

# Yevgeny zamyatin essay sample



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We played a fateful role in Yevgeny Zamyatin's life. An epitome of his philosophy, the novel prefigured his own future and that of his country with astonishing accuracy. Zamyatin's credo is best expressed in the words of the heroine of *We*: "There is no final revolution. Revolutions are infinite," and, "I do not want anyone to want for me—I want to want for myself." These two principles—eternal change, and freedom of the individual to choose, to want, to create according to his own need and his own will-dominated both his life and his work. "We shall break down all walls—to let the green wind blow free from end to end—across the earth," says his heroine. Small wonder he was hated and hounded by those who demanded uniformity and total compliance with an outside will—the state's, the Benefactor's, the Party's. A powerful and original writer, and an entirely modern one, Zamyatin is deeply rooted in the traditions of Russian literature. He is a direct descendant of Gogol and Dostoyevsky, the favorites of his childhood. He is also close kin to Leskov, Chekhov, Shchedrin, and his own contemporaries Alexey Remizov and Audrey Bely.

Like Gogol and Dostoyevsky, he is profoundly concerned with central moral problems; like all of them, he is a great master of satire, style, and the grotesque. Zamyatin was born in 1884 in Lebedyan, one of the most colorful towns in the heart of the Russian black-earth belt, some two hundred miles southeast of Moscow—a region of fertile fields, of ancient churches and monasteries, of country fairs, gypsies and swindlers, nuns and innkeepers, buxom Russian beauties, and merchants who made and lost millions overnight. It was also a region that preserved a richly expressive folk speech, which Zamyatin absorbed and later used to magnificent effect in many of his

stories, plays, and novellas. His father, an Orthodox priest, taught religion at the local school. His mother was a talented pianist. A naval engineer by training, Zamyatin early turned to literature. In 1913 he published the novella “ A Provincial Tale,” and in 1914 “ At the World’s End,” satirizing army life in a remote garrison town.

The journal in which the latter appeared was confiscated by the Tsarist authorities, and both the editor and the author were brought to trial for “ maligning the Russian officer corps.” The charges were dismissed, but this was only one of Zamyatin’s lifelong clashes with constituted authority. As a student at the St. Petersburg Polytechnical Institute during the early years of the century, Zamyatin had joined the Bolshevik faction of the Social-Democratic Party. Arrested during the revolution of 1905, he spent some months in solitary confinement and on his release was exiled from St. Petersburg. After a short stay in Lebedyan, he came back to the capital, where he lived “ illegally” (and even continued his schooling) until 1911, when the police finally caught up with him and exiled him a second time. It was during this exile that he wrote “ A Provincial Tale.” In 1913 he was amnestied and permitted to reside in St. Petersburg. On graduation from the Polytechnic Institute, he was invited to serve on its faculty. For some years literature was largely superseded by teaching and engineering work. During World War I, Zamyatin was sent to England to design and supervise the construction of some of the earliest Russian icebreakers.

When the Revolution of 1917 broke out, he could not endure to be away from Russia and hastened back, bringing with him two tales satirizing English life, “ The “Islanders” and “ The Fisher of Men.” In Russia, Zamyatin (no

longer a Bolshevik) threw himself with tremendous energy into the great cultural and artistic upsurge that followed the revolution. This was a period of fantastic contradictions. Russia lay in ruins after years of war, revolution, and continuing civil strife. Her economic life had all but wholly broken down. Transportation, communication, the food supply, the contact between city and village were in total disarray. Yet in the midst of hunger and cold, a band of dedicated spirits took it upon themselves not only to save the country's culture but to present to the hitherto deprived masses the cultural heritage of the entire world. Initiated chiefly by Gorky, the veritable patron saint of Russian literature in those grim days, a number of organizations were formed, both to keep writers, scholars, and artists physically alive and to permit them to continue their work.

In Petersburg, these included the House of the Arts, established in 1920 in the unheated former palace of the great merchant Yeliseyev, where writers were given lodgings in every available room and cubbyhole; the House of Scientists; and a number of publishing houses and literary journals (Zamyatin served on the editorial boards of several of these). Studios were organized where young writers were taught the elements of their craft by such writers, poets, and translators as Zamyatin, Gumilyov, Lozinsky, Chukovsky, and others. Both teachers and students often had to cross the frozen city on foot and sit, in unheated rooms, dressed in old coats, sweaters, mufflers, chilled and hungry but totally absorbed in the brilliant discussions of literature. A variety of schools and movements proliferated in all the arts, some of them continuing with renewed vigor from prewar days, others entirely new.

Endless disputes raged between symbolists, futurists, constructivists, formalists, acmeists, imag-inists, neo-realists, and, of course, the increasingly powerful and vocal groups of proletarian writers and critics who regarded literature as the mere instrument of the revolution and social change. Zamyatin became the leader and teacher of the Serapion Brethren, a group that included some of the most promising and original young writers of the time—Mikhail Zoshchenko, Vsevolod Ivanov, Valentin Katayev, Veniamin Kaverin, Konstantin Fedin, Lev Lunts, Nikolay Tikhonov, Victor Shklov-sky, and others. Differing in temperament, method, and scope, they were united in their insistence on creative freedom, on the artist's right to pursue his own individual vision, on variety, experimentation in form, and the importance of craft. Lev Lunts, one of the most brilliant members of the group, formulated a manifesto in which he proclaimed the complete autonomy of art “ Literary chimeras,” he wrote, “ are a special form of reality.”

He rejected those on both the right and the left who cried, “ If you are not with us, you are against us.” “ With whom are we, the Serapion Brethren?” he asked. “ We are with the hermit Serapion. . . . We reject utilitarianism. We do not write for the sake of propaganda. Art is as real as life itself, and, as life itself, it has no goal or meaning, it exists because it must exist . . . Our one demand is that the writer's voice must never be false.” The Serapions rallied round Zamyatin's credo that “ true literature can exist only where it is created, not by diligent and trustworthy officials, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels, and skeptics,”—a credo he proclaimed in 1921, in his essay “ I Am Afraid.”\* And the need for heresy, the right to say “ no” to

official dogma, the belief that mistakes are more useful than truths, that truths are ideas “ already afflicted with arteriosclerosis” are urged again and again in Zamyatin’s writings. \*This essay, as well as the others quoted here, may be found in *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin* (Chicago University Press, 1970).

In “ Tomorrow” he wrote: “He who has found his ideal today is like Lot’s wife, already turned into a pillar of salt. . . . The world is kept alive only by heretics: the heretic Christ, the heretic Copernicus, the heretic Tolstoy. Our symbol of faith is heresy. . . . We call the Russian intelligentsia to the defense of man, and of human values. We appeal, not to those who reject today in the name of a return to yesterday, not to those who are hopelessly deafened by today; we appeal to those who see the distant tomorrow—and judge today in the name of tomorrow, in the name of man. In 1921, in an essay entitled “ Paradise,” Zamyatin again lashed out scathingly at the purveyors of unanimity, at those who pressed for total conformity: Much has been said by many about the imperfection of the universe ... its astonishing lack of monism: water and fire, mountains and abysses, saints and sinners.

What absolute simplicity, what happiness, unclouded by any thought, there would have been if [God] had from the very first created a single firewater, if he had from the very first spared man the savage state of freedom! . . . We are unquestionably living in a cosmic era—an era of creation of a new heaven and a new earth. And naturally we will not repeat [His] mistake. There shall be no more polyphony or dissonances. There shall be only majestic, monumental, all-encompassing unanimity. In “ The New Russian Prose” (1923) he wrote: Life itself today has lost its plane reality: it is

projected, not along the old fixed points, but along the dynamic coordinates of Einstein, of Revolution. In this new projection, the best-known formulas and objects become displaced, fantastic, familiar-unfamiliar. This is why it is so logical for literature today to be drawn to the fantastic plot, or to an amalgam of reality and fantasy. And in his essay “ On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Matters,” he developed further one of the central ideas of *We*: Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number.

The social revolution is only one of an infinite number of numbers. The law of revolution is not a social law, but an immeasurably greater one. It is a cosmic, universal lawlike the laws of the conservation of energy and of the dissipation of energy (entropy).... In the same essay he wrote: Harmful literature is more useful than useful literature, for it is antientropic, it is a means of combating calcification. ... It is Utopian, absurd. ... It is right 150 years later. And, one of his most significant statements: What we need in literature today are vast philosophic horizons. . . . We need the most ultimate, the most fearsome, the most fearless “ Why?” and “ What next?” In 1926, in “ The Goal,” Zamyatin made a frontal attack on the Communist critics who demanded of the writer total subservience to the demands of the party: The Revolution does not need dogs who “ sit up” in expectation of a handout or because they fear the whip. Nor does it need trainers of such dogs. It needs writers who fear nothing.... It needs writers in whom the Revolution awakens a true organic echo. And it does not matter if this echo is individual... if "a writer ignores such-and-such a paragraph adopted at such-and-such a conference.

What matters is that his work be sincere, that it lead the reader forward . . . that it disturb the reader rather than reassure and lull his mind. . . . But where forward? And how far forward? The farther the better.... Reduction of prices, better sanitation in the cities ... all this is very good. ... I can imagine an excellent newspaper article on these topics (an article that will be forgotten the next day). But I find it difficult to imagine a work by Lev Tolstoy or Romain Rolland based on improvement of sanitation. Inevitably, Zamyatin became one of the prime victims of the purveyors of “ unanimity” and “ sanitary” literature. He was attacked for “ inconsonance with the revolution,” for “ vilification and slander” of revolutionary tenets and “ achievements,” for being “ a cold and hostile observer” and an “ internal emigre” who played into the hands of the enemies of the Soviet regime. (It is scarcely necessary to point here to the long list of independent artists—Akhmatova, Zoshchenko, Pasternak, Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn and others—who have suffered similar treatment at the hands of the dictatorship.)

During the first post-revolutionary decade it was still possible for Zamyatin to publish his works, despite the constant chorus of abuse from the guardians of orthodoxy. His works, naturally, never appeared in the officially sponsored and subsidized magazines. They were usually published in fairly short-lived journals or anthologies issued by writers’ groups, or by the few private journals and publishing houses that were still allowed to exist in those early years. With great courage and integrity, Zamyatin continued to write as he saw and felt—essays, plays, fiction —although the dead hand of the dictatorship was steadily becoming heavier. A striking light on an important



facet of his character is thrown by a passage from an essay “ On the Future of the Theater,” written considerably later and published in French in 1932.

“ The most serious play,” he wrote, “ is the play with fate which carries in its pocket a timetable, drawn up and stamped a long time ago, and marking the day and hour of the tragic end of every one of us.” Unquestionably, he knew what was to come, but went on doing what he felt he must do. The scope and quality of his writing, under the circumstances, are astonishing.

Zamyatin was not only a consummate satirist and stylist, but a master of many themes and many styles. Some of his stories\* are marvelous evocations of the almost mythical old Russia of his childhood. Some read like ballads— the landscape is stark, the people and events tragic or comic on a grand scale. Still others deal with the present, often drawn in a grotesque, oblique, surrealist light, with echoing images and an extraordinary mingling of reality and irreality, mockery and grief. Others are jests, ribald inventions he called “ impious tales.” In addition to his other qualities, Zamyatin had an unexpected streak of irrepressible gaiety and a great sense of fun. \* See *The Dragon: 15 Stories by Yevgeny Zamyatin* (Chicago University Press, 1976).

The same richness and diversity and a keen eye for the comic and grotesque infuse his plays. Many of his characters are marvelous caricatures. Wit, imagination, and, always, most meticulous craftsmanship are combined in much of his work with a profound sense of history and a prophetic vision. This is particularly true of *We*, a searing satire, among other things, on schematic—hence, necessarily, totalitarian—society, written in 1920-1921. *We* was not admitted to publication. Read, as the custom frequently was in those years, at a meeting of the All-Russian Writers’ Union in 1923, it elicited

a new wave of violent attacks from party-line critics and writers. Zamyatin wrote this "remarkably prophetic novel when the totalitarian future was just becoming discernible. Like all great satirists, he projected from present trends and intimations to an encompassing vision of the society to come.

His method, as he defined it in *We*, was *reductio ad finem*—a. method later applied with powerful effect by such master satirists as William Golding (*The Inheritors*, *Lord of the Flies*) and Anthony Burgess (*The Wanting Seed*, *A Clockwork Orange*). Poet, mocker (laughter, he wrote, is the most devastating weapon), heretical fighter for freedom and independence in art and in life, Zamyatin was a consistent enemy of all canonized ideas, all coercion, all the purveyors of " compulsory salvation." He mercilessly attacked and ridiculed the emerging totalitarianism, its fawning mediocrities, its reign of brutality, its violation and destruction of the free and creative human spirit. He foresaw it all: the terror, the betrayals, the dehumanization; the ubiquitous " guardians"; the control of thought and action; the constant brainwashing which resulted either in unquestioning automatons or in hypocrites who lied for the sake of survival; the demand that everybody worship the Benefactor, with his huge hand that literally " liquidates," reduces all who dissent, all who passionately want to be themselves to a puddle of clear water. He also foresaw the subjection of the arts.

His hero boasts: " We have harnessed the once wild element of poetry. Today, poetry is no longer the idle, impudent whistling of a nightingale; poetry is civic service, poetry is useful." And not only must the people (" numbers") in this apocalyptic state of ritualized totalitarianism attend the gala ceremony of extermination of every heretic by the Benefactor, but a

poet is obliged to recite an ode celebrating the wisdom and great justice of the executioner. In its style, too, *We* is a remarkable achievement, for Zamyatin had a perfect ear and perfect taste. “The language of our epoch is sharp and rapid as a code,” he wrote in 1923. In *We*, which is as carefully structured as a poem, the reader will find none of the slow, singing richness of his provincial stories, none of the sly laughter of his “impious tales.” *We*, about the square state and square men, is written in a style of utmost severity and discipline—a style in perfect harmony with the author’s intention, with the totally controlled society he evokes, where emotion is banished (yet survives), where every moment is lived according to schedule in a glass-enclosed city of glass houses and absolute straight lines, where even lovemaking is done on scheduled days and scheduled hours.

But just as Zamyatin was much more than a keen political intellect, so *We*, within the astonishing discipline of its style, is much more than a political statement. It is a complex philosophical novel of endless subtlety and nuance, allusion and reflections. It is also a profoundly moving human tragedy, and a study in the variety of human loves (passion—D-503; domination—I-330; jealousy—U; tenderness, and gentle, total giving of the self—O-90). And, though the people are nameless “numbers,” they are never schematic figures; each is an individual, convincingly and movingly alive. Zamyatin’s main concern in the novel is the problem of man in its multiple aspects: the relation of the individual to society and to other men; the conflict between the tempting safety of unfreedom and the will to free identity; the fear and the lure of alienation; the rift between the rational and the irrational.

We is also a study of a society that claims to be based on the purely rational—and hence becomes deadly, dehumanizing, absurd. “Who are they?” the hero asks after he has seen the gentle, hairy creatures outside the Wall that encloses the One State. “The half we have lost?” The feeling half. The irrational half that lives outside of schedules and straight lines. Yet even in the One State, where nothing spontaneous is permitted, the state that is walled off from everything unstructured and alive, life and humanity assert themselves. The hero—a builder and mathematician who has been thoroughly shaped by his society, who never questions it—has atavistic “hairy hands.” Seduced into violent and irrational passion, he makes a shocking discovery of an unsuspected, long-suppressed realm—the realm within, of individual identity, of self. “Who am I? What am I like?” he cries despairingly. In a “supremely tragicomic scene, he visits a doctor, seeking help against this terrifying malady. The doctor gravely tells him he is seriously ill—he has developed a soul. “Is it dangerous?” he asks. “Incurable,” the doctor replies. But, alas, it turns out to be curable in the end.

The Benefactor’s men have found a remedy for individuality, for rebellion, for humanity: a simple operation to excise the seat of all infection—imagination—and reduce all citizens of the One State to grinning semi-morons. We is more multifaceted, less hopeless than Orwell’s 1984, written more than twenty-five years later and directly influenced by Zamyatin’s novel. Despite its tragic ending, We still carries a note of hope. Despite the rout of the rebellion, “there is still fighting in the western parts of the city.” Many “numbers” have escaped beyond the Wall. Those who died were not destroyed as human beings—they died fighting and unsubmitive. And

though the hero is reduced to an obedient automaton, certain that “Reason” and static order will prevail, though the woman he loved briefly and was forced into betraying dies (as do the poets and rebels she led), the woman who loves him, who is gentle and tender, is safe beyond the Wall. She will bear his child in freedom. And the Wall itself has been proved vulnerable after all.

It has been breached—and surely will be breached again. In *We*, Zamyatin says: This is where we are going. Stop while there is still time. Throughout the poetry and the mockery, there is great warmth— for Russia, for man— and profound grief over the particularly intense ordeals they were to suffer in our century of terror, so uncannily foreseen in the novel, and so proudly faced. For Zamyatin, himself to such an extreme degree a victim of these ordeals, is remarkable in his utter lack of cynicism or bitterness. Anger, mockery, rebellion—but no self-pity and no bitterness. He seems to be saying to all the dogmatists, all who attempt to force life into a rigid mold: You will not, you cannot prevail. Man will not be destroyed. Zamyatin called *We* “ my most jesting and most serious work.” And, though it speaks on many levels and of many things, its political message is unmistakable.

It is a warning, and a challenge, and a call to action. It is perhaps the fullest statement of Zamyatin’s intellectual philosophy and emotional concerns. Significantly enough, the hounding of Zamyatin rose to fever pitch in the late 1920s, when the present had become too uncomfortably like the prophecy, when the Benefactor and his Machine had become too recognizable as living, immediate realities. In 1929 full power in the literary field was placed in the hands of the RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) which

became the instrument for the extirpation of all that was still independent in Russian literature. By campaigns of vilification, by pressure on journals and publishers, by calls for police methods, it sought to bend everyone to the requisite line—service to the party. The RAPP plunged into the role of executioner with gusto, and the results were quickly apparent. Many journals and publishing houses were closed. There was a wave of suicides among writers and poets. Recantations became epidemic.

Endless nonparty writers, their spirits broken, publicly repented of their sins and came into the fold, repudiating and rewriting thenown works. A particularly vicious campaign was launched against Zamyatin and Pilnyak. The latter was pilloried for the publication abroad of his novel *Mahogany*. *We*, which had been written almost ten years earlier and never published in the Soviet Union, was used as the immediate pretext for Zamyatin's destruction. While its first translation into English (in 1924) and Czech (in 1927) had not provoked any noticeable response by Soviet authorities, its publication in 1927 in *Volya Rossii*, a Russian emigre journal published in Czechoslovakia, without the author's knowledge or consent, was used, two years later, as a convenient excuse for bringing the full weight of official pressure upon its author. The matter was "discussed at a meeting of the Writers' Union in the summer of 1929, when Zamyatin was away on a summer journey. One after another, his frightened and subservient colleagues rose to denounce him. Zamyatin replied with an indignant and courageous letter, resigning from the Union. " I find it impossible," he wrote, " to belong to a literary organization which ... takes part in the persecution of

a fellow member.” Pilnyak was unable to withstand the pressure and recanted.

Zamyatin’s former pupils and admirers— Ivanov, Katayev, Kaverin—sacrificed their talents to become hacks, manufacturing whatever was required in the shape and style demanded. Those with stronger backbones, like Isaac Babel, turned silent And only isolated giants like Zamyatin and Bulgakov refused to submit Denied access to publication, their plays withdrawn from the stage despite enormous popular success, and their books withdrawn from stores and libraries, they wrote to Stalin requesting permission to leave Russia. Both spoke of the ban on their work as a literary death sentence. Thanks to Gorky’s intercession with Stalin, Zamyatin’s request was, surprisingly, granted. He left Russia in 1931 and settled in Paris. His last years were a time of great loneliness and privation. He died of heart disease in 1937, his funeral attended by a mere handful of friends, for he had not accepted the emigre community as his own. To the end he regarded himself as a Soviet writer, waiting merely, as he had written in his letter to Stalin, until “ it becomes possible in our country to serve great ideas without cringing before little men,” until “ there is at least a partial change in the prevailing view concerning the role of the literary artist.”

He was never to see that day. His death went unmentioned in the Soviet press. Like the rebellious poet of We, and like so many of the greatest Russian poets and writers of the twentieth century, he was literally “ liquidated”—reduced to nonbeing. His name was deleted from literary histories, and for decades he has been unknown in his homeland. And yet, he lives. As his fellow victim Bulgakov said, “ manuscripts don’t burn.” He

has been revived in the Western world. We has been translated into more than ten languages. Many of his stories, essays, and plays have been published abroad in Russian, and also in English translation. Even in Soviet Russia his name is beginning in recent years to crop up (timidly) in occasional memoirs, in occasional obscure essays on science fiction and Utopian literature. It has even been restored to literary encyclopedias—of course, with the inevitable negative comment.

And although his writings are still unavailable in Soviet Russia, they have undoubtedly reached some readers, writers, and scholars in underground ways, for his influence is clear in the thinking of dissidents of the sixties and seventies. (Their fate, alas, is still much like Zamyatin's. Some are silent, others forced into exile.) Like all major works of art, We lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations. Numerous essays and analyses have been written on Zamyatin,\* and on We, approaching it from various points of view and within various frameworks: as a study of modern man alienated from his natural self; as a Freudian charade; as myth presenting man's dilemma in terms of archetypes and dream figures; as a religious parable with strong Dostoyevskian influences; as one of the most significant modern anti-Utopias, and so on. We is all these, and more. It is one of the great tragic novels of our time. \* A fine biographical and critical study by Alex M. Shane appeared in the United States in 1968—The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamjatin (Berkeley, 1968) containing among other things, an excellent bibliography.

But let the book speak for itself. The discerning reader will find in it far more than can be suggested in an introduction. MIRRA GINSBURG



## Acknowledgments

We was first published in Russian in book form in 1952 by the Chekhov Publishing House in New York. I wish to express my gratitude to the National Board of Young Men's Christian Associations, present owner of legal rights to books published by the Chekhov Publishing House, for permission to translate We into English. Thanks are also due to the University of Chicago Press for permission to quote from A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin, published in 1970.

AUTHOR YEVGENY ZAMYATIN was born in Russia in 1884. Arrested during the abortive 1905 revolution, he was exiled twice from St. Petersburg, then given amnesty in 1913, by which time he was turning to a literary career. WE, composed in 1920 and 1921, was denied publication in Russia and, when read at a meeting of the Writers' Union in 1923, elicited attacks from party-line critics and writers. Nevertheless, throughout the 1920s, Zamyatin, outspoken and courageous as always, published his essays, plays and tales. In 1929, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers launched an all-out attack against him. Denied the right to publish his work, he requested permission to leave Russia, which, surprisingly, Stalin granted in 1931. Zamyatin went to Paris, where he died in 1937. MIRRA GINSBURG is a distinguished translator of Russian and Yiddish works by such well-known authors as Mikhail Bulgakov, Isaac Babel, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Editor and translator of three anthologies of Soviet science fiction, she has also edited and translated A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin, and History of Soviet Literature by Vera Alexandrova.