of the scheduled sexual encounter, there unfolds the unpredictable eros of writing.

In *My*, Zamyatin gives literary form to poetic positions he articulated more explicitly elsewhere, particularly in his essays. For example, in the essay “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters” (1923; included in the Croatian edition of the novel used for this review) he argues that “harmful” literature is “more useful than useful literature: because it is anti-entropic, it is a means of combating calcification, sclerosis, crust, moss, quiescence” (Zamyatin 1970: 108–109). For Zamyatin, literature bears social responsibility and fulfills a visionary role; it is a medium in permanent revolution. “A literature that is alive”, he writes, “does not live by yesterday's clock, nor by today's, but by tomorrow's. It is the sailor sent aloft: from the masthead he can see foundering ships, icebergs, and maelstroms still invisible from the deck. He can be dragged down from the mast and put to tending the boilers or working the capstan, but that will not change anything: the mast will remain, and the next man on the masthead will see what the first has seen” (Zamyatin 1970: 109).

References:

Flaker, Aleksandar. 2018. “Zamyatinova distopija”. U: *Jevgenij Zamjatin. Mi*. Zagreb: Naklada Breza: 199–207.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. 1970. “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters”. In: *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*. Edited and translated by Mirra Ginsburg. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press: 107–112.

LANGUAGE: English

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