

YEVGHENIY ZAMYATIN

WE

*Translation from the Russian  
by Linda S. Farne*

  
ENC Press



## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

If we accept the classical utopian premise that paradise on earth will come when everybody is equal in everything—said equality usually conveyed in utopias through sameness of clothes, haircuts, domiciles, food, vocabulary—we can start rejoicing now, for we are halfway there. Multinational corporations toil 'round the clock to make sure that there are enough khaki pants and denim jackets (we get a choice of a white and a black T-shirt, just to express our individuality) to satisfy every civilized earthling's basic need for covering his nakedness. Wherever there still are random enclaves of earthlings who are not bothered by their pantless state, we have missionaries on the case, since the concept of shame and guilt must be spread in order for souls to be saved. And, of course, we have teams of experts all over the world actively promoting redistribution of wealth, whether voluntary or forcible, which will ultimately boil down to putting a Kentucky Fried Chicken in every pot.

Utopia was an interesting literary concept for as long as it remained an idealistic longing for the impossible. But in the XX century—when the erstwhile utopian dreams finally started to

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get realized, bodies started to pile up, and fresh vistas of possible consequences of enforced happiness started to open—a new literary genre was born, later called dystopia. The first dystopia was Yevgheniy Zamyatin's *We*, written in Russian in 1920, published at first in an English translation in New York in 1924; then, for the first time in Russian, in 1952, also in New York; and finally, for the first time in Russia (then still the Soviet Union but already afflicted by *glasnost*), in 1988.

George Orwell and Aldous Huxley gave Zamyatin credit for inspiring *1984* and *Brave New World*. Ursula K. Le Guin, whose *Dispossessed* indubitably ranks among the greatest classics of science fiction, called *We* “the best single work of science fiction yet written.”

What is it about this short, simple, at times even cheesy book that prevents it from becoming obsolete?

Zamyatin's novel is not about the dim view he took of the brightly sunlit, shiny, happy society of the future. It's about one random individual caught up in the crossfire of incompatible ideologies and conflicting ideas of self-righteousness; torn between two sides, each fighting for control over his soul, mind, and destiny without the slightest thought for what *he* wants; ultimately used, manipulated, and discarded by both sides.

The revolutionaries in *We* are not out to pat themselves on the back for the lofty goal of liberating people from the shackles of uniformity and from the benevolent nanny state. They don't even pretend to care about individual “human slivers”: they are simply contrarian for the sake of being contrarian. They feel driven by energy rather than entropy, if you will. And even if you won't. They destroy the clockwork routine of the state with nary a thought as to how it will affect its citizens, who know no other existence. Order sucks! Chaos rules! Their revolution, they believe, is better than the status quo, just because it's different. People who don't see things their way, people who don't join them, are obviously part of the problem, since they are not part of the revolutionary solution.

And don't we know how that feels. Every day we are as-

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our money, our choice of what to eat for dinner, what to wear, and what to watch and read; we're bombarded by self-righteous messages from religious fundamentalists, socialist activists, and everybody in between, wings flapping, guilt trips laid on us thicker and thicker. Whatever the reason, whatever the motivation, any group or entity with a stake in doing so works toward reducing our choices and increasing uniformity. It's no longer divide and conquer—it's unite and conquer. Whether by emotional or intellectual blackmail, or economic necessity, any interest group tries to force as many people as possible into a mob—and to lead it where the leaders' particular interests lie.

Proponents of collecting our individual rights and liberties for safekeeping while we're facing the danger of terrorist attacks would probably prefer it if we, like Zamyatin's people of the future, lived in glass houses. Apologists of legislating our behavior and our very nature would probably like to collect our children for safekeeping—for, as we know, it takes a village. Both sides would be comfortable with limiting even our vocabularies to a dull amalgam of bureaucratic terminology, politically correct verbal choices, and some touchy-feely programspeak.

Everybody wants a piece of us, promising in exchange a number of hollow-sounding delights, from soul salvation to self-esteem to permission to think of ourselves as self-actualized. Yet deep down we always know, even if we don't talk about it much, that all they care about is making a sale, whether mercantile or spiritual. Everybody professes to care about large groups of people; caring about an individual at least enough to leave him alone—feh, where's glory in that?

We at Emperor's New Clothes Press decided that the time had come for a new translation of *We*, a translation that treats the original as the fresh, relevant, sharp novel that it remains, even after all these years and all the other magnificent works of literature it inspired. We live in the world where the individual rights, lives, and safety of citizens of sovereign countries are debated by other countries in the name of the "inter-

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national community." Certain interest groups, unable to get their way through the available to them democratic process of electing like-minded representatives, attempt to go over the heads of their compatriots and their elected governments straight to the "international community," demanding that the "international community" make everybody in the world behave in the way these groups believe will lead to global happiness. Imagine: what if groups demanding open borders got their way, and so did groups that believe that the United Nations has the moral authority to make decisions that affect everybody in the world?

Hence we made a conscious choice to translate Zamyatin's *Edinoe* [=one, united, indivisible] *Gosudarstvo* [=state, nation] literally, as the United Nation. We also made a conscious choice to translate Zamyatin's title of the ruler of the United Nation, *Blagodetel* (*blago*=good [n.]; *detel*=doer), just as literally, as the Do-Gooder, to convey the sense of exasperation many of us feel these days with people who *just know* what's best for everybody—and woe to those who disagree.

The more things change, the more they stay the same, as the old saying goes. Human nature, the way people relate to one another, and the need to ram one's convictions down everybody's throat no matter the cost, have not changed in over eighty years that passed since Zamyatin wrote *We*. Although one of the most important philosophical thoughts in *We* is that there's no ultimate anything; there is always the next revolution; always a change—it's cold comfort if your life happens to fall into one of those in-between periods, when some do-gooder or other spends sleepless nights making benevolent but heavy-handed choices designed to make everybody happy. Because if you are not happy with that—well, then you are obviously part of the problem, since you are not part of the solution. The only correct solution.

**Olga Gardner Galvin**

**SUMMARY****the discharge****the matter of an idea****the zero cliff**

Discharge is the most apt definition. Now I can see that it was exactly like an electrical discharge. The pulse of the last few days became ever drier, ever faster, ever tenser—the poles got closer—dry crackling—another millimeter: explosion—then silence.

Everything inside me is now very quiet and empty—like in a domicile, when everyone's gone out and you're lying in bed alone, sick, and clearly hear the precise metallic clanking of your own thoughts.

Perhaps this "discharge" has finally cured me of my torturous "soul"—and I, once again, became as the rest of us. At least, right now it causes me absolutely no pain to see, in my mind's eye, O-90 ascending the steps of the Cube, O-90 in the Gas Bell. And if there, in the Surgery, she gives them my name—so be it: at the very last moment I'll piously and gratefully kiss the punishing hand of the Do-Gooder. I have this inalienable right, bestowed on me by my relationship with the United Nation: the right to bear punishment—and I shall never give it up. No digit should ever dare to give up this right, our only—and therefore immensely valuable—right.

My thoughts are clanking quietly, with metallic precision; an intangible aero carries me up, into the blue heights of my beloved abstractions. And I see that here, in the clear, thin air, my ruminations about “rights” pop with a light crackle, like a pneumatic tire. It becomes clear to me that they are nothing but an acid reflux of a ridiculous ancient prejudice, the ancients’ idea of “rights.”

There are ideas made of clay—and others, made to last forever, of gold or our precious glass. In order to define and analyze the matter of an idea, all one has to do is test it with a drop of strong acid. The ancients knew of one such acid: *reductio ad finem*. I think that’s what they called it, but they were afraid of this acid, they preferred to see some sky, even if it was made of clay, even if it was a toy rather than the blue nothingness. We, however—praise the Do-Gooder—are adults, and we did away with childish things.

So, let’s drop-test the idea of “rights.” Even among the ancients, the more mature of the adults knew: might makes right, right is a function of might. Take a pair of scales and weigh a gram against a ton; an *I* against a *WE*, the United Nation. Clearly, to assume that “I” has some sort of “rights” in relation to the Nation is to assume that a gram could ever weigh as much as a ton. Hence, the ton has rights, the gram has responsibilities; and the natural path from nothingness to magnificence is to forget that you are but a gram and realize that you are a one-millionth of a ton.

You, my voluptuous, ruddy Venusians; you, my covered with soot, like blacksmiths, Uranians—I can hear your objections in my blue silence. But you must understand: greatness is simple; you must understand: only the four rules of arithmetic are immutable and eternal. Hence, only the morality based on these four rules will be great, immutable, and eternal. This is the ultimate wisdom, this is the summit of the pyramid that people had spent centuries trying to scale, red, sweaty, kicking and screaming. And from this summit—even if down below the miserable worms of something that survived in us from our ancestors’ savagery are still crawling—from this summit, everybody is equal: the unlawful mother Q-90, a murderer, or that lunatic who dared to lob a heretic poem at the United Nation—and so is their punishment



equal: premature death. This is the divine justice, much ballyhooed by the stone-housed people, lit by the naïve pink rays of the dawn of history: their “God” punished disrespect for His Holy Church just as severely as murder.

You, Uranians—glum and black like the ancient Spaniards who so wisely employed bonfires for enlightening purposes—you are silent; I feel you’re with me on this. But I can hear the ruddy Venusians prattle on about torture, executions, return to barbarianism. I pity you, my dear Venusians, you are incapable of philosophically mathematical thought.

Human history rises in circles, like an aero. The circles may be different—some golden, some bloody—but they can all be divided into 360 degrees. And so, if we move from the zero forward—10, 20, 200, 360 degrees—we come to zero again. Yes, indeed, we return to zero. But to my mathematically reasoning mind, it is clear that this zero is completely different from the last zero, it’s all new. We turned right from the initial zero, we returned to it from the left, and so instead of a +0 we have a -0. Get it?

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I see this Zero as a taciturn, huge, narrow, knife-sharp cliff. In the brutal, hairy darkness, holding our breath, we sailed from the black, night side of the Zero Cliff. For centuries, we, the Columbuses, sailed and sailed, we went all around the earth and finally—hurrah! Salute—and all lookouts aloft: before us is the other, heretofore unseen side of the Zero Cliff, lit by the aurora borealis of the United Nation, the blue monolith sparkling with rainbow colors and the sun—hundreds of suns, billions of rainbows . . .

What if only the breadth of a knife edge separates us from the other, the dark side of the Zero Cliff. The knife is the most enduring, most immortal, most brilliant human invention. The knife has served as a guillotine, the knife is a universal means of resolving all knots, and along the knife’s edge lies the path of paradoxes—the only path worthy of a fearless mind.