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Seize the Means of Reproduction! Gender Wars in Zamyatin's We

Alexandra Gage Michaud
Bard College

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SEIZE THE MEANS OF REPRODUCTION!
Gender Wars in Zamyatin's *We*

Senior Project submitted to
the Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Alexandra Michaud

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2018

I am grateful beyond measure to the brilliant and formidable Olga Voronina, whose time and expertise has made this project possible. I extend my gratitude also to Jonathan Brent, Marina Kostalevsky, and Oleg Minin, for their combined efforts to initiate me into the bizarre and beautiful world of Russian letters.

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Introduction

Love is a Battlefield: Zamyatin's "New Heroines"

1. Girls to the Front

Zamyatin began to write his novel *We* in 1918, a year notorious for its violent impact on the new Bolshevik reality. The Civil War was blazing in many-colored fury, thousands of lives were claimed by Red Terror, and the new constitution established the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat." But yet another battle was underway for the spirit of the age—a war waged by women. In her 1918 essay, "Love and the New Morality," Alexandra Kollontai, who was then the People's Commissar for Social Welfare, exhorted Soviet society to end the domestic, social, and sexual subordination of women:

We must throw open before woman the doors to multifarious life, we must harden her heart, we must galvanize her will. It is time to teach the woman to take love not as the foundation of life, but rather as a platform, as an opportunity to reveal her true Self. Allow her, like a man, to emerge from the sexual crisis not with broken wings, but with a hardened soul. [...] Already the dawn glimmers, already the new women are appearing, the so-called "odd women" (Kollontai 1918a).

For Kollontai, the new women were not "nice" girls dreaming of marriage. Nor were they lascivious libertines. "No," Kollontai declared, hers "is a wholly new type of heroine, hitherto unknown, heroines with independent demands on life, heroines who assert their personality, heroines who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the State, the family, society,

who fight for their rights as representatives of their sex” who have “ceased to play this subordinate role and to be no more than the reflex of the man” (Kollontai 1918b).

Such are the women of Zamyatin’s *We*—or, rather, the women Zamyatin portrays in his novel to question the rhetoric of the fiery Kollontai and her comrades-in-arms, Inessa Armand, Zlata Lilina, and other proponents of women’s liberation from sexual servitude. As the novel progresses, their struggle for liberation is not fully realized, and some of them do not escape with their wings unbroken. However, it is the women rebels and lovers who leave an indelible mark on Zamyatin’s vision of the future and on his protagonist D-503, a man who is blithely servile to the thirtieth-century technocratic totalitarian regime. The goal of this project is to demonstrate that Zamyatin addresses the problem of dogmatized radicalism, central to his own experience of and eventual escape from the early Soviet state, in terms of the interplay between gendered forces—between women who claim political and sexual agency and men who surrender it. The outstanding feature of the One State that I wish to emphasize is the connection between its authoritarianism and its masculinity as a collective being. One of the key ideas this project explores is that Zamyatin’s men who inhabit the State willingly defer to its virility, while women air their grievances and demand justice.

Though most critics center their interpretations of Zamyatin’s anti-utopian novel around D-503’s “awakening,” I intend, rather, to expose this male figure not as an burgeoning freethinker, but merely as part of the parent state: a collective body that provides its inhabitants with everything they may need, including thoughts, purpose, even sexual orientation. Rather than interpreting the novel as a story of the re-emergence of consciousness in an oppressed man, I choose to examine its main conflict as a dialogic struggle between the male collective psyche

and individualized, subversive female perceptions of reality. Susan Layton interprets *We* as the story of “a ‘catastrophe of liberation,’ as he [D-503] becomes alienated from his role as technician and turns inward in order to define individual being” (Layton 1978, 8). My interpretation is concerned, rather, with the “catastrophe of liberation” of women who choose to end their alienation by turning to the State in order to assert their individual being.

I begin my project with an analysis of the dystopian collective as a sexually active entity. I parse the goals, motivations, and tactics of the One State by relating its features and activities to political and literary trends that Zamyatin contemplated as he was writing the novel (eugenics, Freudism, Kollontai and Armand’s “Free Love,” and Bolshevik reproductive policy). I also argue that as a collective sexual entity, the One State is strikingly aggressive, preparing to colonize the universe and disseminate its ideology there, as though forcibly impregnating the final frontier. And yet, the State is impotent, for its colonization program fails within the limits of Zamyatin’s narrative.

I then turn to the forces of opposition in *We* by devoting my attention to the protagonist D-503’s two female companions, I-330 and O-90. I propose that these two figures represent different facets of femininity that, in Zamyatin’s world, both make liberation from male tyranny possible. By examining resistance mechanisms employed and emblemized by the novel’s heroines and comparing these women to other female rebels in world literature and mythology, from Russian folklore to Victorian popular fiction, I set out to uncover the ethical and philosophical implications of female dissidence in the novel. In my opinion, Zamyatin’s representation of gender and his embedded critique of the politicization of sexuality are the work’s most significant features.

2. The Battleground

Zamyatin finished *We* in 1921. By that time, the Bolshevik utopia he had once worked tirelessly to usher into existence became a nightmarish reality of War Communism and its attendant starvation, epidemics, and blatant violation of human rights. The writer was horrified to see his revolutionary dreams realized as brutal violence, deprivation, and rigid dogma. A younger Zamyatin thought of his courtship with Bolshevism as “following the line of greatest resistance” (Zamyatin 1929, 10). He joined the Party in the early 1900s and, by 1905, had avidly participated in demonstrations and mass meetings, supported strikes, and wrote and distributed socialist propaganda. For these activities Zamyatin was imprisoned for six months in Saint Petersburg and then exiled twice, in 1906, to his hometown Lebedyan, and again in 1911, to Lakhta. In 1906, the incorrigible dreamer Zamyatin was still “in love with the Revolution” as with a “fiery-eyed mistress” who was “not yet a lawful wife who jealously guarded her legal monopoly on love” (quoted in Shane 1968, 19). By the time of his second exile, however, he had already formally withdrawn from the Bolshevik Party, begun designing warships for the Russian government, and chosen literature for a new paramour. Instead of breaking up with the Revolution, though, he ended up fully and tumultuously wedded to it. When the author returned to Petersburg in 1917 from an eighteen-month spell in England as a naval engineer, he knew that the inevitable—the February Revolution of 1917—had already happened. “This is the same as never having been in love and waking up one morning already married for ten years or so,” he wrote (Zamyatin 1922a, 4).

Zamyatin, who frequently expressed his political and professional conflicts as choices between wives and lovers, tended to pursue the latter. Just as his life and work reflect a consistent preference for the experimental and taboo over the conventional, his predilection for literature prevailed over that for politics. A cosmopolitan and self-described heretic, he hated anything he perceived as banal. Though he left the Party long before 1917, he welcomed the Revolution as an invigorating adventure for Russia—but only until it happened. For Zamyatin, “revolution” was less about specific politics than it was about a principle of preference for the new. It was for him a Heroclitian abstract and lyrical idea that he pictured as pure energy, “red, fiery, deadly; but this death means the birth of a new life, a new star” (Zamyatin 1923; 107). Its opposite was “entropy,” or what follows when the newborn star’s “flaming, seething sphere” cools, and “the fiery magma becomes coated with dogma—a rigid, ossified, motionless crust” (*ibid*, 108). The revolutionary’s task is to “explode” this crust with “a new heresy” (*ibid*). In other words, Zamyatin saw everything in terms of this tension between motion and stasis. He was no believer in universal truth beyond his own energy-entropy maxim, derived from Hegel’s dialectic of history. Following the Hegelian model of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, Zamyatin described his era thus: “We have lived through the epoch of suppression of the masses; we are living in the age of the suppression of the individual in the name of the masses; tomorrow will bring the liberation of the individual—in the name of man” (Zamyatin, 1922c; 52). His self-image was that of a heretic born to explode the dogmatic crust that formed with the advent of the “Victorious Bolshevik Revolution.”

Zamyatin’s *We* is often interpreted as a critique of the emerging totalitarian tendencies of the Bolshevik regime and as a cautionary tale of technocracy that satirizes ecstatic utopian

literature, revealed through the reemergence of consciousness in an individual who has been subsumed by the collective. Critics generally argue that D-503's awakening comes about from the act of writing, or sex, or both, is facilitated by the dissident I-330, and leads to the primary conflict between D-503's own inner voice and the all-penetrating voice of the hivemind. Though I agree with Christopher Collins's argument that *We* is not an exclusively "anti-Soviet" work, but is concerned more generally with "conformism" as a sign of the "victory of Entropy," I also believe that Collins misreads the sexual dynamics of the novel (Collins 1966, 359). He identifies "sexual passion" as the catalyst of "self-awareness" for D-503, who, as he "becomes more aware of self [...] loses his feeling of being a part of a greater unity" and revolts (*ibid*, 357). I do not ascribe such importance to D-503's "sense of self," because I consider the impulse at the root of his revolt to be not his own, but I-330's. Julia Vaingurt proposes that writing "draws D's attention to his body, the locus of his differentiation and the seat of his sexual desires," thus leading him to dissidence (Vaingurt, 117). Robert Russell observes "the growth in D-503 of a richly original poetic vein, which, when released under the influence of love, aligns him with the revolutionaries" (Russell, 41). These analyses, while well-reasoned, are incomplete, because they overestimate the role of Zamyatin's protagonist in the novel. D-503 does not rebel, he merely swaps allegiances. This is why I find Andrew Barratt's interpretation of D-503's arc in *We* more perceptive than others. Barratt notices that the "external marks of D-503's transformation from loyal subject of the One State into Mephi revolutionary are impressive, yet they remain, in the final reckoning, external marks only" (Barratt, 348). Accordingly, D's inner voice is always equivocal. The real conflict in *We* is between the One State and a few women. D-503's mind is merely a part of the novel's setting.

Zamyatin introduces the first belligerent of the gender war at the center of *We* when he establishes the Benefactor and the *Integral* as inseparable, defining entities of the One State. The agonizingly authoritarian and hyper-masculine dictator's favorite toy is the unmistakably phallic interplanetary rocket destined to subjugate the universe. Zamyatin divides the civil war factions according to a gender binary, and the clashes are replicated in D-503's embattled mindscape as conflicts of loyalty to the Benefactor's regime and to his female acquaintances who seek liberation. Zamyatin depicts major battles in D-503's mind as engagements in sexual intercourse. If we take this approach to reading *We*, the significance of Zamyatin's female characters changes dramatically from previous interpretations.

3. Tactics

To understand the function of the erotic in the novel as a means of power exchange, it is important to remember that, while Zamyatin certainly targets the Bolsheviks in his novel, his themes are universal—none more than the mirage of sexual freedom. Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* proposes that sexuality is not “repressed” in the West, but “administered.” He attributes this phenomenon to the advent of population metrics in the eighteenth century and the desire of states to manipulate their birthrates—which necessitated taking “sex ‘into account’” as something to be “managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all” (Foucault 1978, 24). To this end, he argues, states organize sexual practice by criminalizing certain behaviors, as well as inventing “perversions,” or taboos, in order to police the individual both directly, by law, and indirectly, by manipulating the social atmosphere. This multi-level construction of sexual culture forms an important element of what Foucault terms “biopower,”

the active presence of the state in all aspects of the individual's life. A private or public body "controls" sex by placing it in "a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden," because "where sex and pleasure are concerned, power can 'do' nothing but say no to them," which manifests as "rejection, exclusion, refusal, blockage, concealment, or mask" (*ibid*, 83). A state becomes "biopolitical" when it constructs a prohibitive "machinery" to exert biopower, the success of which is "proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (*ibid*, 86).

Foucault's paradigm is based on European models but applies to the Soviet Union as well. Kollontai and Armand's call for a new Bolshevik sexual morality that would free women to join the workforce is an example of biopolitical machination: the private life of individuals becomes material for public discourse, and thus a domain for political activity. The promise of an end to repression masks the implementation of a new system of permissions and constraints: the "odd woman," formerly suppressed, becomes visible, while the "bourgeois" housewife is rejected. Essentially, one taboo replaces another. In *We*, the "machinery" of biopower is clearly visible—as are the "multiplicity of points of resistance" to it. "Power," as distinct from "biopower," does not, however, necessarily issue from a single point over a vast domain, but also circulates among individuals as "a multiplicity of [...] unbalanced, heterogeneous, unstable, and tense force relations" (*ibid*, 93). In the One State, as in reality, because "there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations" there is likewise "no single locus of a great Refusal [...] instead, there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case" (*ibid*, 95).

In *We*, there is indeed a "plurality of resistances," and they appear in the form of women living in a society whose male chauvinism is central to its tyrannical ideology and praxis. The

novel is set in the thirtieth century, but the One State adheres to an ancient, almost mystical sexism, the roots of which, as we will see in Chapter 1, lie in the fifth century BCE—Pythagoras’ cult of masculinity. According to the mathematician-philosopher, “There is a good principle, which has created order, light, and man; and a bad principle, which has created chaos, darkness, and woman” (quoted in Beauvoir 1953, 104). It is the fruitless task of the One State to bring to order the forces of “chaos, darkness, and woman.”

4. Munitions

“Biopower,” to use Foucault’s word, became a standard element of Russian science fiction at the turn of the century as a means of achieving utopian light and order. The emergence at the *fin de siècle* of the monistic, interdisciplinary scientific-philosophical theory of psychophysiology, positing a continuity of mind and body as aspects of being that exercise mutual influence, influenced thinkers like Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the Russian visionary who became the founding father of Soviet astronautics. He advocated “colonizing the cosmos” as a means of perfecting human psychophysiology by bringing the “human body into contact with the great body of the universe,” thereby reviving the “originary ‘monistic unity’” of all being. Tsiolkovsky thought of the cosmos as “a giant being, a sort of pantheistic animus,” an “incarnate universe,” rather than a passive, inanimate space. In his fiction and in his treatises, “technological superiority” and emancipation from the earth were prerequisite for this undertaking. Banerjee describes Tsiolkovsky’s future man as cyborglike: machinery becomes, instead of an instrument, “an organic extension” of the body that facilitates cosmic conquest (Banerjee 2012, 137). As if responding to Tsiolkovsky’s vision, Zamyatin satirizes this fantasy

and interrogates its ethics in his novel. In *We*, the final stage of human evolution is also colonization of the cosmos, with the use of a futuristic rocket, by men who have distanced themselves from the organic world through machinery, of a universe pictured as a vast, nubile maiden. Thus, like Tsiolkovsky, Zamyatin engages with psychophysiological principles in his novel. That said, he sees in the mechanization of the human body not so much the potential for apotheosis, but an effacement of humanity that leads inevitably to abuse. The “perfection” of the body is, for Zamyatin the individualist, already a detestable, tyrannical action.

Another target of *We* is Alexander Bogdanov’s socialist utopian novel *Red Star* (1908). In Bogdanov’s vision of Martian communism, the individual body is manipulated by the state in an explicitly sexual way. The earthling visitor Leonid cannot differentiate between the sexes in the Martian socialist state, assuming everyone he encounters to be male. Bogdanov presents the integration of gender in *Red Star* as evidence of social advancement and equality, but it eventually becomes clear that Martian society is not post-gender. Because Martian medicine has discovered that “immense intellectual activity” requires “a maximum of physical restraint and thus a minimum of lovemaking,” it falls to the engineer Menni’s wife to remove herself as a temptation (Bogdanov 1908, 101). She is driven nearly to suicide by heartbreak, but eventually gains “enough control of herself to play the part of the cheerful boy poet” (*ibid*). Thus the effacement of femininity in *Red Star* becomes the means of curbing sexual excess that might damage the planet’s foremost mind and “complicate” the smooth functioning of society, which depends on masculine discipline. The influence of Bogdanov’s Martian “Bolshevik utopia” on *We* is unmistakable, and, as Collins points out, is itself part of a legacy of utopian writing reaching back to Plato’s *Republic*. He writes that “[H.G.] Wells and Zamyatin in [*We*] follow

Plato in viewing unity and harmony as man's greatest need, in his own body and soul as well as in the social body and soul,” and that, consequently, “complexity is to be avoided, as it arouses passion and leads to confusion, both enemies of harmony and reason” (Collins 357). In Zamyatin’s *One State*, the pairing of sexual partners is regulated by the government, while children have become national property, recalling Plato’s proposition that “that the wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent”¹ (Plato 2004, 457). The sexual austerity in Zamyatin’s *One State* is its most important mechanism for enforcing this “unity and harmony,” which, like Bogdanov’s *Mars*, cannot withstand confusing interference from women.

Zamyatin’s novel is anti-utopian in content but also in form. He wrote dismissively of the utopian genre that these works have “two generic and invariable features [...] the authors of utopias paint what they consider to be ideal societies” that are “always static” and “always descriptive,” with “no, or almost no, plot dynamics” (Zamyatin 1992b, 286). It is no wonder, then, that Zamyatin admired H. G. Wells for creating indulgent visions of fantastic worlds that generally avoided these problems. Though he rejected Wells’s world of “machines, machines, machines, airplanes,” “armies of workers,” and “odors of chemical reactions,” Zamyatin followed his example of injecting the science-fiction novel with adventure and “an atmosphere of the miraculous” (*ibid*, 260, 261). To this end, Zamyatin draws upon the Victorian “quest romance” model for the development of his novel’s plot as a man’s journey into parts unknown,

¹ During the years of Revolution, this neo-Platonic dissolution of the family was hotly debated in the Party. The Bolshevik Zlata Lilina, addressing a pedagogical conference in 1918, declared, “We must exempt children from the pernicious influence of the family. [...] we must nationalize them. From the first days of their lives they will be under the beneficial influence of communistic kindergartens and schools [...] Here they will grow as real communists. Our practical problem is to compel mothers to hand over their children to the Soviet government” (quoted in Clawson 1973, 687).

away from the civilized world of rational men, where the mysterious object of desire is savage and feminine. Rider Haggard's *She* makes a mark on *We*, as does the work of Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, and Conan Doyle.

Zamyatin invokes mythology from a vast range of traditions to intensify the “miraculous” in *We*. The novel's powerful female characters are the heiresses to Eve and Mary, but also to Medusa and Danae, and to vampires and heretics. The Judeo-Christian elements of *We* form the basis for much critical work on Zamyatin, such as Richard Gregg's discussion of the “seductive charms of Eve and her first fatal bite” that are reflected in “the recurrent images of I-330's sharp teeth and ‘bite-smile,’” and the parallels between D-503's story and the fall of Adam (Gregg 1965, 683). Because my interpretation is concerned more with the relationship between male dominion and female dissidence than the function of women as aids to the protagonist's self-discovery, the archetype of Eve does not feature as prominently in my analysis. I consider instead the novel's references to female figures who play a less accessory role, who are goddesses, warriors, and monsters in their own right.

5. Belligerents

The project begins with my examination of the One State's ideology and praxis. I identify it as a biopolitical entity that emulates eusocial colony behavior, employing Marxist psychoanalysis and a warped Bolshevik sexual morality to achieve this condition. I connect the supremacy of rationalism in the State to the ancient cult of Pythagoras, in which masculinity and mathematics are unified into a ruling principle. I then interpret the State as a single male body that seeks to conquer and destroy other, female bodies, identifying this as a trope Zamyatin

borrowed from Victorian adventure novels. Connecting *fin de siècle* associations with femininity to the implications of geometrical forms that masculine and feminine forces take in the novel, I propose that this dialogic novel's conflict is one between male entropy and female energy.

I then turn to the novel's points of resistance, beginning with I-330, the One State's harbinger of chaos. I interpret her androgyny as a mask that the protagonist D-503 constructs subconsciously to defang her sexuality in order to shield his own fragile psyche from her influence. I argue that Zamyatin illustrates the brainwashed D-503's mistrust by alluding to the poetry of Mayakovsky, an example of an invaluable talent that, for the novelist, is soured somewhat by its utility as propaganda. I then analyze I-330's revolutionary ethics in terms of Zamyatin's own "Scythian" doctrine. I compare I-330's androgyny to that of literary and mythological androgynes whose sexuality is grotesque to the male beholder in order to demonstrate that she embodies the fear of female deployment of sexuality. As such, I conclude that, though I-330 is a somewhat ambiguous figure in the novel, she is ultimately a force for good, connecting her iconoclastic heresy to the ancient Slavic myth of benevolent vampires.

The final chapter of my project concerns the novel's other major female character, O-90. I interpret her intractable femininity as the cause of her especial alienation from society, where she is denied even her reproductive function. I see this situation as Zamyatin's response to extreme propositions that emerged in Bolshevik biopolitics at the time he wrote his novel, particularly the regime's flirtation with eugenics and with its early attempts to reconfigure sexual morality. Zamyatin's exaggerated application of these trends to the One State becomes the impetus for her revolt against the regime. The Victorian pathologization and objectification of disobedient women, in my view, can be linked to the disproportionate suppression of female

sexuality in Zamyatin's novel. Finally, I compare the crucial role of her maternal self-concept to that of mother-goddesses from a variety of traditions to posit O-90 as a "real heroine" in *We*.

Chapter 1

We are Iron Man: Masculinity and the Biopolitical Machine

1.1. Sexual Revolution from Above

In the history of Russian literature, Zamyatin's *One State* stands out as an early critique of totalitarianism. He depicts his state as a single collective entity that has come to exist as a result of the government's manipulation and oppression of its population. In this chapter, I attempt to trace the influence of the author's political environment on the features of this fictional social body. While the targets of Zamyatin's gloomy satire are many and varied, I stress here the impact of the implications of early Bolshevik interest in population manipulation and the influence of Marxist-Freudian psychoanalysis on early Soviet culture and politics. I argue that Zamyatin's sensitivity to the state's attempt to rationalize the personal, including sexual, affairs of the individual led him to picture the result of such interference as a society mechanized to the point of malfunction and on the verge of collapse.² Zamyatin, himself well-versed in the principles of psychoanalysis,³ seems to find the creative potential of sexuality to be so deeply definitive of human nature that his sterile dystopian society appears to be inert and lifeless, its development stunted by the State's organized suppression of eros.

My analysis of thematic and structural devices in *We* will demonstrate that the *One State* can be read as Zamyatin's response to the massive upheavals of his political landscape following

² For further analysis of the significance of technology in *We*, see Layton 1978, McCarthy 1984, and Barratt 1984.

³ For discussion of the role of the subconscious in his work, see Zamyatin 1930 and 1920.

the Bolshevik revolution. The State attempts to establish a harmonious society resembling a eusocial colony, like that of bees and ants, which, as described by E. O. Wilson, divide labor in a truly “altruistic manner,” meaning that “some take labor roles that shorten their life spans” and “sacrifice” their reproductive potential for the benefit of the rest of the colony (Wilson 2012, 105). Such “altruism” requires the selflessness of an automaton. Zamyatin presents the abuses committed by the One State against its people to mold them into such creatures as, above all, sexual. State rhetoric equates the machine, the worker-automaton, and the male mind with the principle of disciplined logic, while emotion and imagination are attributed to female imperfection. Yet, in Zamyatin’s world, female vice soldiers on.

The One State is a fully collectivist society, organized according to a principle of “mathematically infallible,” strictly enforced “happiness” (1). This happiness depends on total conformity of the population, which has been achieved through the abolition of liberty in the service of efficiency. The One State moderates its inhabitants’ behavior by meticulously scheduling nearly every moment of their lives, thus allowing them almost no freedom of action or expression. As Patrick McCarthy points out, this mechanization of society is a reaction to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “scientific management” system, a method of training workers to behave like machines to advance the “priorities of efficiency and standardization [...] and his interest in ‘a control so extensive and intensive as to provide for the maintenance of all standards’” (McCarthy 1984, 124). Richard Stites identifies “Taylorism” as a major source of controversy during the Revolution, noting that “labor movements everywhere opposed Taylorism as exploitative, and yet it attracted a large segment of leftist intellectuals” who lauded the “organization, power, and discipline more than the socialism, equality, and justice” of

Taylor's system (Stites 1989, 146). Stites interprets *We* as “an anguished outcry” against the excesses of Soviet Taylorites (*ibid*, 147). In Zamyatin's world, Taylorism is but one aspect of a grander scheme to dehumanize its population. The most celebrated achievement of the authoritarian regime is the supposed eradication of hunger and of love, with the intent of eradicating any individualism that might interfere with the society's harmonious and efficient conformity. Hunger has been abolished with the advent of an apparently unlimited petroleum-based food product, fitting for machine-men. However, according to D-503, “love” is both more important and more problematic.

The One State views sexuality, as Foucault claims of Western societies, not as “the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality” (Foucault 1978, 103). The State attempts to regulate love and its consummation with the “*Lex Sexualis*”—a law prescribing “sexual days” on which any inhabitant may exploit any other “as a sexual commodity” (21). The nationalization of sex is the linchpin of the State's biopolitical program to alter the very nature of humankind. The State formulates its permissions and proscriptions to provide its citizens with a sexual ethic that views intercourse as merely a “pleasant and useful function of the organism [...] like sleep, physical labor, the consumption of food, defecation, and so on” (22). It de-eroticizes sex by enforcing a conjugal custom that is measured, routine, and monotonous, and thereby turns lovemaking into a civic duty that is regulated no differently from other bodily functions: eating petroleum with “fifty prescribed chewing movements for each bite” to the rhythm of a metronome, and obediently sleeping at night, “just as it is their duty to work during the day” (102, 58). By enforcing at these habits of extreme rationality and calculation, the State has transformed its citizens into “numbers;”

consequently, it refers to its inhabitants exclusively as such.

Zamyatin conceives the One State in part as a reaction to troubling ideas about the transformation of society adopted by the nascent Bolshevik government. Trotsky in particular promoted the potential of psychological methods to correct what “political and economic structural changes” might “[fail] to achieve” for the fundamental alteration of human life (Etkind 1997, 184). The Bolsheviks believed they could improve on Nietzsche’s “irrational dreams” of the possibility of a new, more powerful and perfect species of man, driven by a desire to improve humanity. However, this vision by the time of the Revolution had fallen out of fashion among the communists, and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* was reimagined as the Soviet “new man,” who would emerge in public conversation as a concrete role model—an imminently realizable, rational dream. Trotsky thought that this dream could be achieved through a program of “Freudism,” or psychoanalysis through a Marxist lens: a materialist dialectic of the individual mind. Freud’s self-consciously clinical vernacular and his concept of a tripartite mind easily lent itself to Bolshevik “extreme expressions of rationalism,” and offered a “scientifically based promise of the real, not the hypothetical, alteration of man, achieved through the reformation of his consciousness,” which could theoretically be deployed on an industrial scale (*ibid*, 185). Thus, Trotsky pictured a new Soviet man as an individual programmed to order by a bureau of Marxist-Leninist psychoanalysts. Richard Pipes suggests that this desire to transform humanity was due less to a utopian vision of the future than to a fundamental political dilemma for the Bolsheviks, that they “acted in the name of the workers but without their mandate” (Pipes, 106). Among other advantages, “Freudism” would offer the new regime a way to create this mandate.

The Bolsheviks considered other ways of curbing individual desires, often without regard

to the potential harm of manipulating psychic responses. A concurrent and closely related trend was the advent of public discourse on the question of a new official sexual morality. If Freudism was to facilitate the invention of the Soviet man, his eros needed somehow to be regulated. The early twentieth century saw Kollontai and Armand offer “free love,” commonly misunderstood as the nationalization of sex, as a radical alternative to the patriarchal family unit, while Aron Zalkind would contend that “a class has the right to interfere in the sex life of its members for the sake of revolutionary expediency” (Etkind 1997, 186). Pyotr Blonsky, a foremost developmental psychologist in the early Soviet Union, went so far as to insist that, “along with botany and animal husbandry, there should be an analogous science, human husbandry,” to produce a population to be psychoanalytically engineered into living automatons, or what Bukharin would later call “qualified, specially schooled, machines that we can start up right away and set into motion” (quoted in Etkind 1997, 265).

Zamyatin responds to these ideas by making it clear that in the One State, the transformation of man has gone terribly wrong and human beings have become almost unrecognizable, “a million-handed body” with “rows of nobly spherical, smooth-shaven heads” (12, 15).⁴ His narrator, D-503, credits the State’s draconian reproductive policy for the physical and mental unity the society has achieved. Sexual practice is essentially “human husbandry” under the *Lex Sexualis*, which in addition to scheduling sexual activity for each inhabitant, establishes “Maternal and Paternal Norms” to exclude those considered unfit to reproduce from the gene pool (14). As a result, the numbers have become nearly homogeneous, though D-503 and his comrades, who worship conformity, eagerly anticipate the day when “even the noses” of

⁴ Later, Osip Mandelstam’s damning “Ode” to Stalin would also liken his country to a subdued “sea without wrinkles” where “mounds of human heads recede into the distance” (Mandelstam 1937, 688).

all people are completely identical (9). This uniformity is paralleled by a conformity of thought: when D-503 first encounters the temptress-dissident I-330, he is unsurprised when she appears to speak his thoughts, musing that “nobody is ‘one,’ but ‘one of.’ We are all so much alike” (6).

Zamyatin was demonstrably conversant with psychoanalytic principles and sensitive to their implications. At the time of writing *We*, he delivered a series of lectures in which he stressed the supreme role of the “subconscious” in the writer’s craft, and further, demonstrated the necessity of “being in love” with one’s work (Zamyatin 1920, 161). For the author, love and creativity come from the same “mysterious realm” (*ibid*). Freud would refer to this “realm” as the life instinct, “eros,” a chiefly sexual force that encompasses also a broader spectrum of life-perpetuating energies. Layton identifies Zamyatin’s “concern with the configuration of eros, revolution and a general principle of creativity” as a crucial element in the novel’s “critique of the dehumanizing forces present in society” (Layton 1978, 3). Indeed, in *We*, where sexuality is strictly organized, creative work is impossible. State-appointed poets are occupied with “versifying the [death] sentence” (58). Academia is left to “phono-lecturers,” robots—indistinct in D-503’s mind from human beings—that inform students on the vices of “irrational numbers” and the implausibility of any other way of life (17, 104). Public executions have replaced theater. Fiction, cinema, cuisine and the visual arts appear to be altogether absent. Music has been reduced to a mere algorithm by which anyone “can produce about three sonatas an hour” (17). However, when I-330 demonstrates the “ancient” music of Skryabin at a public lecture, D-503 describes the sounds as “savage, spasmodic,” comparing “inspiration” to “epilepsy” before experiencing an erotic response: “[...] slow, sweet pain [...] rushing, scorching, and off with all your clothing” (17). In this sequence, Zamyatin explicitly links the creative and the sexual, and,

with I-330's presence, also the feminine, the individual, and the irrational.

The One State suppresses the individual when it denies its citizens creative and sexual agency with its myriad prohibitions. Zamyatin depicts the internalization of this repression as the experience of eusocial devotion to the collective, both physically and mentally. D-503 refers to the State as “our powerful united organism,” and narrates the early chapters from the perspective of a collective being. D-503's role in the collective is like that of an insect: putting it bluntly, “I see myself as part of an enormous, vigorous, united body” (32). When it appears that D-503 has almost no thoughts of his own, the reader must question the source of his ideas. The nationalization of D-503's body corresponds psychophysiologically to the nationalization of his mind. The first words of the novel, the first entry of D-503's diary, are a “copy, word for word, the proclamation that appeared in the *One State Gazette* this morning” (1). His text is, for all intents and purposes, the diary of the State and a series of echoes of the Benefactor's ideology. D-503 and the other numbers cannot describe “the things I think,” but only the “things *we* think” (2). It is only later, under the influence of O-90 and I-330, that the narrator's incessant regurgitation of State rhetoric is disrupted. Because those interferences come from women, the contrast between their thoughts and desires and those of D-503 will contribute to the reader's perception of the gender-based conflict in the novel.

1.2 Men Like Machines

Before the female uprising begins, the reader can interpret the State as the novel's collective protagonist. This entity asserts itself as male from the beginning. The news article cited by D-503 announces the creation of an organ which would make expansion of the State

possible by near-sexual means: plans are in place “to integrate the indefinite equation of the universe with the aid of the fire-breathing, electric, glass *Integral*,” which becomes more phallic every time D-503 refers to it in the text—“an elongated ellipsoid” with “transverse ribs” and “longitudinal stringers from within,” that “every three seconds” will “eject flame and gases into cosmic space” (1, 82). Its assembly adheres to the Taylorist labor practice of “humanized machines, perfect men,” underlining Zamyatin’s connection between mechanization and maleness (82). Botanical imagery, by contrast, is associated with femaleness in the text. O-90 brings D-503 flowers that disgust him, and the Mephi who populate the forest like nymphs live beyond the Green Wall that was erected to keep out the “wild wave of roots, flowers, branches, leaves” (93).

Why is the state male? Zamyatin’s reference to D-503’s favorite musical composition, entitled “Pythagoras’ Trousers,” may answer this question (18). D-503 is an engineer, and thus the physical sciences carry a special significance for him, and the same can be said for Zamyatin himself, who designed warships for the Russian, and later Soviet, government. The author, who refers frequently to mathematical theory in his literary and philosophical work, was certainly familiar with the metaphysical aspects of Pythagorean thought. In her cultural history of physics, Margaret Wertheim describes Pythagoras as both an intellectual and religious figure. A crucial tenet of Pythagorean philosophy was that “maleness” is “divine and immaterial whereas femaleness was associated with the earthly and material” (Wertheim 1997, 29). Mathematics was for the Pythagorean cult a means “to free the psyche from the body so that it could rise into the ‘heavenly’ numerical realm” of “timeless stasis and immutability” (*ibid*). The immaterial realm of quantitative harmony was the apotheosis of all that was male and good—as opposed to the

“lower” realm of “femaleness” and “evil” (*ibid*, 35). This paradigm was also of interest to Simone de Beauvoir, who determined that Pythagoras laid the foundation for the persistent Western prejudice that “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (de Beauvoir 1953, 15).

In *We*, Pythagoras’s gendered, unbalanced dichotomy of being motivates the One State’s war on women. As Zamyatin makes clear, State literature refers to its inhabitants no longer as “people,” but as “numbers” who are supposed to have been conditioned through a millennium of totalitarian rule to behave rationally and multiply at a predetermined rate. Curiously, D-503 usually reserves the designation “numbers” for men, while he refers to women as “she-numbers” or, simply, “women.” In Zamyatin’s masculine realm of “mathematically infallible happiness,” however, Pythagorean “number-gods” are replaced by machines. The One State technocracy’s rejection of the organic body and hyper-regulation of sexual contact is an attempt to reform humanity into this divinely static, masculine ideal, uncontaminated by the unruly earth and her wild women.

Zamyatin makes it clear that this collective entity can only function if all differentiating traits are eliminated from its elements. The author poses the most important individualizing impulses as creative, erotic instincts that are rooted in the body, and, in accordance with Pythagoras, coded as feminine. In addition to cleansing the population of physical difference, the State’s reproductive policy is meant to suppress psychological individualism by curbing the “female” vices of lust and creativity. When I-330 violates this taboo, she initiates the simultaneous development of D-503’s sexuality, his capacity to think critically, and his ability to

narrate the story of his life in the One State. D-503's encounters with the dissent of women distinctly echo Pythagorean thought, particularly its "nonquantitative" significance of numbers. The number 2 represented, among the "feminine," even, "evil" integers, the "supreme female principle" (Wertheim 1997, 19) The "supreme male principle" among odd, "masculine," good integers was 1 (*ibid*). There are two female rebels in *We*, I-330 and O-90, both of whose names feature even numbers. Under their subverting influence, D-503 feels that he has developed "two selves" (54).

At the beginning of D-503's diary, the still-deluded engineer describes the Benefactor as "cast-iron," "stony," "square," but is unable to describe his face (46). D-503 gives the reader the impression that the Benefactor is more machine than man—a product of abstract thinking, rather than of emotional and physiological human intercourse. D-503's evaluation of the powerful, venerated leader is distorted by propaganda equating "perfect" with "machinelike" (180). Near the conclusion of his journal, however, D-503, who has fallen in love, participated in an insurrection, and come to think of his journal as a "fantastic novel," rather than a "derivative of our life" sees the Benefactor again and is able to appraise him as a human body, "with tiny drops of sweat on his bald head" (97, 2, 215). D-503 understands with real clarity when the Benefactor explains that I-330 has only taken advantage of the gullible, love-struck engineer, but, mentally equipped for the first time ever to make a truly informed decision, D-503 chooses the dissident over the dictator anyway. D-503 remains loyal to her until she is incarcerated, his imagination "nodule" is destroyed by the Great Operation, and he regresses back to his previous idle docility. As in the beginning of D-503's adventure, when he merely voices the collective conclusions of the State hivemind, he is now able again to devote himself mindlessly to the State's pet project,

the colonization of the Cosmos by thrusting ascension. The renewed automaton status of Zamyatin's protagonist is as much a result of the Benefactor's annihilation of dissenting female voices as it is the consequence of the Operation—for the most perfect, harmonious state can only be one that is cleansed of dialogue and unified into a single male machine.

1.3 The Eros of Empire

Zamyatin makes his vision of the State as a massive organism crucial to the structure of his narrative. The central conflict of *We* stems from the State's quest to satisfy its accordingly astronomical reproductive urge: the collective body has been ripening for a thousand years and is now nearing sexual maturity. However, the One State's denial of the feminine, which for Zamyatin's world indicates the corporeal, the earthly, and the natural, impedes its ability to propagate. The *Lex Sexualis* program of domestic population growth is no longer sufficient to satisfy the State's appetite for proliferation, only providing endless replication, a stasis that is "heavenly," yet fruitless (Wertheim 1997, 35). The *Integral* resembles an organic appendage to the State body, whose imperial aspirations will now require it for the first time to confront a remote Other. Just as the Numbers are granted the occasional "time especially set aside for unforeseen circumstances," the sexual hours during which curtains are drawn and the unknown is allowed to intrude on their perfectly calculated lives, the State is on the cusp of its own sexual hour. The State's rejection of the earthly feminine necessitates a search for an alternative method of propagation, to penetrate the dark womb of the universe. Zamyatin, presenting the One State's colonization project as a collective sexual act, incorporates the gender tropes of Victorian quest romance into his Pythagorean vision of a failing totalitarian empire that seeks to conquer a

savage, distant female body.

Zamyatin connects colonial enterprise to sexual aggression by presenting the instrument of propagation as an “elongated ellipsoid made of our glass—as eternal as gold, as flexible as steel,” suggesting an anatomical imperative to impregnate (82). The author parodies aggressively masculine imperial rhetoric further by including in the newspaper clipping an ominous clause that if the inhabitants of other worlds “fail to understand that we bring them mathematically infallible happiness, it will be our duty to compel them to be happy” (1). If the State is a body, and the spacecraft is the oblong ellipsoid with which it will sow the seeds of its future empire, then this exhortation can be read as a cosmic rape threat. The State braces itself for erotic warfare against an imagined, invisible body in the sky, but it refuses to acknowledge the sexual melee already blooming within its walls.

Contrary to the State's projected image of masculine mechanical might, its inner life is more ambivalent. D-503 meditates on the “yellow honey pollen of some unknown flowers” dusting his world in springtime (3). Zamyatin juxtaposes the introduction of the *Integral* with this idyllic image—perhaps a reference to the aphrodisiac green vapor of H. G. Wells's *In the Days of the Comet* (1906)—to subvert the State's patriarchal slogans. While the *Integral* prepares to spit fire into the wild heavens, a warm wind gently fertilizes the homeland with the seed of a nearby wilderness, signaling that there is another, more urgent reason for the United State's sexual awakening. While D-503 describes the State as “the great, divine, exact, wise straight line,” with a mandate to “unbend the wild, primitive curve” of unconquered space, he takes little notice of the reality that he lives in, to wit, a radially-planned city bounded by a circular border wall constructed of a miraculous glass-like material (2). Without the *Integral*, the State has no

direction and therefore cannot be a straight line; it is rather more like a limp curve spiraling in on itself, destined to implode and expire.

The State resembles rather a circle—a shape that D-503 (and, presumably, the rest of the State collective consciousness) associates with femaleness. Considering the rectilinear imagery Zamyatin associates with the empire's self-representation, the State creates unsolvable problems for itself when it denies this reality. O-90, who is “all curves,” is the epitome of this antithetical, curvilinear femininity—and the only character who manages to escape the One State (65). Zamyatin introduces another threatening roundness with the mysterious “irrational curves” of imaginary numbers, over which the engineer D-503 frets in a flashback to his school days when he is presented with the square root of minus one, and other nonreal numbers, which theoretically comprise “a whole vast world [...] beyond the surface” (37, 102). These otherworldly curves are given human form in O-90 and in the elusive I-330, who leads a revolt against the regime and cultivates a sexual awakening in D-503. The State's existence necessarily depends on this encapsulating, insulating roundness that D-503 connects to femaleness, but which is actually a suffocating circle of self-impregnation and incestuous isolation. This is why D-503's vision of his world is often distorted: he has absorbed the State's philosophical conflation of straightness and simplicity with truth and goodness. This is why he interprets the seemingly impassable boundary of his world, the Green Wall, as an upright, “divinely bounding” line that penetrates the sky to keep out the “wild wave of roots, flowers, branches, leaves” (88).

Zamyatin emphasizes the line as the symbol of the United State's imperialist propaganda, which is fitting for a socio-political entity that expresses itself in mathematical shapes and seeks to build a linear world. A line, by definition, lacks depth; it has no surface and thus there can be

no “beneath.” It follows a path which is concretely determined at the very moment it ceases to be a point, the smallest and most mysterious of circles. A linear civilization, then, has a singular purpose and a future which can be precisely calculated based on the conditions of the present. The line is unchanging, unyielding, unending, and merits little investigation or argument. A circle, on the other hand, necessarily possesses an interior, a space which is fundamentally different from its exterior space. However, if the spaces within and without the circle are thought of as distinct from the circle itself, then the circle holds some kind of relationship to these spaces. Thus, a dialogue may arise between closedness and openness, origin and destiny, the inside and the outside.

Every structure in the One State is made of transparent glass specifically to prevent the citizens from confronting these questions of identity, place and context. They are sheltered from the concepts of depth and of interiority, and conversely, of thinking about their own constraint and the outside world. The boundaries of the circles which make up the entire infrastructure of the State are crystalline to render them invisible, to minimize the apparent difference between inside and outside, to avoid even this dialogical mode of thought itself, in favor of the reductive, immutable, monologic rule of line. The success of this illusion is attested to in D-503’s characterization of the border fence as a “Green Wall.” The material it is constructed from is ubiquitous in the city and is transparent, but D-503 is unable, or uninterested, to comprehend that what he really sees is the green forest through clear glass. The State’s suppression of individual perspective has conditioned D-503 to think simplistically and schematically; his interior landscape has been linearized and flattened.

Zamyatin also attends to the more explicitly sexual connotations of the line and the circle,

and he arranges these tropes in conversation with the concerns of his predecessors in world literature. The launch of the phallic *Integral* into the unknown abyss of outer space echoes Victorian adventure novels in which exotic and unknown territories are explored and exploited by heroic men. The path of the *Integral* will see it traverse the vertical channel bounded by the Wall, enter the cosmos and colonize it. Elaine Showalter, in her study of gender dynamics in *fin de siecle* fiction, describes the underlying conceit of quest romances, like Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), as stories of "the penetration of a female wilderness," wherein the alien, feminized territory is associated with "paralysis, darkness, and suffocation" (Showalter 1990, 98). In *We*, as in its Victorian predecessors, colonized Other is depicted as shadowy, mysterious, primitive, and ignorant, and assumed to be ready to welcome the intervention of benevolent and wise colonizers from the glittering cities of the Old World. Zamyatin, however, subverts this familiar imperial narrative through his direct and prolonged confrontation of that very "lassitude, paralysis" and "suffocation" in the seat of empire by confining the action of *We* to the capital, rather than embedding his critique in frame narrative structure as Conrad does in his novel.

Zamyatin relates the state-building anxieties of the stifled homeland along clearly gendered lines. The totalitarian dictator and wielder of the colonizing phallus, the Benefactor, is "defined in square, austere, majestic contours" when he executes a criminal by pulling a "lever" with, D-503 imagines, a "fiery gust of exaltation" (46, 48). Filtered through the enchanted eyes of D-503, the embodiment of empire, the "resultant of a thousand wills," is a grotesque caricature of rigid, all-dominating masculinity (48). The greatest acknowledged threat to the dictator's absolute power is the succubus-like I-330, who seduces D-503 to recruit him to the

dissident movement. Zamyatin introduces her as the Benefactor's foil, an embodiment of deviant, uncontrolled female sexuality.

In the geopolitical context of Zamyatin's world, this phenomenon plays out in the confrontation of concentrated male sexual power in the hands of the Well-Doer by a diffuse, female-fronted revolutionary faction that works from within and without to destabilize the regime. Zamyatin is clearly conversant with the conventions of the late Victorian "quest romance," in which Showalter identifies a pattern of "flight from women and male dread of women's sexual, creative, and reproductive power" as a response to "fears of manly decline" (Showalter 1990, 83). Zamyatin applies a typically Victorian essentialist, binary concept of gender to this world, inherited from Pythagoras: the rational, civilized order is male, the chaotic and unknown is female. The *Integral* project is a science-fiction recapitulation of the quest romance model: the implacable male organ of empire seeks to confront and silence a feminine wilderness while simultaneously fleeing another untamed female power. As in the Victorian prototype, the circularity of this path reveals that "above all, the quest romances" about men's adventures into wild frontiers are "allegorized journeys into the self" (*ibid*, 82).

D-503's "journey" into himself, however, introduces a second theater of gender war, where the One State's struggle to impose masculine, arithmetical order over a diffuse and fractious force of female resistance is mirrored in miniature. D-503, who desires above all to reconcile his love for the treasonous I-330 with his civic duty to the Benefactor, is not so much an actor in this conflict as he is part of its setting. He loves I-330 *despite* her heretical tendencies, not because of them, though he ironically does not seem to understand or value the noumenal irrationality corresponding to his own experience of unconditional love. D-503's awakening is

incomplete: he becomes aware of his previously suppressed “irrational” instincts toward creativity and freedom, but he cannot understand or fully embrace them. He is, as he describes himself in the presence of I-330, “a strange creature consisting of a single organ—an ear” (53). While his ability to describe his experiences develops substantially, he makes less progress with his capacity to accurately or meaningfully interpret them, and none toward genuine originality of thought. The dialogic basis of the novel is not, then an inner conflict between D-503’s “two selves,” but a series of altercations between the unified, collective voice of the One State and the female voices of dissent.

D-503’s diary, then, lays the battleground for Zamyatin’s assault on the nascent Soviet biopolitical regime. The author borrows some of the One State’s motivating ideology from the Bolsheviks, namely Taylorism and Freudism, but his allusions to Pythagorean prejudice and to Victorian colonial dreams of annihilating the “Other” broaden the scope of his attack. These phenomena share an underlying compulsion to categorize and organize humanity from within and without. Though a sexual morality that attempts to reconcile Kollontai with Pythagoras is ludicrous, the lens of Foucault’s historical theory suggests that the State’s praxis has relatives in reality, that the implementation of such a paradigm is possible—and therefore horrifying. In Zamyatin’s world, this program is proven effective on D-503, who has been analyzed beyond the point of recovery, his consciousness dismantled and reassembled as part of the State’s collective thinking apparatus. D-503 can only approach a state of liberty when his tiny sector of the vast “gleaming mechanism” becomes corroded with the emotional rust of the lost free epoch, introduced by women intent on destroying the machine.

Chapter 2

Alien She: Androgyny and Aberration in *We*

The most visible point of resistance to the regime in the novel is the revolutionary exhorter I-330. She is a difficult figure to unpack; her ideology and praxis seem often to be at odds and she at times appears even to be cynical and ruthless. Critics tend to dwell on her as the novel's anti-heroine, and many appear to take a certain delight in "proving" that she is not heroic at all. These responses are aptly summarized by Andrew Barratt: "By and large, the literature on [*We*] has been characterized by the (usually unspoken) assumption that I- is a positive character..." (Barratt 1984, 353). He proceeds to argue that I-330, far from "the novel's heroine," is actually "the victim of a delusive faith in the revolutionary ideal" (*ibid*, 354). While Barratt's analysis of *We* is lucid, insightful, and well-reasoned, my approach to the novel's main female protagonist is rather different. I do indeed consider I-330 a positive character—she is a martyr, not a victim. This, however, is not an assumption, but a conclusion that I draw from a careful examination of the character's beliefs and behavior in the context of Zamyatin's philosophical essays, while also considering the author's allusions to such seemingly disparate texts as Mayakovsky's poetry, Oscar Wilde's drama, and the monster mythology of Greek and Slavic antiquity.

2.1. The Golden-born Comet

As D-503 meditates on the arrival of spring, Zamyatin introduces I-330 as a mysterious

woman who captivates D-503 by her perceptiveness and assertive manner. She turns out to be the leader of the Mephi insurgents, whose aim is “to break down the Wall—all walls” to free the brainwashed citizens from the oppressive regime, and Zamyatin initially depicts her as an antidote to the stultifying rule of the autocratic Benefactor (157). She is an alluring outlaw, the bearer of wild sunshine and disorder to the dark and doomed empire, exclaiming to D-503 aboard the *Integral*, “how wonderful it is to fly, not knowing where” (200). However, the reader gradually discovers her to be a more complex and problematic figure: a manipulative sexual predator, and possibly a representative of an alternative power structure that may not, after all, be superior to the existing political system. As the Benefactor’s rhetoric takes on the characteristics of increasingly repressive early Bolshevik domestic policy, I-330, the only coherent voice of opposition in the novel, expresses many of the author’s own “heretical” beliefs. However, as this character develops, her ultimate significance becomes less tidy; she begins to embody a rowdy synthesis of ideas, not all of which are compatible with the author’s ethic. By examining the echoes and premonitions of Zamyatin’s critical work that appear in the novel, I argue that I-330 reflects the iconoclasm of the modernist “Scythian” writers, a circle of Symbolist poets who adopted the ancient Eurasian equestrian nomad as their icon, as well as “nimble” artifice Zamyatin ascribed to the Futurist writers who cooperated with the Bolshevik regime.

I-330’s short yellow dress, and the “black stockings” worn beneath it, are an allusion to Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Futurists, whom Zamyatin extensively, and often acidically, criticized, despite his admiration of their poetry (28). The young Mayakovsky famously stole a tattered, fluorescent yellow blouse from his sister and wore it to his public readings in cheerful defiance of decorum. He immortalized his signature silly garment with the 1914 poem “Fop’s

Jacket,” in which his speaker declares, “I will sew myself black trousers / from the velvet of my voice. / A yellow jacket out of three lengths of sunset” (Mayakovsky 1914, 71). The yellow blouse became the hallmark of the most grandiose and subversive variation of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona, and, as Svetlana Boym points out, yellow thereafter became “*the* color of Futurism, and Mayakovsky’s yellow blouse [...] its banner” (Boym 140). Zamyatin personally resented Mayakovsky for allowing his obstinately eccentric literary image to be annexed into the poetics of the masses and considered this alignment opportunistic and “nimble” (Zamyatin 1921, 53). Almost a decade after *We*’s publication abroad and his consequent departure from the Soviet Union, Zamyatin would write that Futurist poetry itself was fundamentally at odds with what Proletkult sought to promote in literature, because, as Zamyatin contested, it was formally illogical and undisciplined, its content fantastical, and “above all emotional, feminine” (Zamyatin 1933, 145). All of these characteristics certainly appealed to Zamyatin, but he objected to what he perceived as the movement’s “dogmatization” (Zamyatin 1923, 108). Nevertheless, the influence of Mayakovsky’s work on Zamyatin is strikingly clear in *We*, which was written as the author began in earnest to distance himself from the Bolsheviks whom he had once keenly supported. He even borrows a famous Mayakovskian image from “Cloud in Pants” to describe I-330 as “nothing but lips” (71). Just as Mayakovsky’s fop proclaims that the “earth is my lover girl,” D-503 imagines, walking with I-330, that the earth is an “unencompassable woman” and that “everything [exists] only for” him (Mayakovsky 1914, 71; 72). Zamyatin’s bitter admiration of his literary rival surfaces in I-330, the commanding, eccentric, revolutionary antihero in a foppish yellow frock.

I-330’s yellow dress, like its prototype, Mayakovsky’s jacket, represents for Zamyatin an

ideological disharmony. I-330 exhorts the masses beyond the wall and propagandizes the citizens of the State, but though is the most visible and vocal dissident, she is always accompanied by a shadow, S-4711, a rogue “Guardian,” or secret policeman, who is also working for the Mephi. The presence of a male authority figure in the resistance complicates the movement’s meaning in Zamyatin's world, which, as we have seen, is constructed on a fundamental, binary opposition between the masculine principle of equilibrium and the feminine principle of disorder. The “X” that D-503 sees in I-330’s features may mark a point where these principles meet. Her physique is androgynous: D-503 admires the “miraculous and incalculable curve” of her bared breast after the peaceful protest she leads on election day is brutally suppressed, but at other times her body is boyish: “slender, sharp, stubbornly pliant like a whip” (146, 7). When she plays the “ancient” piano for a public history lecture in an austere glass auditorium, the music is “savage, spasmodic,” but when she speaks frankly with D-503 her voice is “firm, metallic,” recalling the “motionless figure, as if cast in metal” of the Benefactor who represents the height of rectilinear, masculine authority in the novel (17, 160, 46). I-330 promotes Zamyatin’s own philosophy, but its implementation by a hierarchical organization is antithetical to the nature of these ideas.

I-330’s position in relation to the moral center of *We* can be approached in terms of Zamyatin’s personal interpretation of the “Scythian,” which he embeds in the text as female, chaotic energy. Just as the yellow blouse was the emblem of Futurism, the Scythian was an icon for the Symbolists. Zamyatin appropriates this term from the self-styled “Scythian” writers, a circle of Symbolists including Ivanov-Razumnik, Andrey Bely, and Alexander Blok, in his criticism of what he perceived as their failure to realize the voice of a true “spiritual revolutionary” (Zamyatin 1918, 22). Zamyatin’s Scythian, or spiritual revolutionary, is strictly

and literally a heretical martyr. That the poets in question managed to publish anything at all under Bolshevik censorship disqualifies them almost without question from the accolade of “Scythianism.” For Zamyatin, the true Scythian can only be “Christ on Golgotha, between two thieves, bleeding to death,” because “Christ victorious in practical terms” becomes just another “paunchy priest” (*ibid*). The “practical victory of an idea” necessarily annihilates its moral value. Success is the end of progress, and victory, the end of conquest, and this is when the Scythian is left with no course but to dismount. The Scythian must be then, for Zamyatin, a relentless iconoclast, whose “cry is an eternal ‘Down with—!’” (*ibid*, 23). The spiritual revolutionary is tainted by any intercourse with an existing power structure: “The very odor of a dwelling, of settled existence [...] is intolerable to the Scythian” (*ibid*, 21). In Zamyatin’s view, Mayakovsky joined the ranks of false Scythians when he came out “from the jungle” to surrender to the Kremlin his “yellow blouse” for a “red sansculotte cap” (*ibid*, 55).

Zamyatin connects the Mephi to the Scythians when D-503 sees them galloping on horseback from the *Integral*, but the exact degree to which I-330 is or is not a Scythian is difficult to ascertain. In her final moments, Zamyatin styles her as “Christ on Golgotha,” for she dies a heretic and a martyr. She is denied “practical victory” when she is executed by the Benefactor, but the consequences of the Mephi insurrection are likely to continue to destabilize and possibly topple his government. Thus she achieves some measure of “victory on the higher plane—the plane of ideas” (*ibid*, 32). However, in life, I-330 seems to renege on the unmistakably Scythian principles she sets forth, namely, “the destruction of equilibrium” and the call to “tormentingly endless movement,” which, as prophesied by Blok’s Scythian, will “blaze a trail” that “with black blood flows, in fearful wildness,” leaving the “old world” to “fall in ruins”

(165; Blok 1918). She explains her philosophy of “energy” as an alternative to the “entropy” and “blissful quietude” of the sedentary life of the One State during a tender moment in D-503’s home, all the while “stroking [his] head,” and his “hairy hand,” the symbol of D-503’s near-extinct desire for freedom (163). But in the immediately preceding chapter, she adopts a more masculine and authoritarian voice that spoils this idealism, by setting forth a concrete, practical program. Beyond the Wall, she rejects the Mephi cries of ““Down with the Integral! Down!”” responding, ““No, brothers, not down. But the *Integral* must be ours”” (157). I-330’s pragmatism is at odds with Zamyatin’s revolutionary ethic, and yet his unmistakable sympathy for her lingers in the text.

The vehemently anti-authoritarian Zamyatin problematizes I-330’s insurrection by placing her in position of power in the resistance movement. Her desire for a new world order, for the “destruction of equilibrium,” and her belief that there is no final revolution, just as there is no “final number,” and that the new age ought to be one of “endless movement,” is in fact the author’s own (174). However, the practical implementation of this ideal brings it crashing down from the “plane of ideas” into reality and damages its merit. For Zamyatin, “the surest way to destroy is to canonize,” because “dogmatization [...] is the entropy of thought” (Zamyatin 1923; 104, 108). Zamyatin seems to sketch a looming “dogmatization” of I-330’s agenda in her masculine, “angular” features, as she begins to resemble the Benefactor in her quest for power—for the imposition of order, any order, as soon as it is imposed, is, to Zamyatin, contemptible, and coded in the text as male. It is after her *Integral* speech that D-503 takes note of the “firm, metallic” quality of her voice (160).

However, when I-330’s behavior and physique read as “masculine” in terms of the

novel's symbolic lexicon, it is helpful to remember that D-503's account is, to his chagrin, subjective: he is, after-all, "integrated" into the State machine. The parallels that arise in D's record between the Benefactor and I-330 may point to D-503's subconscious desire to reconcile his loyalties to these two figures of authority by uniting them in some way. Among the many reasons that this is impossible is that D-503 is subject to a reflexive mistrust of women and hatred for the "enemies of happiness" (149). As D-503 begins to accept that I-330 is both of these things, she becomes terrifying to him. This distortion of perception, as Simone de Beauvoir explains, is a means of "self-defense" for a "man [who] wants to give" faced with "woman taking for herself" that "makes the erotic object into a wielder of black magic, the servant into a traitress, Cinderella into an ogress, and changes all women into enemies" (de Beauvoir 1953, 206).

2.2 The Man-Trap

While the radically politicized literary climate of Zamyatin's milieu clearly impacts his novel, *We* engages also with the broader European literary tradition. He reacts to the Victorians as much as he does to the Russian avant-garde, and it is the influence of the former that more clearly shapes the gendered tropes he arranges in the novel's central conflict. I will demonstrate that I-330 embodies a clash of feminine chaos and masculine order, the novel's two opposing forces, by considering Zamyatin's antiheroine as an iteration of the *vagina dentata*. As Zamyatin's novel progresses, I-330 becomes a more disquieting figure. As D-503 begins to understand that I-330's iconoclastic convictions are more than a secret fantasy, he grows anxious and troubled by her behavior. D-503 conflates his reservations about her infidelity to the State

with his suspicion of her unfaithfulness to him as a lover. I-330's promiscuity, so tightly bound up with her freethinking, is threatening to his disciplined sensibility. She undermines D-503's received dogma that men, who are rational and intelligent, must restrain and subdue fractious and foolish feminine instincts. D-503's prejudices link I-330's independence with her androgyny, which he finds both attractive and unnerving. This, of course, is not a device of Zamyatin's invention, but a compelling variation on a perennial theme in European literature and mythology of masculine female figures whose sexual behavior is disturbing to their male beholders.⁵

Zamyatin establishes the erotic nature of the impending epidemic of creative awakening and social disorder by connecting the revolutionary I-330 with the "yellow honeyed pollen of flowers" that fertilizes the sterile cityscape and its susceptible inhabitants. Her "vivid yellow dress," then, acquires another meaning when she wears it during her liaisons with D-503 and tempts him with sex and alcohol (28). The yellow dress appears nightly in his dreams, dripping with "sap" (32). As D-503 marches along in his squadron during the mandatory morning march with his partner, O-90, he notices that "the sweet pollen dries your lips," and begins to lick his lips and speculate, "the lips of all the women you see must be sweet (of the men too, of course)" (3). Exposure to the yellow haze coincides with D-503's erotic thoughts, which are taboo, because they occur outside of his assigned "sexual hours" for quelling such urges. This flash of sexual appetite opens his newly wandering eye to men as well as women—a noteworthy development for the primary engineer of the *Integral*, the colonizing rocket which is presented as the ultimate tool of male heterosexual violence. The power of this yellow substance is such that it induces a response even in a model citizen, the staunchly logical mathematician who, in the

⁵ See Showalter 1990 for a deep analysis of Victorian gender archetypes.

opening pages of the novel, is sexually oriented exclusively toward civic duty and is therefore flummoxed by his partner O-90's merely hypothetical suggestion of extracurricular sex: "What could I say to her? [...] she knew as well as I did that our next sexual day was the day after tomorrow" (8). At this moment, D-503 is beginning to feel a desire for freedom, but to act on it is still an overwhelming notion for him. The color yellow will eventually, however, begin to signify in the novel something more aggressive and threatening, which may lead to a total loss of self-control and madness in connection with I-330 as she induces D-503 to act on his latent impulses.

Because D-503's principle virtue is discipline, he reflexively resists the feelings that disrupt "the flow of logical thought" (3). In Zamyatin's totalitarian hellscape, "logical" is a codeword for "correct" and "masculine," and its disruption is considered a dangerous illness, the name of which is "imagination" and is understood as a deceptive "barricade on [the] way to happiness" (180). Again, nothing in the State is as it seems. Its lauding of rational order and rejection of inspired impulse is merely a veneer for institutionalized misogyny reminiscent of the Pythagorean cult. "Imagination" here really refers to any independent, and therefore "incorrect," thought, which D ruefully observes in O-90 as a sign of mental defect commonly found among women. This undisciplined, fanciful thinking also becomes associated with yellow. As D-503's thoughts become confused and fanciful, the fog of pollen condenses into golden "tiny baby suns" reflected in the standard-issue uniform badges worn on the chest, suggesting a process of internalization, of literal taking-to-heart, and away from the head.

Zamyatin uses the color-cues of pollen, brass, and sunshine to fuse together the novel's main themes of sexual and creative consciousness in an individual who can no longer fully

submit to the hyperlogical regime. While O-90 gives free voice to her fantasies, D-503 conceals from her his romantic reverie that develops into a fantastic vision of the “brass rhythms” of the national anthem, emblematic of his forced habit of sublimating his sexuality into patriotism. The brass of music is then drowned out by “the brassy steps gleaming in the sun,” which remind him of a long-extinct epoch of freedom (5). This fantasy sequence reveals the rapidly growing inner conflict between D-503’s natural inclinations and his internalized emotional-sexual repression through his attempts to interpret this brassy yellowness. Zamyatin contrasts D-503’s self-censorship with O-90’s remorseless embrace of her heretical tendencies to introduce a dialogue between contrived, masculine, subjugating sexual power and the opposing feminine sexuality that is wild and uncontrollable.

I-330 first appears in the novel during D-503’s daydream, almost as if she materializes from it. She interrupts him to finish his sentences with “the same words [as] the things [he] had written down before” (7). This “astonishing coincidence of ideas,” however, makes him feel uneasy. I-330 weighs D-503 “with her eyes as on a scale” as she begins to direct the newly self-aware protagonist’s attention from his hitherto muted inner “sunshine” to the other wild sunshine beyond the Wall, to cultivate his inner freedom and recruit him to the Mephi movement (8). Zamyatin’s comparison of I-330’s gaze to the mechanism of scales carries a somewhat ominous implication for her role in the novel. These could be the scales of Justice, or merely another means of measure and control. D-503 understands the “X” he picks out in her features as something for which he cannot “define in figures,” an imaginary number which stands for something hidden “beyond the surface” where the “wild, primitive curve” of untamed existence has yet to be unbent and mechanized (8, 96, 4). He sees in her a part of himself that he is unable

to accept, despite its appeal, because he interprets it as female and evil. Behind lowered curtains, she stands with D-503 “in front of a mirror,” and, looking into it, he is distracted by his own face “reflected in her eyes” and cannot understand what is actually “going on” with that “X” behind “the lowered shades” of her eyelids (28, 27).

Zamyatin is, in part, responding to a long-established European tradition of anxiety about the power of feminine sexuality, which found notable expression in Victorian panic about the end of male mastery and erasure of sexual difference that might result from the liberation of women. I-330’s “X” is, as Showalter writes of the Victorians, “the veil” that conceals “the specter of female sexuality, a silent but terrible mouth that may wound or devour the male spectator” (Showalter 1990, 146). Surrounding I-330 with mirrors and curtains, Zamyatin crafts his *femme fatale* I-330 as an archetypal “veiled woman,” whose enigmatic allure is irresistible, but conceals something malevolent and emasculating, a *vagina dentata*.

2.3 The Pretty Demon

Zamyatin exposes I-330’s hidden teeth when he describes her persuasion of D-503 to use his position as the top State engineer for the benefit of her revolutionary organization, promising the advent of a new, free world. That her free-spirited radicalism and indulgent sexuality are subordinated to the ultimate goal of appropriating the machinery of a totalitarian political structure suggests that she is may not be the beneficent liberator she claims to be. As the fullest expression of the United State’s oppression is condensed in the phallic *Integral*, destined for rape of the heavens, the opposing Mephi agenda also depends on their leader I-330’s sexual prowess. The declaration of this intention occurs beyond the Wall in the wilderness, which, in keeping

with many, including Russian, folk and literary traditions, is an exotic and somewhat mystical world, hostile to artifice and inspiring revelation in its beholder. D-503's first experience of nature is also a deeply erotic one: without any such contact, he feels his body "dented, crumpled, [...] as happy as after a love embrace" (157).

Zamyatin depicts D-503's voyage beyond the city limits with I-330 as an especially sexually-charged and vulnerable act of good faith. Their adventure culminates in I-330's proclamation to her followers, who call for the destruction of the *Integral*, that, instead, "the *Integral* will be ours," with which "to break down the Wall" (158). I-330 shares her intention to wield the imperial phallus, while fully clothed and occupying a position of power and trust, among the vulnerable, "naked," wild, "golden-haired," angelic Mephi who inhabit the forest. The context of this exhortation is suggestive of an act of sexual aggression, or perhaps even assault. In fact, her irresistible hold on D-503 means that she already possesses the *Integral* in principle if not yet in practice. I-330's mouth, no longer "silent and terrible," opens to unleash the possibility of a new political and sexual hegemony, rather than a fight for free love. Her seductive yellow dress, in turn, now resembles the "yellow eyes" of "some beast" beyond the Wall, predatory and threatening (93).

D-503 is most frightened of I-330 when he perceives her as a challenger and possible usurper of the Benefactor's sexual-political tyranny. I-330's sexuality elicits anxiety in D-503 because it is an expression of the One State's "implanted perversion," as Foucault would term it (Foucault 1978, 36). Sex is permitted by the State exclusively as a civic duty, and any other sexual practice is taboo, or perverted. Not only does I-330 violate this paradigm, she ventures further to deploy her own opposing mechanism of power to manipulate D-503 sexually.

Among Victorian iterations of the *vagina dentata*, Showalter's discussion of the mythology of Salome, who became "the *fin de siecle*'s favorite phallic woman" as Oscar Wilde's exotic anti-heroine, will shed further light on the significance of I-330 as a sexual deviant (quoted in Showalter 1990, 148). Wilde's Salome is a lucid example of the perpetration of sexual power by a woman depicted as something catastrophic. For Salome and I-330, the assumption of a dominant role leads to violence. Before I-330 takes D-503 out beyond the Wall, she "slowly, with an effort" raises her eyelids, which D-503 often compares to shades and veils (154). In a meadow, beyond the reach of the Benefactor's repression, she fully unveils herself to show what Showalter terms "the guillotine and the man-trap" (1990, 148). Like Salome, when I-330 becomes a sexual actor, rather than merely a sexual resource, the male spectator is disturbed. As Salome calls for the head of John the Baptist after entrancing Herod with her Dance of the Seven Veils, I-330 demands also a symbolic castration in the form of the annexation of the *Integral*. In both cases, the woman acts in retaliation to a male denial of her sexuality, and the drive for vengeance is born from that same, hitherto silenced sexual power. I-330, however, is more extreme than Salome; she would not kiss the head of John the Baptist but wear it upon her shoulders and proclaim herself a prophet.

I-330, in her campaign to seize the *Integral*, she seeks not only to castrate the male master, but to affix his organ to her own person, to become Medusa, the most frightening of phallic women. I-330's annexation of the State's most prized organ is a concrete affirmation of her essential androgyny. Medusa's veil is a metaphysical one, woven from fear and ignorance: the hero is simply instructed not to look, lest she return his gaze, which would petrify him. Freud interprets the myth as male fear of the female organ; Medusa's corona of snakes stands for pubic

hair and her mouth is a *vagina dentata*, and petrification is likened to an erection to defend against that mouth's castrating power (Freud 1922, 85). Perhaps Freud himself falls victim to this fear—his analysis depends on a dismemberment of Medusa. Over the course of Freud's interpretation, her body is ripped apart as the psychoanalyst rearranges female anatomy to suit his paradigm. According to Freud, the male beholder is ultimately reassured by the impaling potential of his erotic response, so Medusa's deadly power actually becomes a manifestation of male potency. Freud's analysis is a disarmament. Medusa's power is not derived from her vaginal mouth, nor from the invincibility of the viewer's opposing male organ. Medusa's serpentine hair is inevitably phallic, but it is not her weapon of choice, either, despite its potential for violence (which the male beholder is intimately familiar with, and, therefore, fears). Rather, Medusa is frightening to behold because of the inseparability of her genitalized hair and mouth. Her eyes are her weapon; she petrifies because she is the ultimate nightmare of the male chauvinist: the sexual object who returns his gaze. Petrification is objectification. The myth speaks to male fears of retaliation in kind for sexual subjugation. Medusa's androgyny, however, like that of Salome and I-330, not only reverses gender hierarchy, but explodes it. This is because she has male and female sex characteristics, but neither ultimately define her. Medusa, then, embodies the fear of ““unveiling the female sex, which [is found] to be itself a veil”” that is removed to ““reveal there is nothing to unveil,”” that sexual difference is a myth (quoted in Showalter 1990, 147). For Zamyatin, I-330's androgyny, like Medusa's, is an expression of the dread of female empowerment from the perspective of an oblivious misogynist like D-503.

2.4. The Good Vampire

Zamyatin's characterization of I-330 also evokes the vampire, a figure of interest to the Victorians as well. Showalter sees the embodiment of "the thrills and terrors of blurred sexual, psychological, and scientific boundaries" in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, in which the Count's "mission" is one of physical, emotional, and sexual conquest (Showalter 1990, 179). Supported by Christopher Craft's analysis of Dracula's "mission" as the "creation of a race of monstrous women, feminine demons equipped with masculine devices," she compares the female vampire to the "new woman" at the *fin de siecle*, whose independent lifestyle and outspoken temperament were labeled masculine, aberrant, and threatening to social order (quoted in Showalter 1990, 180).

I-330, like the vampire, seduces her prey out of both love and revenge. Her *modus operandi* is sexual, with cannibalistic undertones, and she does not vanquish her victims, but converts them—all of which is visible in her courtship of D-503. Like Stoker's protagonist Jonathan Harker, who feels a "wicked, burning desire" that Dracula's female progeny would pierce him with their "brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips" that inspire "longing and at the same time some deadly fear," D-503 is mesmerized and intimidated by I-330's "extraordinarily white and sharp teeth" behind "blood—a slit, as if made with a sharp knife—her lips" (Stoker 6, 71). The penetrative potential of such teeth is terrifying but also attractive to D-503, whose sexuality is complicated by the confluence of his yearning to be dominated and his inculcated desire to subordinate women. He experiences I-330's sexual aggression as a conduit for an evil contagion, worrying that "some X will remain"

in him after their liaison (23). D-503 even once behaves vampiristically himself, sinking “his teeth into” her out of jealousy of her relationship with another man (57).

In Russian folklore, vampires were the corpses of “sorcerers and witches,” and other people who engaged with the “unclean force,” whose “graves could not contain them” (Ivanits 1989, 120). Linda Ivanits points out in her survey of Russian folk belief that Orthodoxy and pagan faith coexisted for centuries and informed each other and, as a result, many nature spirits became associated, and even merged entirely, with Christian figures in the peasant religion. The Christianized vampire became the undead sectarian or heretic. I-330 is, if nothing else for sure, a heretic, as she explains to D-503 about her cohort, “entropy was worshipped as God [...] by your ancestors, the Christians. But we [are] anti-Christians” (Zamyatin 1924, 165). Felix Oinas, in his discussion of East European vampirism, reports that the word “heretic” (*eretik*) actually replaced “vampire” (*upir*) in Russian medieval peasant vernacular. The Russian vampire was sometimes cannibalistic and often a sexual predator but was more prone to hypnotize and haunt its victims by means of its “evil eye” than to physically drain them (Oinas 1985, 122).

A fascinating example of this phenomenon in Russian mythology is another veiled woman, the *eretitsa*. *Eretitsi* were women who lived in heresy and continued after death “to turn people away from their faith,” often to fulfill a pact with the devil (*ibid*, 123). As in the case of Medusa, her appearance was grotesque, and her lethal weapon is not her teeth, but her “evil eye;” to look upon her spelled certain death. Oinas cites a representative “eyewitness” account in which a drunk man stumbled and fell into an open grave and found himself face to face with an *eretitsa*, who, after returning his gaze through the slats of her coffin, haunted him until he died. Zamyatin’s Christian symbolism in *We* lends I-330 a decidedly demonic quality: she is

reminiscent of Eve, the original sinner and temptress, and she is attended by the strikingly serpentine “double-bent” S-4711, who facilitates her criminal activity (64).⁶

It is important to note, however, that the Russian vampire was an equivocal figure. Oinas understands “Russian villages to have two kinds of vampires—one bad and one good [...] while a dead vampire destroyed people, a live one, on the contrary, defended them” (Oinas 1985, 116). The possibility of a benevolent predator offers a curious implication for I-330. When Zamyatin clarifies her true intentions for D-503, the author highlights the shared tendency of I-330 and the Benefactor toward vampiristic, predatory sexuality and pragmatism. However, the end of I-330’s agenda is “energy” and eros, while the Benefactor enforces thanatic “entropy,” as did his Christian predecessors, according to I-330. With the Well-Doer’s final monologue, Zamyatin rejects the entropic Christian Paradise. The autocrat informs D-503, who has been arrested for sedition, that one enters heaven only with the aid of “someone to tell them, once and for all, the meaning of happiness, and then to bind them to it with a chain. [...] Remember: those in paradise no longer know desires, no longer know pity or love. There are only the bless, with their imaginations excised [...] angels, obedient servants of God” (214). For Zamyatin, heaven is a cloying and insipid cesspool. In the novel, the antithesis to Paradise on earth, the One State, is I-330’s demonic and destructive female rage. She is a good vampire in the sense that Zamyatin depicts her predation and violence as a troubling but ultimately preferable alternative to the toxic anesthesia of Paradise—for, as Zamyatin’s R-13 recounts, it was “he [the devil] who had tempted man to [...] freedom” (61). Zamyatin demonstrates, by placing the novel’s political

⁶ See Layton 1978, Russell 1973, and Gregg 1965 for further analysis of Biblical themes in *We*.

conflict in Biblical terms, a preference for Mephistopheles (from which he derives the name of the resistance movement, Mephi) over the Prince of Peace.

The demonizing effect of D-503's distorted and unstable lens, then, actually exonerates I-330. She is compelling and terrifying to a naive and benighted man who is inculcated with a strong mistrust of women and the inner freedom they represent. Her annexation of the *Integral* is not only a threat to the old, male-dominated order and the culmination of D-503's life's work, but also to his own burgeoning masculine identity and inculcated chauvinism. I-330 assaults D-503's understanding of "who 'They' are and who are 'We'" in a political, but also in an existential sense (162). Her resistance to categorization is itself a challenge to the State's regime of scientific management. The State, which negates the "feminine" phenomenon of "Imagination," or inner freedom, in favor of "masculine" logic, which is actually obedience, bisects its victims. I-330's androgyny signifies the inevitable and necessary reintegration of a divided soul such as D-503. Thinking of her, D-503 feels a reflexive "curtain [fly] up inside" himself (62). Like Salome, I-330 attempts to overturn and subdue the male order. Like Medusa, she possesses and understands that order's weapons and tactics, which makes her, at times, terrible to behold.

This unsettling androgyny, however, is central to her final, incontestable, heroics. Her sexuality and her identity are ultimately subservient to her ideology. As for Medusa, these physical qualities are superficial but necessary vehicles of philosophical truth. Most importantly, for Zamyatin, I-330's truth is the real truth, even if her praxis is imperfect. This is the difference between D-503's forced sublimation of his erotic energies into expanding the State and I-330's weaponization of her sexuality. His is enslavement, while hers is a willing sacrifice. Zamyatin

makes this visible when, after her final betrayal of D-503, admitting that she only seduced him for her cause, she does “not say a word” when publically interrogated, tortured, and executed (232). Suffocating under the State’s preferred method of torture, the use of an oxygen-deprivation chamber, she throws “her head back” and “half-close[s] her eyes,” repeating the same gesture from her final tryst with D-503, when “her head [is] thrown back with half-closed eyes” (232, 225). I-330’s sexual conquest of D-503 is not self-serving, but an act of self-immolation. She is undoubtedly a predator, but she is, in the end, something of a good vampire.

Chapter 3

You Don't Own Me: *We* and the Eternal Feminine

Lacking a clear political motive or any enunciated philosophy, O-90 is rarely the center of critical attention in *We*. O-90 bucks the yoke of the State out of unbridled instinct: her own sexual freedom is both the means and the end of her revolt. In light of the questions and conflicts of identity that arose in my discussion of I-330, what may appear to be the comparative simplicity of O-90's role in *We* is deceptive. The meagerness of critical interest in O-90 is understandable because Zamyatin's narrator reports relatively little of her activities to the reader. However, having established in the preceding two chapters that the novel's primary conflict is one of which the narrator D-503 is only dimly, if at all, aware, I think that D-503's silence concerning O-90 is actually quite telling, because it speaks to his State-engendered tendency to disregard women. O-90, the novel's pinnacle of irrational femaleness, is a remote and unintelligible being from D-503's perspective. Moreover, she symbolizes a dimension of femininity that is especially dangerous to the sterile, mechanically replicant State: motherhood. To understand the significance of the fertility that forms the basis of O-90's subversive activities in the novel, I consider this character in the context of Bolshevik feminism and other trends in European reproductive policy that gained momentum during the first decades of the twentieth century. I connect these phenomena to precedent Victorian approaches to the control of female sexuality. Finally, I interpret the miraculous visions of motherhood in Russian and Greek

mysticism that surface in Zamyatin's depiction of O-90 to propose that this character forges an alternate path to the novel's moral center. The biological basis of O-90's revolt may seem to a modern sensibility somewhat retrograde in contrast to I-330's deviant sexual warfare, but within the context of the novel, O-90's dissidence is equally threatening to the One State.

3.1. The Other Sex

O-90, unlike the other main characters of *We*, is an ordinary citizen. More importantly, she is the only major character to survive; I-330 perishes under the dome of the Machine, and, while D-503 is not executed, the exorcism of his "imagination nodule" is, effectively, death. O-90's survival means that she is the only one to succeed—she, a woman in a male-chauvinist dystopia, escapes annihilation of herself and her child at the moment when her entire circle collapses. The fact of her comparative victory points to the importance of the values she represents for the author of *We*. In this chapter I interpret O-90 as a vehicle for Zamyatin to critique extremist politicization of the individual body. Here, I compare her interaction with the regime, predicated on her desire to procreate, to the trends in European reproductive and social policies concurrent with Zamyatin's writing the novel. I also demonstrate that the roots of these guiding principles in medical, psychological, and political control of women's reproductive choices lie in the antecedent Victorian approaches to the female body as a public object to be examined, pathologized, and modified.

Voluptuous and passionate, from the novel's beginning O-90 appears to be an outsider, though she is understood by Zamyatin's narrator to be silly, sensuous, and unconcerned with politics. Belonging to a lower caste than her companions D-503 and R-13, who are members of

the elite, she suffers an alienation from society that D-503 does not; because she makes no special contribution to the State machine, she enjoys no privileges. Zamyatin reveals this stratification, a direct contradiction to the State's dogma of perfect equality, during an exchange between R-13 and D-503 lauding the importance of their careers. As R-13 assures D-503 that he could "arrange it in a moment" for the mathematician to become a poet, D-503 responds gravely that he prefers to "continue to serve knowledge" (40). O-90, who is also present, is silent until she must apologetically inform D-503 that she cannot spend her sexual hour with him that day because she is assigned to R-13. Thus, her role in the State appears to be little more than domestic slavery. However, this is a deliberate subversion on Zamyatin's part. He knows that, according to Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai, such "subjugation of women" ought to be rendered obsolete when the woman gains "value in the national [collectivized] economy" as a result of "the obligation of every citizen to work," ultimately resulting in the withering away of the family unit (Kollontai 1921, 226). In *We*, Zamyatin makes conspicuous reference to the abolition of the family, and yet, O-90, who is not economically dependent on either of her consorts, has no rights and no apparent value in the public sphere.

O-90's life is deprived of meaning by the State's enforcement of a sexual morality that seems to be a distorted version of the communist attitude toward sex. At the time Zamyatin was writing *We*, Kollontai famously proposed that "free love" ought to replace traditional marriage, an institution she identified as a method of consolidating property inheritance that necessitated the confinement of women to the home as chattel. Free love, in contrast, she defined simply as the "union of two people based on mutual agreement" (*ibid*). Kollontai recalls in her *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* that her beliefs were often

misconstrued as “the ‘nationalization of women,’” which she attributes to a reactionary, intentional misunderstanding of her view of sexuality as a basic physiological need, “such as hunger and thirst” that must be attended to carefully so as not to “exhaust the capacity of of men and women for work” (Kollontai 1926, Kollontai 1921, 229). Despite D-503’s report that in the One State, sexual relations are viewed as a “harmonious, pleasant, and useful function of the organism,” Zamyatin’s *Lex Sexualis* is exactly this mythic “nationalization” of sex: assigned to each citizen is an allotment of “sexual days” on which they have a “right to any other number, as to a sexual commodity” (21). It is important to note that the *Lex* contains no clause concerning mutual consent to sexual activity. O-90, theoretically liberated from the confinement of the bourgeois family structure, is actually born into a new type of subjugation, as a “sexual commodity.”

In his portrayal of O-90, Zamyatin rejects the notion that this public unity can replace interpersonal union. The State’s effort to communize its people by means of equally distributed sexuality serves only to alienate them from each other. This effect is evidenced by D-503’s firm generalization that women “are totally incapable of thinking abstractly” (36). Zamyatin, who associates femininity in the text with disorderliness, depicts the State as particularly inhumane to “women,” who, according D-503, parroting the government, are “incurably riddled with prejudices” (36). Zamyatin gives the reader to understand “prejudices” as a codeword for “opinions,” a threat which the State attempts to negate by discrediting female voices in general.

Zamyatin’s sinister parody of radical reproductive politics also includes a eugenic component. In the novel, he alludes to it by means of the “Maternal Norm,” which O-90 does not meet due to her standing “ten centimeters shorter” than the requisite height to procreate (4). It is

important to remember that the Bolsheviks never adopted eugenic programs resembling the practices described in *We*, but, as David L. Hoffmann discusses in his history of Soviet social welfare policy, at the end of the nineteenth century, eugenics was widely praised across Europe and America as an “application of science to human reproduction that would better society as a whole,” representing a “shift away from individual medicine and toward social medicine” (Hoffmann 2014; 157, 158). These ideas, which spread to Russia before the Revolution, did appeal to many Bolsheviks, who advocated a kind of “soft eugenics” that focused on improving prenatal healthcare and “government assistance for mothers as a eugenic responsibility of the state” (*ibid*, 164). The genetic determinism of “hard eugenics,” i.e., genetic cleansing, was ultimately deemed irreconcilable with Marxism, and therefore not implemented (*ibid*). However, forced sterilization was brazenly practiced in the twentieth century in the United Kingdom, the United States, and, notoriously, Germany. Although Zamyatin obviously criticizes the Bolshevik regime in *We*, he responds also to the rise of a global obsession with genetic purity in his novel, where crowds are “rows of noble, globelike, closely shaven heads,” that are “all so much alike” (16, 8).

D-503, recalling his knowledge of “history,” cannot believe that his ancestors “could leave sexual life without any semblance of control [...] totally unscientific, like animals [...] Isn’t it ridiculous: to know agriculture, poultry-breeding [...] yet fail to go on to the ultimate step of this logical ladder—child-breeding” (13). It is important to note that the basis of this standard cannot be medical in Zamyatin’s technocratic empire, where the functions of the body are increasingly supplanted by the “ideal unfreedom” and “subordination” of machinery (6). The State’s extensive and absolute control of sexual expression speaks to this negation of the organic

body in favor of the cybernetic superbody imagined by Tsiolkovsky, Soviet Taylorites, and their poet laureate, Aleksei Gastev.⁷ The Maternal Norm does not exist to promote a healthier population, but rather as a brutal mechanism to eliminate difference in the name of ideal unfreedom.

Zamyatin, responding to the psychophysiology of Soviet Taylorism, leaves clues for the reader that the “child-breeding” program of the One State has, likewise, both physical and intellectual standards. O-90 is prohibited from reproducing on the grounds that she is “ten centimeters shorter than the Maternal Norm,” but D-503, whose hands are “all hairy, shaggy,” a trait considered “a stupid atavism,” a deformity, by the State, is subject to no such limitations (4, 7). However, D-503’s pseudo-structuralist analysis of O-90’s temperament compared to his own provides an alternative explanation for her legal sterilization: D-503 explains to his readers that O-90 speaks up when she ought to keep “silent” because “her tongue is wrongly timed,” like the “premature supply of a spark to a motor” (7, 8). He sees his own mind, on the other hand, as a “chronometrically exact gleaming mechanism” of thought (32). Thus, it is possible that it is even more important for the State to isolate and promote D-503’s predisposition to obedience and gullibility than it is to purge the population of physiological degeneracy.

Because of this mental pliability, D-503 internalizes the State’s dismal view of humanity far more than O-90 does. Zamyatin makes this visible with D-503’s appraisal of his mistress as a “circle of rosy” flesh which is “always open” to him, and in whose mind there is “nothing” (77, 34). To D-503, O-90’s “round, blue-crystal eyes” are indistinguishable from the “eternal glass” from which all his other tools are constructed (10). He thinks of her as a loosely adjoined series

⁷ For a discussion of Zamyatin’s novel as a reaction to Gastev’s poetry, see Stites 1989, pp 149-155.

of parts which appear on demand for his own sexual gratification. D-503 literally imagines O-90 as a machine, a “sexual commodity,” and, moreover, with the “damaging” defect of “premature supply of spark” (8). This particular dismissal is prompted by O-90’s informing I-330 that D-503 is her registered sex partner. In the One State, for O-90 to express anything resembling sexual dominance, and, further, to interfere with a man’s perceived sexual autonomy, is a glitch in need of repair.

D-503’s cold, mechanical analysis of his partner recalls a Victorian trend, described by Showalter, of pathologizing “female dissent” through “metaphors of the clinic and the laboratory” that refer to the unruly woman as “a silent body to be observed [...] her resistance to convention could be treated as a scientific anomaly” so that “her individual experience becomes impersonal and statistical” (Showalter 1990; 127,128). Showalter cites the feminist writer Olive Schreiner’s “The Buddhist Priest’s Wife” as an example of this phenomenon. Schreiner’s story opens with a view of the female protagonist’s fresh corpse, described as “an outline under the white” sheet, or otherwise simply as “it,” and then recalls a conversation some years prior, in which the woman confronts the reality that the man she loves will eternally regard her intelligence and assertiveness in a merely “half-amused, half-interested way,” and that, for these qualities, she “is the only woman with whom [he] never realise[s] she is a woman” (Schreiner 1892, 111). Schreiner and Zamyatin objectify their “odd women” in the eyes of their male beholders to illustrate their perplexity and unease at the refusal of the sexual commodity to passively fulfill its function. In the case of Schreiner’s unnamed woman and Zamyatin’s O-90, the objectifying pathologization is preceded by a romantic rejection and a denial of her sexuality. The disobedient woman, then, becomes unappealing, then un-female, and finally inhuman, with

the aim of rendering her powerless to disturb male-centric prejudice. The woman who cannot be silenced is thus erased.

Zamyatin takes this depersonalization further by emphasizing the “crystalline” quality of O-90’s eyes, evocative of the universal building material of the State’s architecture. Zamyatin, who has D-503 repeatedly refer to this characteristic of O-90, illustrates D-503’s internalization of the State’s paradigm of the powerful male setting out to penetrate an alien, mindless female body. The State’s cosmic colonial project is presented as the impregnation of a vast, dark womb, and D-503 mirrors this image when he thinks of his lover’s body as a virgin territory. The effect of the State’s propaganda on D-503 is similar to that of nineteenth-century “boys’ fiction,” described by Showalter as “the primer for empire,” meant to engender a chauvinistic worldview among the future custodians of Western civilization (Showalter 1990, 80). An example of this phenomenon, bearing striking resemblance to D-503’s received disposition toward women, is the late nineteenth-century American gynecologist Marion Sims’s appropriation of imperial propagandistic language to describe “himself as a colonizing and conquering hero” when he penetrated female patients with the recently invented speculum (quoted in Showalter 1990, 129). This transformation of the female body into a landscape to be occupied and cultivated is a persistent device of alienation and subjugation in Zamyatin’s empire, where the State manipulates its victims into abetting its biopolitical agenda.

Zamyatin’s State deliberately and forcefully inculcates in its citizens a view of women simultaneously as pathogenic objects and spaces to conquer, and yet, O-90, an apparently average “she-number,” internalizes none of this, despite even her brainwashed lover’s complicity in her oppression. Zamyatin makes it clear to the reader early in the novel that she experiences

the so-called illness known as “fancy,” or imagination, that carries the dire prognosis of rebellion (40). She has been divested of any control over her physical life, so she cultivates an inner, freer world. Unlike D-503, who at first “cannot imagine a life that is not regulated by the figures” of the universal daily schedule, O-90 expresses, to his consternation, a sexual fantasy, to “let down the blinds” “right now,” when she is prohibited from doing so (11, 8). By the time D-503 begins his diary, O-90’s desire to become a mother is already a familiar “old song” to him (19). While D-503 cannot imagine how his ancestors got along reproducing of their own accord, O-90 does not accept the opposite. When D-503 discovers that she has ignored his monologue on robot ballet and the perfect “esthetic subordination” of the “*unfree*” body, he is oblivious to the significance of her interruption: “She talks about spring. Women...” (6). However, D-503 himself opens this journal entry with the word “spring,” and it is among his first ideas not directly copied from the State newspaper. D-503 struggles to repress these thoughts, but O-90 embraces her inner freedom.

In both Schreiner’s and Zamyatin’s cases, the Foucauldian “cycle of prohibition” manifests between individuals who internalize the societal norms established by political entities. The enforcement of the norm, as we have seen, depends on the administration of the abnormal through exertions of power that manipulate behavior by means of “a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences” described by Foucault’s maxim: “Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification” (Foucault 1978, 84). Both women begin from a position of nonexistence, the renunciation of desire, and end up in the alternative nonexistence of exile. But they do not “disappear.” Schreiner’s female character, like

O-90, is subject to a stifling atmosphere of systemic sexism, and when she finds no outlet there for her peculiarity, she flees to an exotic land that promises spiritual freedom. The story's title, "The Buddhist Priest's Wife," refers to the male character's assumption that the heroine will seek solace in an enlightened man. Buddhist priests, however, do not marry—Schreiner's free woman achieves enlightenment on her own. O-90 is also in love with her male companion, but her love is likewise subordinate to the desire for liberty that motivates her to flee a confining cycle of prohibitions.

Zamyatin initiates O-90's revolt with the act of seizing a body. When O-90 rescues a falling child, on precarious display as a visual aid for a public lecture on "child-breeding," by snatching the infant with her "lips" after releasing a "woman's scream," she acts on a maternal impulse that is more powerful than the State's authority and can no longer be silenced (110). Even D-503 can see the "necessity" of this act (110). It is a retaliatory outburst against the State's annexation of her own body, and an exclamation of Zamyatin's anarchic female principle, which is purely intuitive, irrational, and, therefore, necessary. This gesture is the precise opposite of the "ideal unfreedom" D-503 finds in the "mechanical ballet" of spacecraft construction. Even the State's ruthless eugenic program cannot overcome O-90's defiant sense of self.

3.2 Strange Nearness

Though Zamyatin makes the Mephi insurrection instrumental to the liberation of each of his main characters, the case of O-90 is distinct. Though her activities and goals often intersect with the Mephi agenda, I-330 does not recruit O-90 because the latter, unlike top engineer

D-503, poet laureate R-13, rogue secret policeman S-4711, or the doctor, holds no valuable position in the United State. D-503 and R-13 both feel unfulfilled by their public service, but O-90 lacks even the meager creative outlets afforded her men. Zamyatin worsens her situation by making her subject to even harsher personal restrictions than the other prominent characters. In opposition to the State's total suppression of her creative potential, her procreative impulse incites her ultimate act of defiance and delivers her from imprisonment. O-90, initially Zamyatin's most powerless and suffering character, lacks also the vices of other figures in the novel. She can be interpreted, as has been suggested by Andrew Barratt, as "the real heroine" of *We*, for "hers is a story of real fulfilment" of which Zamyatin seems to morally approve (Barratt 1984, 361). Barratt hesitates, however, in this assessment, citing the "vague and ambivalent" significance of O-90's future beyond the Wall (*ibid*, 361). I contend, rather, that an examination of Zamyatin's evidently deliberate engagement with icons of divine motherhood will elucidate O-90's true role in the novel as a "real heroine," as well as her future with the Mephi.

The symbolism of O-90's "speaking name" hints at her latent heroism. The letter O resembles the number zero, neither negative nor positive, with the potential to negate any other figure in an equation or else to be entirely superfluous.⁸ Likewise, O-90, who is virtually ignored by the other characters, outlives them all. In his explanation of the *Lex Sexualis*, D-503 explains the maxim (which O-90 in fact overturns) that there can be "no possible reasons for envy" if the freedom of choice is removed from sexual relations, and that where there is zero freedom, "the denominator of the happiness fraction is reduced to zero, and the whole fraction is thus converted to a magnificent infinity" (22). The proximity of zero to infinity is a mathematical curiosity

⁸ It is worth noting here that Pythagoras' numerology, discussed in Chapter 1 of this essay, had no concept of "zero" (Wertheim 1997, 24).

appropriate to O-90's arc. O-90's connection to infinity, an unreal number, connects her to the unreal world of fantasy. Zamyatin maps out another avenue to unlimited freedom in the geometric aspect of "O," which possesses that hidden, forbidden interior space whose very existence is antithetical to the State doctrine of linear logic.

O-90, understood as an inverted double of the collective organism in which she lives, becomes even more threatening to the State. Zamyatin establishes her dominant physical features as her large window-like eyes and her convex yet compact figure, just like the architecture of the State. But while the brainwashed D-503 celebrates this quality in connection with the State, as a hallmark of the "most perfect" sedentary form of life which must be disseminated throughout the universe, for O-90 it is considered a defect which must be eradicated from the gene pool (12). The inner reality of the empire is sterile and static, but O-90's hidden depths are fertile and dynamic.

Zamyatin carefully and consistently undermines D-503's confident appraisal of "dear, sweet" O-90's simple and submissive disposition. The author establishes the inaccuracy of his narrator's characterization by making it clear to the reader that D-503 does not actually pay any attention to O-90. Her first reported arrival at D-503's quarters takes him by surprise, even though it is a standing appointment. Though D-503 sees O-90 as a mere sexual commodity, she is a rather outspoken and unruly woman who often criticizes his behavior. For instance, when D-503 informs O-90 of his plan to confess his first transgression with I-330 to the police, she stops him from doing so by offering him a bouquet along with her emphatic disapproval.

Zamyatin depicts O-90's nonconformity as inseparable from her feminine sensuality, but O-90's subversive sexuality is different from I-330's. Liquidated before she can realize her

vision of a new world order, I-330's eros is ultimately a destructive force, leading to the demolition of the Wall and accelerating the fall of the One State, but no further. O-90 represents an alternative, productive force of opposition to the State. Zamyatin places the bouquet conversation directly after D-503's unlawful tryst with I-330, who prefaces her sexual pursuit of the engineer by naming an alternative to logical "love, because of," that is the ancient, unconditional "love, just like that"⁹ (26). I-330 needs D-503 to believe that she loves him "just like that," to ensure his loyalty, while in reality she loves him precisely "because of" his position, expertise, and the consequent potential to exploit him for her political agenda. O-90 actually loves him unconditionally. Her gift, flowers, which D-503 detests for their lack of utility, is "just like that," while I-330's is a proposition. O-90 pressures D-503 not to report his experience in the Ancient House to the police to stop him from incriminating himself, but also out of a reflexive revulsion to the idea of cooperating with the State: "to the spies... Ugh!" she says (36). Her instinct, however, dovetails perfectly with the Mephi agenda. The femme fatale I-330 shows him love to gain authority over him, but O-90 exercises authority out of love, yet both acts further the revolutionary cause. O-90's bouquet offering is a romantic gesture, but the citizens are supposed to "see nothing beautiful in flowers" because they lack any concrete function (48). This signals that O-90 does not deny her innate aesthetic sensitivities the way that D-503 strives to do. Further, Zamyatin connects O-90 to the Mephi revolution symbolically through the image of flowers. The Mephi are associated with the yellow pollen that announces the arrival of spring, and O-90, bearing illicit blossoms, shows herself ripe for pollination and revolt.

O-90's symbolic fertilization bears notable similarities to the Greek myth of Danae:

⁹ Russian: *prosto tak*, alternatively, "just so."

daughter of the king Akrisios, who imprisons Danae after a prophet reveals that she will give birth to a son who would destroy him. Despite her imprisonment, she is then impregnated by Zeus in the form of a “shower of gold,” and her father expels her from Argos in retaliation (Hard 2004, 227). O-90’s fertility, like Danae’s, is both a pretext for her captivity and the source of her liberation. In both cases, a woman is condemned by a powerful and aggressive male master who feels threatened by the possibility of progeny who may destabilize his authority. Though Zamyatin poses O-90’s procreative potential as a more complex ideological hazard to the State, the threat is nearly the same as in the case of Danae and Akrisios. For O-90 to pass on her diminutive genes would be to preserve physical difference in the population—to perpetuate the individual, which, as a concept, is an inherent threat to the State that recognizes only the Benefactor as a supreme, *Übermensch*-like figure, and a mass of subhumans. Referring to O-90’s public act of nonconformity, Zamyatin makes it clear to the reader that her possible future child is an already victorious rival for her loyalty to the State; she desires not simply to produce offspring, but to nurture her child, to touch “the little crease” of the wrist, to be a mother, not a broodmare (Zamyatin 1924, 112). For O-90 and Danae, maternal destiny defeats the efforts of their wardens to constrain them. After Zeus intervenes on Danae’s behalf, her father attempts to drown her and her child by locking them in a chest and casting them into the sea, which they miraculously survive. O-90’s escape is rather more self-accomplished. Like D-503, she is visibly affected by the atmosphere of dissent accompanied by the showers of gold “honey pollen” (3). But while D-503 is absorbed into the whirlwind of dissident activity and becomes a tool for the insurgents, the Mephi become a supporting apparatus for O-90’s liberation, which she initiates herself when she impregnates herself by means of D-503. Zamyatin, then, offers O-90 as a truly

free person, and an alternative to I-330 as the “Anti-Benefactor.”

When yellow appears as the fertilizing “honey pollen,” it represents an irrepressible natural instinct toward liberty and perpetuation of the self, but this color, as we have seen, is for Zamyatin a flexible symbolic device: when it is connected with I-330 as a political agent, it is “bright,” “vivid,” and, when combined with black, stands for hope but also for fear of the man-trap, or the bee-sting that may follow her ideological “pollination.” As D-503 begins to fall in love with the idea of freedom, the yellow of pollen becomes an ethereal “milky golden veil” of mist at sunset, obscuring the usually cloudless, artificially azure sky above the One State (59). When gold is associated with O-90, she begins to resemble another goddess who made an enormous impact on Russian letters in the early twentieth century.

Gold and azure are often found at odds in the Symbolist poetry of Bely and Blok, with whom Zamyatin worked closely for several years. For the Symbolists, gold, especially when tinged with pink, was associated with the pursuit of an abstract feminine ideal, iconicized by the Russian philosopher-poet Vladimir Solovyov’s Sophia, an “emanation of divine light and wisdom in Gnostic mysticism” (Matich 2005; 58). She makes an appearance in Blok’s “Unknown Woman” in the guise of a beautiful stranger, who, behind a “dusky veil” possesses “an enchanted shoreline / a charmed remoteness” (Blok 1906, 324). In Bely’s “Eternal Call,” the “remoteness” herself calls to the speaker, who is imprisoned in an “azure,” “frozen, glittering” madhouse (Bely 1903, 28). She promises him, “I am so close to you. / My poor earthly children, / at the golden-ambering hour” (*ibid*). It is likely that Zamyatin’s reverence for the female in his novel was influenced by Symbolist meditations on this divine femme. The author seems to invoke Sophia when, beyond the Green Wall, D-503 is attracted to a “golden-haired,

satiny-golden woman” who walks among the Mephi. But D-503’s “heart” is also touched by the golden, “tiny drops of sunlight [gleaming]” in O-90’s “blue eyes,” like the “blue fathomless eyes” of Blok’s stranger that will “blossom on a distant shore” (157, 42; Blok 1906, 324). O-90’s instinctual moral code, her curious imperviousness to State dogma, her remoteness, and her exaggerated femininity are all evocative of Sophia, or “God’s female other” (Matich 2005, 61). O-90’s “call” falls on deaf ears in the One State’s godless temple of machinery, but to the romantic Mephi mystics, her heretical disposition would be a divine gift.

3.3 A Sectarian Madonna

It is possible to read O-90 as I-330’s successor in the Mephi movement and as the perfected embodiment of Zamyatin’s female principle of irrational, incorrigible individual spirit. O-90 very well may, after the end of D-503’s record, take up the struggle to overthrow the One State. When D-503 gives O-90 the letter for I-330 that will ensure her escape, he sees in her face “a faint, rosy dawn,” suggesting the advent of a new era, while also connecting O-90 to the Mephi, and also to Sophia, through the image of the rising sun (*ibid*, 192). Zamyatin characterizes O-90 as a heretical and courageous woman, willing to die for freedom, quite like I-330 herself. I-330 personally sends O-90 beyond the wall, promising D-503 that “she’ll live” (*ibid*, 201). This occurs shortly before I-330’s final acts of terrorism, the foiled highjacking of the *Integral* and the demolition of the Wall—events that precipitate I-330’s downfall, but also the promise of a new life for O-90 and her unborn child. O-90 is liberated just as a power vacuum would appear among the Mephi, who are left leaderless after the death of I-330.

As discussed in the first chapter of this study, Zamyatin often employs uterine metaphors

to describe D-503's attempts at free thought. The semantics of gestation in the novel imply a special, though often overlooked, significance for O-90, whom the author defines foremost as a maternal figure. Zamyatin depicts her unlikely association with the Mephi as the result of spontaneous errors that seem almost fated. The city-dwelling scientist D-503 describes the Mephi as near-mystical beings, and the values they represent in the novel—liberty, absence of sexual inhibition, and political radicalism—are similar to the turn-of-the-century Russian intelligentsia's concept of sectarian communities among the rural peasantry, as discussed by Alexander Etkind (Etkind 2003). The perceived sexual freedom of Russian sectarians, especially the *Khlysty*,¹⁰ was associated with female liberation and the veneration of maternity, especially of the *Bogoroditsy*, the “Mothers of God,” powerful female cult figures who were expected to give birth to new incarnations of Christ. Tracing the sectarian qualities of the Mephi movement will further illuminate the meaning of O-90's motherhood in Zamyatin's novel.

Georgy Fedotov, the turn-of-the-century Russian religious thinker and historian, proposed that “the constant longing for a great divine female power, be it embodied in the image of Mary or someone else' [...] formed the true center of Russian religious feeling” (quoted in Ivanits 1992; 15, 21). Linda Ivanits adds that in pre-revolutionary Russian culture, the “divine, suffering Motherhood” of Orthodoxy “sometimes merge[d] with the popular veneration of Mother Earth” of pre-Christian faith (*ibid*, 21). Zamyatin engages with this paradigm in *We*, where life-giving women are awarded moral preference over mechanized urban male figures. O-90 is an icon of miraculous motherhood: her child is conceived on pain of death and rescued by an improbable and risky intervention from another powerful female. O-90 herself commits no

¹⁰ Sometimes translated as “Flagellants.” The Russian word *khlyst* is usually translated as “whip,” as in D-503's description of the Mephi leader I-330's physique, “like a whip.”

sins in the eyes of the author; in contrast to the heroic yet problematic I-330, O-90 is indifferent to authority and uninterested in dogma, but openly defies the State's regime out of pure, procreative instinct. The seat of rebellion for O-90 is her womb.

Zamyatin, significantly, has D-503 liken the new experience of authorship to "what a woman feels when she first senses within herself the pulse" of a "blind little human being" (2). The Ancient House, where D-503 meets with the freedom-fighter I-330, is a dim, "fragile, blind structure" encased in a "shell," where the protagonist is struck by the notion that "all of us on earth walk constantly over a seething, scarlet sea of flame, hidden below, in the belly of the earth" (25, 56). This womblike structure provides a secret path to the outside world, from where D-503 emerges disoriented, "stunned," and breathless like a newborn (155). D-503 experiences the sentimental clutter in the Ancient House as the "savage whirlwind of ancient life." Moreover, kissing I-330, who he perceives as a being "from that ancient, savage land of dreams," makes him feel as if he is "whirling madly" (28, 52). Nearing the novel's conclusion, D-503 sits alone at the State's sacred altar—the execution machine—and sadly laments to himself, "if only I had a mother [...] to whom I would be [...] not a molecule of the One State, but a simple human being—a piece of herself" (216). As if in response to his prayer, the Mephi finally destroy the Green Wall the following morning, and the numbers riot "like disorderly fragments of a once harmonious, great Machine" now "swept by the wind" (218). Zamyatin's repetition of the "whirling" image in connection with the Mephi links sexual liberation, fertility, romanticized "savagery," and revolution—and the *Khlysty* sect.

During "the years that preceded and followed the Revolution," "sectarianism was at the center of the Russian public debate" and informed a trend Etkind calls "mystical Populism"

(Etkind 2003, 586). According to Etkind, “the Russian elite, aware that they shared the same race, ethnicity, and language as the subaltern population [the *narod*], created a specific device of ‘othering,’ which consisted in the projection of religious difference” and “structured their vague conception of the people through the Westernized ideas of political protest, sectarian worship, and communal life” (*ibid*, 567). Zamyatin, in his obituary for Andrey Bely, admired the latter’s exploration of the *Khlysty* as “the dark forces of the Russian village” in his 1910 novel *The Silver Dove* (Zamyatin 1934, 243). In *We*, the “weird atmosphere” of the village gives birth to the Mephi (*ibid*). Zamyatin’s I-330 explains to D-503 that the Mephi are but a “remnant” of the pre-One State era. They are the descendants of those who escaped the yoke of reason and “learned how to live from trees, from animals and birds,” recalling the animism of Slavic pagans, but retained the same “hot, red blood” and still speak the same language as D-503 and the city-dwellers (164). Thus, the major difference between the Mephi and the numbers, besides body hair, is philosophical-religious. Like the fantastic perception of the sectarians as powerful mystics and possible saviors of the Russian people prevalent in Zamyatin’s milieu, the brief, dreamlike glimpses into the world of the Mephi offer the reader visions of of an “obscure, exotic, virtuous” utopia, preserved and perpetuated by the One State’s “other” (Etkind 2003, 566).

Of particular interest to Etkind and to us is that urban scholars at the turn of the century tended to ascribe extraordinary and bizarre sexual practices to the sectarians. These ideas were informed by Fedotov’s theology that emphasized the role of female figures in popular religion and by the Afanasy Shchapov, who “developed a grand synthesis of religious studies, political history, and the emerging science of ethnography” and connected “two realities equally unknown to the public, namely sects and revolution” (*ibid*; 571, 567). Among the more controversial and

widely discussed sects were the *Khlysty*. Throughout the eighteenth century, the *Khlysty* were accused by religious authorities of “self-flagellation, group sex, ritual murder, and cannibalism” (*ibid*, 568). Etkind compares them to “Siberian shamans” and “European witches,” placing the sect, historically and religiously, “between the pagan memory of the Russian past and the communitarian desire of the Soviet future”¹¹ (*ibid*, 569). Their taboo sexual practices were mostly myth, but to scholars of Zamyatin’s time, they were still accepted as fact. An especially widespread legend was, according to Etkind, a figment of nineteenth-century Prussian traveler August von Haxthausen’s imagination, but it became common knowledge nonetheless, defining the *Khlysty* to Russians and Europeans alike. Von Haxthausen described a ritual in which “singing, whirling, and self-flagellating sectarians cut off one breast of a naked virgin. After her breast was collectively eaten, the community of sectarians engaged in group intercourse, *svalnyi grekh*. The young woman with one breast was called *Bogoroditsa* (Mother of God), and she became a leader of the community” (*ibid*, 572). Interestingly, von Haxthausen considered this ritual to be as empowering as it was barbaric—he wrote in the introduction to his travelogue that “the St. Simonians went to Egypt to discover the free woman; had they gone to Russia they would perhaps have returned better satisfied” (quoted in Etkind 2003, 572).

In the world of Zamyatin’s *We*, O-90 can be interpreted as such a free woman in search of deliverance. The author depicts her as a suffering mother whose fertility becomes her salvation. She may be associated with Mary, the Mother of God, except that O-90’s “paradise” is neither the entropic one of the Christians, nor the Pythagorean realm of divine abstraction. Instead of sanctifying O-90, Zamyatin grants her ascendance to a heretical heaven.

¹¹ This sect is known to have practiced “a ritual whirling dance that resembled the dances of American Shakers” (Etkind 2003, 568)

O-90 embodies the traits that the Populists ascribed to the sectarians and that the Pythagoreans assigned to the female: a resistance to order rooted in instincts born of the body and the earth. She becomes empowered when she orders D-503 to impregnate her, regardless of the consequences, out of an instinct recalled from the “shaggy depths,” following a “woman’s scream” (14, 110). O-90, the whirling “rosy hurricane” with her eyes “brimming,” functions in *We* as the People’s Holy Mother, a sectarian Madonna (77, 112). From D-503’s perspective, she appears to be an outsider in the One State, where her virtues are interpreted as primitive and nonsensical. But when O-90’s behavior is considered in the context of the alternative Mephi community, which espouses the Scythian ideal of endless motion and rejection of the banal present for a fantastic future, it takes on a different significance. In a sectarian world of sublime eccentricity, this irrational woman would become the norm, embodying to a fuller extent than any other character in the novel the principle of intractable individualism rejected by mainstream society.

Viewing the Mephi as a popular sect implies that I-330, by contrast, is akin to an urban radical undertaking a Populist pilgrimage, “going to the people [*khozhdenie v narod*]” to awaken the masses. And, like her prototypes, I-330 ultimately fails to organize a successful revolution, just as she fails to effect a true and permanent awakening in D-503, who is unable to transcend his desire to be controlled. As the novel draws to a conclusion, I-330’s lips turn out to be “cold,” her love, sterile: however provocative, her eros is unproductive (224). The “Sectarian Madonna” O-90 fully embodies the boundless and bountiful, inspired spontaneity that is antithetical to the rational man-machine of the State. For Zamyatin, O-90 is the “hurricane,” an emissary from the whirlwind of the “ancient, savage land of dreams” (77, 28).

Conclusion

Revolution Girl Style Now: Zamyatin's "Punk Prayer"

I did not at first set out to write a “feminist” analysis of *We*. My original task was merely to discover the significance of Zamyatin’s use of gender tropes and explore his idea of spiritual freedom. The author’s vision of femininity is lyrical and mystical—and, at first glance, schematic, essentialist, and reductive. I tend to view any abstract, monistic “principle” of femaleness with skepticism. But, as my project unfolded, I realized that Zamyatin’s concept of womanhood is not limited to a single type of spirit. D-503’s “seismographic” “record” of his life accidentally morphs into a “fantastic adventure novel.” Similarly, my interrogation of Zamyatin’s sex dialectic has uncovered a sensitive and striking feminist vein that would not be out of place in today’s intersectional feminist conversation. Indeed, the class-consciousness and the plurality of his approach to female liberation is exactly what is sorely lacking in twenty-first century identity politics.

When Kollontai called for a “new heroine,” Zamyatin fictionalized her, but she did not need to be invented. In the process of writing his novel, he resurrected ancient monsters and holy mothers and gave them the daughters I-330 and O-90. To ask which is *the* “real” heroine of the novel is to do an injustice to Zamyatin’s thought, to feminism, and to the spirit of revolution. *We* flatly rejects the relentless classification and organization of humanity. Clare Coffey, in an article

criticizing the fixation of third-wave feminist thought on female professional success, proposes that adherence to a single “strong feminist role model promises utopia through the fruitless pursuit of an imaginary ideal.” According to Coffey, “if the valorization of women’s achievements fills a harmful cultural gap, it also risks turning feminism into a project of moral sorting and reward—ultimately obscuring, naturalizing, and enforcing the power systems it purports to challenge” (Coffey 2016). That is to say, one framework of exclusion replaces another. This argument accords with Zamyatin’s belief that to entrench and enforce an idea spells the death of that idea. A single beacon of resistance, then, is not enough.

The threat of tyranny, driven in *We* by a synthesis of Taylorism and Freudism, with the face of Kollontai and the spite of Pythagoras, becomes more urgent when we recognize that these mechanisms are effective on people like D-503—men who lack imagination, of whom there is, sadly, an abundance in reality. I believe that this is central to Zamyatin’s thesis, and that is why I do not accept the “external marks” of his “awakening” as very significant. If the human soul can be so severely maimed, then it is all the more urgent that we defend it. Through the perspective of Foucault’s historical theory, it becomes clear that the One State’s methods, too, are more than a dark dream. Indeed, the twentieth century saw this nightmare invade waking life in multiple iterations across our world.

Fortunately, the State’s “enemies of happiness” also have their counterparts in reality. The revolutionary aesthetic of Pussy Riot, Russia’s most controversial political punk rockers, is a shrill echo of I-330’s startling deviance. Their acts of protest are a Mayakovskian slap in the face of good taste. They attack the establishment with a woman’s scream, wearing army fatigues and balaclavas or shamelessly naked. The body is their battleground. The group’s *de facto*

frontwoman and self-styled grotesque libertine Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, like her literary sister, is more than a performer. She is a Scythian woman who rides on—and survives to record her adventures. In a letter to Slavoj Žižek from a Siberian prison, Tolokonnikova wrote of her activities with Pussy Riot:

We are the children of Dionysus, sailing in a barrel and not recognizing any authority. We are a part of this force that has no final answers or absolute truths, for our mission is to question. There are architects of Apollonian statics and there are (punk) singers of dynamics and transformation [...] it is only together that we can ensure the world functions in the way Heraclitus defined it: ‘This world has been and will eternally be living on the rhythm of fire, inflaming according to the measure, and dying away according to the measure. This is the functioning of the eternal world breath.’ We are the rebels asking for the storm, and believing that truth is only to be found in an endless search. If the ‘World Spirit’ touches you, do not expect that it will be painless (Tolokonnikova 2013).

Tolokonnikova’s iconoclastic philosophy belongs to the same heresy as Zamyatin’s and his I-330’s savage dreams of “tormentingly endless movement.” Before the birth of Pussy Riot, she was involved in a protest group called *Voyna* (“War”), with whom she staged even more elaborate and controversial performances. The most notorious was an act entitled “Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear.” After Dmitrii Medvedev became Russia’s president in 2008, Tolokonnikova reacted to his call to increase the country’s birth rate by engaging in group sex with ten members of *Voyna* at the Moscow Zoological Museum. If the state would presume to provide instructions for the use of her body, she would show them exactly how those instructions would be carried

out. In an act of grotesque parody, Tolokonnikova demonstrated that she would not allow her body to be utilized as a means for Medvedev's government to fortify itself as a biopolitical structure or as a world power. At the time of the performance, Tolokonnikova was eight months pregnant. In this piece of activist art that depended on the body as the medium of resistance, her swollen belly became the locus of refusal to surrender her fertility to powerful men who would nationalize her sexuality. Thus, almost a century later, an intersection of O-90's rejection of civic sexual morality and I-330's mercenary sexuality mark a defiant "X" in this fearsome woman whose seat of rebellion is her womb.

Tolokonnikova does not fight alone—she is but one of a scourge of new heretics whose task is continuous with Zamyatin's, who transcend artistic genre to reach into Russia's fabled past and to probe the uncertain future in order to question the "truth of today." Their ranks include the warrior-poets Maria Stepanova and Elena Fanailova, and dissident emigre writer Mikhail Shishkin, to name a few.

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