Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote We in 1920, during the Russian Civil War. Composed at the dawn of the Soviet era—a not-so-distant mirror of our own troubled and dangerous times—We was first published in the USSR in 1988, at its dusk. The manuscript, a stunning prophecy of totalitarianism and a classic of dystopian literature, was one of several works that prompted a newspaper and magazine campaign against the author. The campaign intensified considerably in the late 1920s, after several translations of We had been published abroad. In a letter of appeal to Stalin in 1931, Zamyatin stated that he had been subjected to a “manhunt . . . unprecedented in Soviet literature. . . . Everything possible was done to close to me all avenues for further work.” His long-running play The Flea was pulled from the stage; a volume of his collected works was denied publication; and his books, stories, and essays were removed from libraries, catalogues, literary histories, and syllabi, joining the swelling ranks of literary desaparecidos. Attila, a tragedy that Zamyatin believed “would finally silence those who were intent on turning me into some sort of an obscure artist,” was canceled just before its opening. He was even barred from doing translations. This “atmosphere of systematic persecution,” he told Stalin, amounted to a “death sentence.”

Despite all that, Zamyatin was lucky. Other writers who (to quote from the same letter) earned a “criminal name” because they chose “to serve great ideas in literature without cringing before little men” suffered even more. Osip Mandelstam died in the Gulag in 1938; Isaac Babel was shot in the head in a Moscow prison in 1940. All three men were courageously defiant, but only Zamyatin’s boldness saved his life. Stalin approved his request for exile—a good word from Maxim Gorky, a champion of the official Soviet aesthetic of socialist realism, must have helped—and he spent his last years in unhappy obscurity and ill health in Paris, where he died in 1937 at the age of fifty-three.

Mikhail Bulgakov remarked that “manuscripts don’t burn.” At least, incandescent ones don’t. We was smuggled out of the USSR and first published in 1924, in an English translation. A Czech translation appeared in 1927, a French one in 1929. George Orwell reviewed the latter, misleadingly titled Nous Autres, in 1946, and used the book as a model for Nineteen Eighty-Four.
Orwell claimed (but Aldous Huxley denied) that *We* also influenced *Brave New World*. *We* is the greatest dystopian novel of the twentieth century, but also one of the least known.

Zamyatin is among the few gifted twentieth-century writers who responded to ideological tyranny by poetically integrating mathematical science into a philosophical anthropology. Dostoyevsky’s literary topographies of the soul are the *fons et origo* of all such endeavors. His *Underground Man* is suffocated by the totalizing utilitarian calculus of the “normal,” rational, positivistic, and progressive European: 2+2=4 as mathematically infallible social policy. Yet Ivan Karamazov rebels against what his willfully Euclidean mind regards as Christianity’s morally unintelligible response to ultimate matters of human freedom, suffering, and the choice between good and evil. Primo Levi, whose knowledge of chemistry and Dante provided food for his soul and bread for his body at Auschwitz (his scientific training got him an indoor job at the Buna industrial site), created new fusions of science and poetry in *If This Is a Man* and *The Periodic Table*. The chemical engineer Vasily Grossman was a master of this sort of literary alchemy; his *Life and Fate*, a novel centered on the Battle of Stalingrad, describes the totalitarian social physics of both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

A trained scientist, Zamyatin designed and supervised the construction of icebreakers in England during the Great War. In *We*, mathematics (the language of the totalitarian One State) and poetry (the language of its revolutionary opponents) are the antipodes around which humanly fundamental oppositions coalesce: necessity and freedom; order and chaos; entropy and energy; rationality and irrationality; utility and beauty; force and love; tameness and wildness; social totality and individual infinity. The drama of *We* plays out in the charged space between these poles: a field of electrical attraction and repulsion where opposites merge, unities split apart, and nothing stands still for long.

*We* takes the form of the diary of D-503, the builder of the Integral, a spaceship whose mission—to bring the “mathematically infallible happiness” of the One State to “pink-cheeked, full-bodied Venusians” and “Uranians, sooty as blacksmiths”—will “integrate the infinite equation of the universe.” (I quote the Mirra Ginsburg translation of *We*, Viking Press, 1972.) The diary answers an official call for tracts extolling the “beauty and grandeur” of the regime—founded six centuries earlier, after a world war that eliminated 80 percent of the human population—to be included as cargo on the vessel. D-503 faces a unique authorial challenge: “Some wrote for their contemporaries; others for their descendants. But no one has ever written for ancestors, or for beings like his primitive, remote ancestors.” Zamyatin wrote for all these audiences at the historical moment when a humanly unsupportable ideology threatened to crush the cultural vertebrae linking past and future, memory and hope, and another kind of “fire-
breathing, electric” ship was preparing forcibly to assimilate multitudinous peoples (the Soviet
Union was founded in 1922). We demonstrates that no mathematical or political formula can
express the volume of meaning enclosed by the irregular surface of human lives. Only the free
poetic imagination can perform this necessary integration.

The antithesis of poetry and mathematics plays a central role in the Republic of Plato, the
philosophical poet from whom (besides Dostoyevsky) Zamyatin is most directly descended. The
Greek word poësis just means “making”; knowledge, however, is acquired rather than fabricated.
In the Republic, this philosophically fundamental distinction breaks down; the dialogue’s images,
myths, and dramatic action are primary vehicles of knowledge, while the mathematically educated
philosopher kings who rule Callipolis, the Noble and Beautiful City, are theoretical and political
constructivists. Ancient prototypes of modern ideological totalitarians, they are abstract and
dogmatic in theory, brutal and manipulative in practice.

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tolerates artists and poets only insofar as they serve the State. The One State has all these features
and more. In We, Zamyatin reimagines the ideological constructivism of Callipolis for an age of
advanced technology and scientific management. All good things flow from the Benefactor, whom
D-503 regards with sacred awe and downcast eyes (“I saw only His huge, cast-iron hands upon His
knees”). Residents of the One State are called “numbers.” Male names are composed of a
consonant followed by an odd number, females by vowels and an even number. Children are not
nurtured and raised in a herd, but formed and polished in the Child-Rearing Factory. The regime is
a panopticon: apartments, streets, and even the spaceship Integral are made of glass, and
conversations are recorded by sensitive mechanical membranes placed on the streets. (Yet spies or
“Guardians” are still necessary.) Criminals are reduced to chemically pure water in ceremonies of
civic religion and justice, where poets sing hymns to the One State specially composed for the
occasion. These technological marvels vividly demonstrate the power of the regime and the
efficacy of its mathematical science. Even the problem of human happiness, formulated as \( h=b/e \)
(bliss divided by envy), has been solved by effectively reducing the denominator to zero: the Lex
Sexualis declares that “Each number has a right to any other number, as to a sexual commodity.”
As in Callipolis, incest—a practice the ancients regularly associated with tyranny—is a foregone
conclusion.

Zamyatin is further indebted to Plato and the Greeks for his understanding of the tension in
the human soul between thumos (spiritedness, including pride and aggression) and erōs (erotic love). In plays like Euripides’ Bacchae, these passions produce great suffering; for Aristophanes, their collision is laughable as well as tragic. In Lysistrata, a comedy frequently performed during the Vietnam War era, the women of Athens and Sparta go on a sex strike to stop the Peloponnesian War. Aristophanes explores ideological aggression as well. The predicament of We’s protagonist D-503, who is repulsed by the possibility that he may be obliged to have intercourse with the older U (whose sagging cheeks remind him of fish gills), is taken straight from Aristophanes’ Assemblywomen. Inspired by the Greeks, Freud locates erotic passion and spiritedness in the murky depths of the psyche; in Civilization and Its Discontents, published three years before Hitler’s rise to power, he suggests that the future of civilization turns on the question of whether love or aggression will prove victorious.

Playful and tragic, We is informed by all these authors. We tells the story of D-503’s terrifying and joyful discovery of primordial, incalculable forces—the psychological equivalent of irrational numbers, or even imaginary ones like √-1—that cannot be satisfactorily controlled when they burst forth from within him. Centuries of eugenics have not weeded out certain primitive traits: D-503’s hairy hands, or the thick, “Negroid” lips of his closest friend, the poet R-13. (These men may also be descended from numbers who mated illicitly with the wild and shaggy people who live beyond the city’s Green Wall.) Plato, too, compares individual human beings to irrational numbers, which Callipolis’s indoctrinating education attempts to make calculable and commensurable, in accordance with what the Russian Symbolist author Andrei Bely called “the plane geometry of the state.”

Callipolis degenerates because its citizens engage in illicit sexual reproduction. In We, it is the love of irreducibly particular individuals that causes every main character to break the law in one way or another, and the One State to collapse into a kind of pregnant chaos. Over the course of the novel, D-503 becomes entangled with a revolutionary sect called Mephi and develops a soul—an “incurable” sickness rooted in the imagination, as he learns in a comic scene at the Medical Office. The One State’s numbers lack souls for the same reason they “don’t have feathers, or wings; only shoulder blades, the base for wings. . . . Wings are for flying, and we have nowhere else to fly.” But D-503’s imagination is evident even in the first diary entry: “I write this, and my cheeks are burning. This must be similar to what a woman feels when she first senses within herself the pulse of a new, still tiny, still blind human being.”

D-503’s wings begin to sprout when he meets the mysterious and alluring I-330, who affects him like an unknown x, “an irresolvable irrational member that has somehow slipped into an equation.” The doctor who examines him at the Medical Office explains that a soul is like “a plane, a surface—this mirror, say.”

“But imagine this impermeable substance softened by some fire; and nothing slides across it any more. . . . The plane has acquired volume, it has become a body, a world, and everything is now inside the mirror—inside you: the sun, the blast of the whirring propeller, your trembling lips, and someone else’s.”
When I-330—whose name Zamyatin writes in the Latin rather than the Cyrillic alphabet, and mostly shortens to I—gives him a mouthful of (illegal) absinthe during a kiss, D-503 begins to whirl like a planet rushing along “an unknown, uncalculated orbit.” That’s when it occurs to him that we “walk constantly over a seething, scarlet sea of flame, hidden below, in the belly of the earth. We never think of it. But what if the thin crust under our feet should turn into glass and we should suddenly see . . .” This recalls the symbol of Mephi, “a winged youth with a transparent body and, where the heart should be, a dazzling, crimson-glowing coal.” Within his own newly transparent soul, D-503 sees a double of himself, a savage inflamed with love and jealousy—one that “had barely shown his hairy paws from within the shell; now all of him broke out, the shell cracked.”

Wings, of course, belong to fallen angels as well as fledgling philosophers. D-503’s experience of erotic love as an attractive and repulsive magnetism culminates not in a philosophical vision of the Good beyond being, but in the revelation of an unconquerable element of transcendence at the heart of human existence. He learns that individual human beings are real, incomprehensible, yet not unknowable infinities. In We, this epiphany coincides with a political apocalypse that shatters the glassy abstractions and totalizing constructions of the One State. D-503’s experience of suffering and betrayal confirms I-330’s observation that “only the unsubduable can be loved”—and that paradox, as the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard declared, is “the passion of thought.”

Zamyatin’s greatest debt is to Dostoevsky, whom he references indirectly on virtually every page of We, and whose unsurpassed portrayal of the religious psychology of revolutionary socialism informs the whole. The One State is the completed Tower of Babel foreseen by the Grand Inquisitor of The Brothers Karamazov as the final solution to the riddle of history. It is the ultimate political embodiment of what Dostoevsky characterizes as a Christian heresy that storms the heavens in the name of man—each and every man and woman—only to raise up, in place of the God whose incarnation exemplifies the dignity and worth of every human life, the abstract, fundamentally quantitative idea of Humanity. The homogenous multitude replaces the single individual in his or her inner infinity. This swindle—the deceptive substitution of quantity for quality—is characteristic of ideological tyranny, and indeed of modernity as such. As Dostoevsky wrote in his notes for the novel, “Those who love men in general hate men in particular.”

The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor reflects the spiritual torment of its author, Ivan Karamazov. Like the Inquisitor, Ivan “accept[s] God pure and simple,” but rejects God’s creation. To borrow again from Kierkegaard, he finds the whole of actuality incommensurable with the love of God. He

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can find no intellectual solution to the problem of theodicy, which for him boils down to the impossibility of redeeming the suffering of even a single innocent child. “If God exists,” Ivan insists, “and if he indeed created the earth, then, as we know perfectly well, he created it in accordance with Euclidean geometry.” Yet Christians “dare to dream that two parallel lines, which according to Euclid cannot possibly meet on earth, may perhaps meet somewhere in infinity.” But Ivan would have known (as Dostoyevsky surely did) that parallel lines can meet on earth. Through the Inquisitor, he advances a Euclidean or planar solution to a problem of spherical geometry—the problem of the human soul as “a world.” That forced political solution, a flattening and leveling of human life, rests on the deliberate neglect of an entire dimension of our human being.

Jesus, so the Legend runs, returns to earth in Seville, at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. The people recognize him and flock to him, but tamely stand aside when he is arrested by the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor informs Jesus that he will be burned at the stake and then pours forth his heart after ninety years of silence. Jesus, he says, desired that man “decide for himself, with a free heart, what is good and what is evil, having only your image before his as a guide.” (I quote from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of The Brothers Karamazov, North Point Press, 1990.) In this, he vastly overestimated the “weak, eternally depraved, and eternally ignoble human race.” Jesus chose “everything that was beyond men’s strength,” as if he “did not love them at all.” For while freedom of conscience is a precondition of heavenly bread, “freedom and earthly bread in plenty for everyone are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share among themselves.” Ever since the Church “took Rome and the sword of Caesar,” it has sought to correct Jesus’s mistake under the cover of his name. But “free reason and science,” he prophesies, will yet lead to “horrors of slavery and confusion.” In the aftermath of starvation, anthropophagy, and wars of extermination, the remnant, “feeble and wretched, will crawl to our feet.” A new regime will then arise, one that, with the help of Promethean “fire from heaven” (technology), will secure indisputable authority as the sole provider of earthly bread, take over men’s anguished moral conscience, and unite human beings in an “incontestable anthill.” Only then will the “terrible Tower of Babel” be completed, and “the kingdom of peace and happiness come for mankind.”

The Inquisitor’s conviction that the new Tower of Babel will resolve “insoluble historical contradictions of human nature all over the earth” is an article of faith. It is rooted in what he regards as the superhuman wisdom of the “three questions” with which “the dread and intelligent spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-being” tempted Jesus after his forty days of fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Formulated by “a mind not human and transient but eternal and absolute,” the Devil’s offer of “miracle, mystery, and authority” constitutes nothing less than a revelation of “the entire future history of the world and mankind.” In this scientific and political trinity lies not the spiritual salvation of the “tens of thousands” strong enough to forsake earthly bread, but the physical salvation of the “thousands of millions” who are not.

The Inquisitor embraces revolutionary millenarianism with religious fervor. His future “kingdom of peace and happiness” is an earthly Eden populated by adults who have never tasted the accursed fruit of good and evil and who will be rewarded for their childlike obedience
with “innocent” animal pleasures, including “wives and mistresses.” But one bargains with the Devil at the cost of one’s soul, and this earthly bread is paid for by spiritual starvation. The Inquisitor claims to surpass Christianity in wisdom and compassion—“we will say that they [Jesus’s followers] saved only themselves, while we have saved everyone”—yet he refuses to acknowledge the freedom and dignity of the human person. He regards the future course of history as a necessary consequence of man’s insect-like nature, and therefore as a “problem” for which there is a “solution.” He employs a political calculus of earthly bread, “noble” lies, and force—crude distortions of the spiritual miracle, mystery, and authority at the heart of Christianity—that restricts the scope of moral agency as far as possible. In all these respects, he is the model of the late-modern humanitarian Antichrist.

When the Devil confronts Ivan as a hallucinatory double late in The Brothers Karamazov, he describes himself as a ghostly “x in an indeterminate equation” who travels through the cold vacuum of outer space (“just imagine: a hundred and fifty degrees below zero!”) simply in order “to negate.” Zamyatin picks up on these hints and makes the necessary thermodynamic adjustments. Located in the far north, where solar radiation and converging lines of polar magnetism combine to produce the aurora borealis, the One State—the towering “crystallization” of the Inquisitor’s prophecy—is associated with entropy and “minus 273º,” absolute zero. The totalitarian paradise is the frozen bottom of Dante’s Hell, where three-faced Satan, taller than a skyscraper and trapped in great sheets of ice, forever gnaws on dead souls. But while the One State’s uniformed and shaven-headed numbers march rank and file under the banner of frozen abstractions, tramping to work like convicts in a labor camp, We’s revolutionaries are associated with heat, energy, and “tormentingly endless movement”—in short, with life.

D-503’s diary has a biblical forty entries; it ends as Mephi’s advance from the western parts of the city has been halted by “a temporary barrier of high-voltage waves” erected at “the Fortieth cross-town avenue.” The great purifications of the Flood and the Exodus (which took two generations to weed out slavish idolatry) inform We, but the temptation of Jesus remains paramount. In basing We’s central moral drama on this episode, Zamyatin writes a new literary equation whose impossible solution is √-1—a number that can be conceived only as simultaneously positive and negative. He thus repudiates the binary logic of totalitarianism, which turns every matter of conscience into a choice between inhuman extremes.

D-503 declares that the Christians are the One State’s “only predecessors”; I-330 describes the revolutionaries as “anti-Christians.” Yet the Inquisitor chastises Jesus for choosing “everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinite.” In the “irritating X” formed by I-330’s mouth and eyebrows, D-503 sees “a slanting cross. A face marked by a cross.” Goethe’s Mephistopheles, who revives the pulse of life in

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the spiritually exhausted Faust, observes that man resembles “a long-legged cicada/ that always flies,” and uses reason only to be “more beastly than any beast.” This is borne out in *We*’s ending, which presents in the starkest possible terms the crucifying choice that every human being—and certainly every writer—is compelled to make in a totalitarian society. I-330 maintains her freedom and dignity even in the Gas Chamber, where, repeatedly subjected to a vacuum, she refuses to betray anyone. D-503 is forced to undergo the Great Operation, which destroys the imagination. One dies in body, the other in spirit. Who is drowned here, and who is saved?

Yet even after the Operation, D-503 is still able to write that “a kind of splinter was pulled out of my head.” This barest glimmer of his old imaginative self suggests that there may be no perfect technological solution to the problem of the human soul. Then again, he has lost the capacity to laugh, a natural and spontaneous response to absurdity that is evidenced even in babies, and that can transcend the most banal forms of evil. The One State’s cruel and humorless maternalism is embodied in the character of U, who reports the children in her charge at the Child-Rearing Factory to the Guardians for drawing a caricature of her as a fish, and later submits them to the Operation. Laughter not only reveals to D-503 that the Benefactor is just a man “with tiny drops of sweat on his bald head”; it even saves him from murdering U with a piston rod wrapped in the metafictional manuscript of *We*.

For Zamyatin, mathematics is fatality. The paradox of history is that it arises from the free actions of human beings but ends up being the eternal return of the same. Like planets tracing elliptical orbits around the Sun, societies are always approaching or retreating from the heavenly light that Plato calls the Good and the Bible calls God. D-503 believes his diary will be “a derivative of our life, of the mathematically perfect life of the One State.” This is a powerful image of the general relationship between the individual and society in any age. But the gift of freedom is more than the possibility of conformity. It is also the possibility of transcendence, of refusing—in small ways and large, and perhaps at some crucial and defining moment—to allow one’s life to be merely a regular function of a curve determined by the aggregate of all lives.

Zamyatin wrote at an uncertain hour when speech and deed—or silence and inaction—counted more than ever in determining the shape of things to come. At stake were the things that make our lives human: memory, conscience, thought, and, in a fundamental sense, the soul itself. Today we rush once again into what Grossman called “the cruel sky, the sky of ice and fire,” aiming at heaven but steering toward hell. All things have become confused, including the word and the fist. But as *We* reminds us, revolutionary instability is temporary. If we do not at this very moment rise to defend individual liberty, as Zamyatin so courageously did, this brief period of fluidity will doubtless be succeeded by a hard freeze.
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