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重新評估察米雅欽的《我們》

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摘 要

俄國作家察米雅欽的《我們》在反烏托邦文學中具有舉足輕重的地位，是此一文類的開山祖之一。然而，傳統上反烏托邦文學的研究者所關注的，多為其社會批判的層面，亦即反烏托邦是針對當前社會走向所發出的「預警」。此等「內容掛帥」的閱讀方式無法發掘《我們》在內涵和文體上所展露的活潑多變的風貌，以是本論文希冀提供另一視角，以補傳統閱讀的不足。由內涵與文體兩方面觀之，皆可見《我們》作為一反烏托邦小說的獨特性。《我們》是一個深具「開放性」的反烏托邦，在內涵上刻意呈現意識形態的不受制約，在文體上則採取深具自我意識的後設技巧，徹底顛覆反烏托邦小說單元/封閉的敘事空間。相較於其他反烏托邦小說，《我們》具有開放的辯證特質，在反烏托邦的陰鬱中重燃烏托邦的樂觀希望。

關鍵詞：反烏托邦、察米雅欽、我們

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Zamyatin's *We*: A Reassessment

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Abstract

This paper means to draw attention to the uniqueness of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* as a "heretical" product, a work that stands aloof among modern dystopias in many aspects. Ideologically as well as textually, *We* is a dynamic, open-ended dystopia, foregrounding ideological free play and narrative indeterminacy. Its articulation of multiplicity of perspectives defies any assertion of absolutism or authority and destabilizes whatever illusion of closure the text may have harbored. Its recourse to various metafictional techniques further unravels a textual world where everything is just in the process of becoming and nothing has already been finished. The departure of *We* from the realist tradition upheld by other dystopias is significant in negotiating a strategy to counter the official, orthodox narrative and eventually to provide a glimpse of hope for the otherwise dark world.

Keywords: Dystopia, Zamyatin, *We*

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Zamyatin's *We*: A Reassessment

Chang Hui-chuan

Much has been dwelt on Yevgeny Zamyatin's[1] *We* as an archetypal modern dystopia[2]. *We*, written in 1920-21 and first published in an English translation in 1924, is habitually highlighted for its rapport with the two great English dystopias of the twentieth century: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Zamyatin's indebtedness to the turn-of-the century utopian figure H. G. Wells has also received much critical scrutiny[3]. Less attention, however, is paid to the uniqueness of *We* as a "heretical" product[4], a work that stands aloof among modern dystopias in many aspects. This paper therefore aims to focus on the distinctive quality of *We*, pinpointing its various innovative attempts to combat ideological entropy and narrative stasis.

I

To a certain degree, Zamyatin's *We* does appear to be a typical modern

1 According to Gary Kern, "Zamyatin's name may be transliterated in three ways: Evgeny Zamyatin, Evgenii Zamiatin, Evgenij Zamjatin." (21) The first name is also spelled as "Yevgeny" in some cases.

2 Some critics prefer to differentiate between "dystopia" and "anti-utopia." For them, "dystopia" retains some elements of hope and the potential for opposition while "anti-utopia" does not harbor any possibility of change. For detail please see Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 156-158. In my subsequent discussion I prefer to use "dystopia" as an inclusive umbrella term.

3 See, for example, Patrick Parrinder, "Imagining the Future: Zamyatin and Wells," *Science-Fiction Studies* 1 (Spring 1973): 37-41; or the more recent "The Future as Anti-Utopia: Wells, Zamyatin and Orwell," in Parrinder's *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy*.

4 The word "heretical" is employed to designate the aberrant aspect of *We*, and is also a tribute to the collection of essays by Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic*.

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dystopian text. A genre that has its roots in Menippean Satire (Kaplan 200) and becomes full-fledged "in the last part of the nineteenth century" (Kumar 110), dystopia exemplifies various traits which by now become quite familiar to its readers. Dystopia, as an "inverted utopia" (Davies 205), is a form of social criticism (Booker 3), which "often reflects paranoia, alarm, or hysteria" (Kaplan 200). That dystopia is preoccupied with contemporary evil trends is succinctly indicated by Krishan Kumar:

> [T]he anti-utopia felt no need to look very far into the future. The impact of the new developments was only too evident in their own times, in their own societies. Democracy was producing mob rule or Napoleonic dictatorship, science and technology a world emptied of all meaning and purpose. By the time the modern anti-utopia was established, in the last part of the nineteenth century, it had come to feel that modern society was already so far anti-utopian as to require little in the way of futuristic elaboration. Unlike utopia, which was only too acutely aware of how much still needed to be done, the anti-utopia was often no more than a thinly disguised portrait of the contemporary world, seen as already more than halfway on the road to damnation. (110)

Furthermore, in his discussion of "the dystopian turn," Tom Moylan endorses Raffaella Baccolini's idea about "the dystopian trajectory," which pinpoints the fact that a dystopian text "usually begins directly in the bad new world, and yet even without a dislocating move to an elsewhere." Thus "the protagonist (and the reader) is always already *in* the world in question, unreflectively immersed in the society" (148). Gary Saul Morson also indicates that there is a "counter-narrative," which "develops as the 'dystopian citizen' moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation that is followed by growing awareness and then action that leads to a *climatic* event that does or does not challenge or change the society" (148). Judged by the above criteria, *We* is certainly a seminal text in the dystopian genre.

We, as an inverted utopia, is characterized by its vehement critique of utopianism. In passages reminiscent of Dostoevsky, Zamyatin consistently launches his attack on the utopian discourse. The following extract from "Record 11" of *We* may be a typical example:

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> "Paradise," he began, and the *p* meant a spray. "The old dream about Paradise—that was about us, about right now. Yes! Just think about it. Those two in Paradise, they were offered a choice: happiness without freedom, or freedom without happiness, nothing else. Those idiots chose freedom. And then what? Then for centuries they were homesick for the chains . . . . And we were the first to hit on the way to get back to happiness . . . . Paradise was back. And we're simple and innocent again, like Adam and Eve." (*We* 61)

Besides the pivotal dichotomy of freedom vs. happiness, Zamyatin's portrayal of the One State further pinpoints the dehumanizing effect of the gospel of science and technology. It is no accident at all that Zamyatin's protagonist should be a mathematician, builder of the spaceship INTEGRAL meant to "integrate the indefinite equation of the universe" (*We* 3). By his satiric rendering of a world whose citizens are designated by numbers only, a state whose existence is predicated on strict control by the Benefactor and his Guardians, and a city protected by a glass wall, Zamyatin "has often been hailed as a prophet who foresaw the advent of the totalitarian Soviet regime" (Stefani, par. 1). The interest of the work, moreover, has much to do with the "counter-narrative" in which the protagonist, D-503, stranded as he is in the "bad new world," shows his growing dissatisfaction with the mechanized state and attempts to ally himself with a revolutionary force to overthrow the regime.

Given the archetypal status of *We*, it is but small wonder that critics are dedicated to assessing the work as an important intertext in the dystopian tradition or pinpointing the influence of *We* on other dystopian texts. An essay on *We* from *The Explicator* is quite typical in this regard:

> Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) is an important novel in the development of modern science fiction. Mark R. Hillegas, for example, discusses this dystopia's reaction against the earlier utopianism of H. G. Wells (101-105) and its "indebtedness" to Wells regarding various plot devices (107-109), whereas Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin remind us that "its influence is visible in works from Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *1984* (1949), to Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952) and Burgess's *A*

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Clockwork Orange (1962).” (Dennis & McGiveron 211)

Here Wells is envisioned as a pivotal figure in shaping the course of *We*. Other possible sources have also been investigated. Philip Rogers, for example, studies “the possible influence of *Hard Times* on *We*” (393), while Sara Stefani attempts to explore “the Platonic underpinnings of Zamjatin’s work” (par. 3).

Over the years, moreover, there is a tendency in dystopian scholarship to scrutinize the affinity among the three great dystopias of the twentieth century. Gorman Beauchamp’s 1973 study of *We* and *1984* articulates “the central conflict of the individual’s rebellion against the State,” which Beauchamp sees as reenacting “the Christian myth of man’s first disobedience” (287). E. J. Brown’s 1988 “*Brave New World*, *1984*, and *We*: An Essay on Anti-Utopia” mostly dwells on various aspects of Zamyatin and his ties with his “English [r]elatives” (220), among whom basic philosophical assumptions and satiric intent are likewise detected. A more recent essay by Patrick Parrinder, the 1995 “The Future as Anti-Utopia: Wells, Zamyatin and Orwell,” continues in this “canonization” of Zamyatin. In his opening paragraph Parrinder is eager to establish the dystopian lineage running from Wells through Zamyatin to Huxley and Orwell:

> Michael Glenny has written that ‘the essential link in the English “anti-Utopian” tradition—the man who grasped the potential in the literary technique of an English writer of one generation, gave it a new dimension and handed it on to two masters of the next generation—was that curiously “English” Russian, Yevgeny Zamyatin.’ The English writer of an earlier generation was Wells, and the two later masters were Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Orwell himself acknowledged that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was indebted to Zamyatin’s *We* (1920-21), and asserted that Huxley must have drawn upon it in *Brave New World*. (115)

Another contemporary essay, “Reinterpretations of Orwell’s *1984*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Zamyatin’s *We* Based on the Conflict Between Liberty and Domination,” continues to follow the well-trodden road although it does have something new to say about the use of certain symbolic imagery. Even a discussion of cyberpunk and cyberculture highlights the science-fictional aspect of the future

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depicted in *Brave New World*, *1984*, and *We*, the latter being referred to as "the paradigmatic anti-utopia that prefigured and influenced" the first two (Cavallaro 8). Given the validity of the above arguments, one may nevertheless wonder whether the "canonization" of Zamyatin in fact leaves much to be desired. Zamyatin, after all, is an arch "Soviet heretic,"[5] who dedicates himself to the lifting of any dogma and, moreover, regards every orthodox stance with utmost suspicion. In the following sections, therefore, I'd like to examine *We* as a "heretical" product, a unique work that stands aloof among modern dystopias.

II

From his 1923 essay "Literature, Revolution, Entropy," Zamyatin's idea about the role of the artist and the nature of literature can be readily detected. Both his vision of the artist as a heretic and his aspiration for a literature that is radically subversive of the existing canon point to the possibility of approaching his works from an alternative perspective. Drawing on the theory of entropy, Zamyatin envisions the artist as the one who is able to foresee "the dissipation of energy" (108) in the sphere of literature and to avert himself from the beaten track, "the smooth highway of evolution" (108). For him, artists are the heretics who are "the only (bitter) remedy against the entropy of human thought" (108). In a poetic passage Zamyatin describes how entropy might bring about "dogmatization," i.e., stagnation in the socio-cultural sector:

> When the flaming, seething sphere (in science, religion, social life, art) cools, the fiery magma becomes coated with dogma—a rigid, ossified, motionless crust. Dogmatization in science, religion, social life, or art is the entropy of thought. What has become dogma no longer burns; it only gives off warmth—it is tepid, it is cool. (108)

The artist for Zamyatin, therefore, is the one who is brave and insightful enough to challenge any canon, to fight stagnation, and always to look for fresh perspectives.

5 This is the title of a collection of essays by Zamyatin: *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*.

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Below is a passage devoted to a description of the disruptive potential of the artist as a heretic:

> Explosions are not very comfortable. And therefore the exploders, the heretics, are justly exterminated by fire, by axes, by words. To every today, to every evolution, to the laborious, slow, useful, most useful, creative, coral-building work, heretics are a threat. Stupidly, recklessly, they burst into today from tomorrow; they are romantics. (108-09)

Based on his vision of the mission of the artist, Zamyatin looks to a literature that can be disruptive of the existing canon and bring forth fresh air. He makes distinctions between literature that is "dead-alive" and literature that is "alive-alive" (110), highlighting the forward-looking, anti-canonical aspect of the latter:

> A literature that is alive does not live by yesterday's clock, nor by today's but by tomorrow's. It is a sailor sent aloft: from the masthead he can see foundering ships, icebergs, and maelstroms still invisible from the deck. (109)

> The formal character of a living literature is the same as its inner character: it denies verities, it denies what everyone knows and what I have known until this moment. It departs from the canonical tracks, from the broad highway. (111)

Thus it may be appropriate here to investigate how Zamyatin's *We* departs from the dystopian canon, to approach it not as an archetypal modern dystopia along the line of Wells, Huxley and Orwell, but as a unique work in itself in terms of its various innovative attempts to combat ideological entropy and narrative stasis.

To a certain degree, a reassessment of *We* as an unorthodox dystopia may entail a reconsideration of the generic traits of literary dystopia. As may be inferred from my discussion of the dystopian genre in Section I, critics tend to focus on dystopia as social criticism and as a warning. While that is certainly a fruitful way to deal with dystopia, nuances pertaining to some dystopian texts may be ignored and the critical endeavor may somewhat be reductionist as a result. Happily there are critics who have growing awareness of this issue and are able to tackle dystopia from a fresher

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perspective. Laurence Davies is a case in point. His essay starts with the assertion: "There is a habit of taking literary dystopias too seriously and thus not seriously enough" (205). What he finds in dystopia, it appears, is "an unruly playfulness" (205) which frequently surfaces in the text. This stance, when juxtaposed with that of another critic, Carter Kaplan, becomes intriguingly interesting, as Kaplan's idea of dystopia is diametrically opposed to Davies's. In his "The Advent of Literary Dystopia," Kaplan tries hard to distinguish dystopia from satire. He attaches high-seriousness to dystopia and finds humor only in satire:

> The most obvious difference between literary dystopia and Menippean satire has to do with humor. Except in rare instances, literary dystopia is not funny. The mood of dystopia is usually dark, pessimistic, and often reflects paranoia, alarm, or hysteria. (200)

Thus for Kaplan "unruly playfulness" in dystopia would be a contradiction in terms. Yet there is the possibility that these two terms may lead to a broader understanding of some unorthodox aspects of dystopia, for which *We* may serve as an eloquent example.

What Davies understands by "playfulness," to begin with, is the existence of the comic spirit in the dystopian text, "a spirit manifested in linguistic inventiveness and a powerful sense of the ridiculous" (206). One may readily detect in *We* examples along this line, such as D-503's description of his girlfriend, O-90:

> Dear O! It always struck me that she looks like her name: about ten centimeters shorter than the Maternal Norm, and therefore sort of rounded all over, and the pink O of her mouth, open to greet every word I say. And also, she has a sort of circular, puffy crease at her wrist, the way children have. (6)

This passage can be taken to symbolize the dedication to figures and mathematical symbols in this scientific utopia. Nevertheless, the underlying comedy of the passage is unmistakable, which in turn arouses our laughter and, according to Davies, brings forth a utopian moment in dystopia (206).[6]

6 Laurence Davies employs the term "utopian dystopianism" to designate the blurring of

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In fact it may even be possible to stretch Davies's "playfulness" a little further to suggest the role that hope or optimism plays in *We*. In contrast to the general picture of dystopia as a dark world whose citizens are forever in despair and stranded in the perpetual present, it is in fact possible to detect in *We* a future dimension that is potentially optimistic. Hope itself has not died, for example, when one learns, toward the end of the work, that O-90 is pregnant and will raise her own baby beyond the Glass Wall. Efraim Sicher, comparing *We* and *1984*, has pinpointed this element of hope as what distinguishes the two texts: "But at least for him [Zamyatin] there was a future to fantasize about. In *1984* the past and the future are abolished. This time, O'Brien tells us, it is forever" (235).

But perhaps it is the term "unruly" employed by Davies that best captures the unorthodox aspect of *We* as a dystopian text. Ideologically as well as textually, *We* is an "open-ended dystopia" (Baccolini 13) foregrounding ideological free play and narrative indeterminacy. In the world created by Zamyatin, one can often detect multiplicity of perspectives, defying any assertion of absolutism or authority. This may partly be attributed to Zamyatin's personality, as he says in one of his letters written in April 1906:

> I am a man who is torn in two. One half of me wants to believe while the other doesn't allow it—one half wants to feel, wants beauty—while the other is mocking and reproachful. One half is soft and warm and the other is cold, sharp and hard as steel. (quoted by Cavendish 738)

Indeed, in *We* Zamyatin resorts to various strategies to destabilize whatever illusion of closure the text may have exemplified. Inherent in *We*, a "travesty" of the Soviet regime and a depiction of "a nightmare of the early twenties" (Clarence Brown xix-xx), is the image of "otherness," be it an alternative perspective, a different locus, or simply a new conception of what it means to be human. What is precious about Zamyatin's technique, moreover, is the principle of change or fluidity that he articulates in the depiction of otherness, with which he attempts to fight the stagnation and stasis of the One State.

D-503's conversation with I-330 regarding revolutions may well be a prominent

utopia and dystopia in these cases.

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example of the articulation of an alternative perspective to counter the illusion of historical determinism in the text. In "Record 30," when I-330 talks about the possibility of taking hold of the spaceship INTEGRAL, D-503 becomes rather amazed:

> I jumped up. "This is unthinkable! It's stupid! Can't you see that what you're plotting is. . . revolution?"
>
> "Yes—revolution! Why is that stupid?"
>
> "Stupid—because there can't be a revolution. Because our—this is me talking, not you—our revolution was the final one. And there cannot be any further revolution of any kind. Everybody knows that . . . ."
>
> Her brows make a sharp mocking triangle: "My dear, you are a mathematician. You're even more, you're a philosopher of mathematics. So do this for me: Tell me the final number."
>
> "The what? I . . . I don't understand. What final number?"
>
> "You know—the last one, the top, the absolute biggest."
>
> "But, I-330, that's stupid. Since the number of numbers is infinite, how can there be a final one?"
>
> "And how can there be a final revolution? There is no final one. The number of revolutions is infinite . . . ." (*We* 167)[7]

This ingenuously devised dialogue, representing the philosophical core of the text, pinpoints the provisional character of history and shatters any hypothesis of historical inevitability. This Heraclitean idea of "eternal change," moreover, as I-330 later indicates, is to bring about "differences," which in turn will bring forth life (*We* 168). The alternative perspective—the "otherness"—then, is a dynamic principle to fight

7 All references to *We* in this paper are from the 1993 Penguin edition (translated and with an introduction by Clarence Brown).

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the dehumanizing mechanism of the One State. The transformation of D-503 in this regard is indeed startling, as can be witnessed at the end of "Record 36" when, after encountering the Benefactor, D-503 utters his hankering for what is human—for a mother:

> If only I had a mother, the way the ancients had. I mean *my own mother*. And if for her I could be—not the Builder of the Integral, and not Number D-503, and not a molecule of One State, but just a piece of humanity, a piece of her own self—trampled, crushed, outcast. (*We* 204-205)

This desire for the (m)other, in a world where babies are technologically produced, renders unstable the official discourse of the One State. The privileged first terms of those familiar binaries preached by the One State, such as reason vs. passion, happiness vs. freedom, city vs. country, and One State vs. the Mephi's world, become suspect and no longer have any power of persuasion. Instead, the second term—the suppressed one—is articulated and brought into focus. The Mephi's world is an example of that "otherness" which continually threatens the legitimacy of the official discourse, an indication of a different locus that symbolically challenges the centrality of the One State. Throughout *We* there are constant references to the world "beyond the Wall" or "on the other side of the Wall," and once D-503 even has the chance to witness that other world personally:

> This sun . . . it wasn't our sun, evenly distributed over the mirrored surface of the sidewalks. This sun was all sharp fragments, alive somehow, constantly leaping spots, that blinded the eyes and made the head spin. And the trees were like candles sticking right up to the sky, or like spiders squatting on the ground with crooked legs, or like silent green fountains . . . . And all this was crawling about on all fours, shifting and buzzing, and out from under my feet some kind of shaggy tangle of something came slipping, and I . . . I was riveted to the spot. I couldn't move . . . because I wasn't standing on a surface, you see, not a surface, but something disgustingly soft, yielding, alive, green, springy. (*We*148-149)

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Here in this depiction of the world outside the Wall one sees that the values preached by the One State have undergone drastic reversal. If the One State is dedicated to "culture" or what is artificial, the world beyond the Wall is characterized by its elevation of "nature." Here, then, is an instance of utopia reasserting itself in face of dystopia. While the official history of the One State says that the 200-Year War has rendered everything desolate outside the Wall, and that only those living inside survive[8], the fact remains otherwise. As I-330 informs D-503:

> But you don't know, only very few knew, that a small part of them managed to survive and went on living there, on the other side of the Walls. They were naked and went off into the forest. There they learned from the trees, animals, birds, flowers, sun. They grew coats of fur over their bodies, but beneath the fur they kept their hot red blood. (*We* 158)

Indeed what characterizes *We* as a dynamic, open-ended text, what makes *We* "heretic" in face of other dystopian texts, may be this constant shifting between utopia and dystopia, a dialectic strategy of interaction providing an(other) perspective always to counter the official, central narrative.

The above depiction of people living outside of the Wall also helps unravel an alternative conception of what it means to be human, with which Zamyatin means to unsettle the official image of the "Numbers" of the One State. In fact, *We* may be deciphered as a perennial battle between two images of man—the all rational, civilized "Numbers" of the One State and the passionate, primitive cast of people known as "Mephi," the revolutionary force led by I-330. It is interesting in this light to see how initially D-503, indoctrinated as he is by the One State, is ashamed of his own hairy hands, an indication of his lingering traces of primitivism:

> I was hurrying to stick the notice in my pocket when I caught sight of *my horrible, ape-like hand*. I remembered how I-330 had taken my hand that

8 The description of the aftermath of the War is as follows: "There was something red against the green of the grasses, against dark clays, against the blue of the snow—pools of red that never dried up. Then yellow grasses, burnt by the sun, naked, yellow, ragged people, and ragged dogs beside them, next to bloated corpses—of dogs, or maybe of humans . . . All this on the other side of the Wall, of course, because the city had already won, inside the city you could already find the kind of food we have now, made of petroleum." (*We* 158)

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> time on the walk and looked at it. Surely she couldn't really . . . . (emphasis mine) (*We* 51)

Furthermore, when D-503 is first brought beyond the Wall and witnesses the people there, he is completely bewildered as to how to designate them:

> And . . . now the trees give way and I see a bright clearing, and in the clearing people . . . or, I'm not sure, maybe creatures is more like it.
>
> .....
>
> In the clearing, around a naked stone that looked like a human skull, there was a noisy crowd of some three or four hundred . . . people. Let's say "people," otherwise I wouldn't know what to say. (*We* 149)

This cognitive instability, it would seem, renders suspect the efficacy of the official discourse of what man should be like. In fact, the two drastically antagonistic conceptions of man clash with each other in an indictment uttered by I-330:

> " . . . You had it worse. You grew numbers all over your body, numbers crawled about on you like lice. You all have to be stripped naked and driven into the forest. You should learn to tremble with fear, with joy, insane rage, cold—you should learn to pray to the fire." (*We* 158)

While this alternative image of man is not able to supplant the official discourse, it nevertheless serves as a functional other which renders the text open-ended. When I-330 says to D-503, "Who knows who you really are? A person is like a novel: Up to the very last page you don't know how it's going to end" (*We* 156), she indeed unravels the sense of indeterminacy that *We* as an open-ended dystopia endeavors to endorse. It is also here that Susan Layton's comment regarding Zamyatin's characterization becomes illuminating: "Rather than being defined conclusively, Zamyatin's heroes are in the process of becoming" (142).

III

In fact, not only are Zamyatin's heroes "in the process of becoming," but the entire text of *We* is dynamic, fluid, and open-ended. Indeed what strikes the reader

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when first encountering *We* is its eccentric—and extravagant—form. Instead of abiding to the principle of realism[9], as is the case with *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *We* ushers in a world of cacophony, stringing together forty "records" in which everything seems possible: there are news reports, mathematical equations, verses, ellipses, dashes, and even the narrator himself in one point wanting to erase everything he has written . . . . The first "record" is an apt example. It shatters narrative stasis first by the juxtaposition of two different discourses—the official discourse represented by the *State Gazette* and the private discourse that is the narrator's voice. At the very beginning of "Record 1," the reader is immediately confronted with the news report from the *State Gazette* which, the narrator says, is being copied "word for word":

> I am merely copying out here, word for word, what was printed today in the *State Gazette*:
>
> > In 120 days from now the building of the INTEGRAL will be finished. Near at hand is the great, historic hour when the first INTEGRAL will lift off into space . . . . It is for you to place the beneficial yoke of reason round the necks of the unknown beings who inhabit other planets—still living, it may be, in the primitive state known as freedom. If they will not understand that we are bringing them a mathematically infallible happiness, we shall be obliged to force them to be happy. But before taking up arms, we shall try what words can do.
>
> As I write this I feel my cheeks burning. Yes: to integrate completely the colossal equation of the universe. (*We* 3-4)

Typographically this insertion of the announcement from the *State Gazette* presents two disparate perspectives and highlights the heterogeneity of the text. The recourse to various metafictional techniques further disturbs the stability of the narrative and destroys the linear progression of the text. The sense of immediacy derived from the

9 There is even one critic who attempts to discuss *We* as "an early example of a postmodern novel." For detail sees Tony Burns, "Zamyatin's *We* and Postmodernism."

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statement “As I write this I feel my cheeks burning,” for example, unravels a textual world in which everything in just in the process of becoming and nothing has already been finished.

This metafictional technique of “laying bare” the process of writing can readily find many echoes in the text. In “Record 5,” as mentioned above, the narrator says first that he wants to erase everything he has written, but then he checks himself:

> I wanted to cross all that out . . . because that’s beyond the scope of these notes. But then I decided: No, I’ll leave it in. Let these notes act like the most delicate seismograph, let them register the least little wiggles in my brainwaves, however insignificant. (*We* 23).

This self-conscious drama somewhat reaches its climax when, in “Record 19,” the narrator is discussing his “manuscript” with O-90:

> “Look—I’m writing it all down. Already 170 pages . . . . It’s turning out to be sort of surprising . . . .”
>
> Her voice . . . or the shadow of it: “You remember how . . . on page 7 . . . I let a tear fall . . . and you . . .” (*We* 108)

Another passage from “Record 21” is equally, if not more, fantastic:

> I couldn’t resist and read her a section from my Record 20, beginning with the words: “There’s a quiet, clear metallic sound to my thoughts’ clicking. . . .” (*We* 118)

This intertextual play, it would seem, disrupts the linear flow of the narrative and renders suspect any illusion of “closure” in the text. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this “laying bare” process occurs when, in “Record 28,” the narrator senses impending danger and is at sea as to where to hide his “notes”:

> Quick, sit at the table. Unrolled my notes, took out my pen—I meant for *them* to find me at work for the benefit of One State. And all of a sudden it felt as if every hair on my head had come alive and stood up: “And what if they take and read a page, even one page, especially one of these last ones?”

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> I sat motionless at the table and saw the walls trembling, the pen in my hand trembling, the letters swaying and blending together . . . .
>
> Far down the corridor I could already hear voices and footsteps. All I had time for was to grab a bunch of pages and stick them under me . . . . (*We* 160)

The chaos vividly presented here is one of the places in which we see that this dystopian work is never a stagnant whole. Michael Beehler is indeed ingenious when he comments that "[w]riting in *We* is heretical and disobedient, full of gaps and ruptures that refuse to close" (par. 32). This feature, it appears, effectively challenges whatever closure there may be in the text.

Another metafictional technique frequently employed in the work has something to do with the narrator discussing his own job as a writer. "Record 1" already witnesses examples along this line:

> My pen, accustomed to figures, is powerless to create the music of assonance and rhyme. I shall attempt nothing more than to note down what I see, what I think—or, to be more exact, what we think (that's right: we; and let this WE be the title of these records). (*We* 4)

"Record 21," partly entitled "An Author's Duty," also self-referentially portrays the narrator meditating upon what he should do with his "notes":

> I'm afraid that if I lose her, I-330, I might lose the only key to explain all the unknown . . . . And explaining them—I now feel myself duty-bound to do it, if only because I am the author of these records, to say nothing of the fact that the unknown is in general the enemy of man . . . . (*We* 114)

Indeed the presence of the metafiction in *We* unravels a textual world characterized by open-ended free play. All these metafictional assertions may amount to what Beehler designates as "textual noise" (par. 29), which, though superfluous and parasitic to the text proper, is constantly there to challenge the official, orthodox discourse.

We, then, as the above discussion attempts to show, is a "heretical" product and an unorthodox dystopia. Its embrace of openness, both ideologically and textually,

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pinpoints its distinct place in the dystopian tradition. As an open-ended dystopia, *We* departs from the realist tradition upheld by classical dystopias such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This departure is significant in negotiating a strategy to counter the official, orthodox narrative and eventually to provide a glimpse of hope for the otherwise dark world.

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