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The “I” Epidemic: Revolution and Identity in Zamiatin’s We

In Yevgeny Zamiatin’s dystopian novel We, first published in 1924, a necessary condition for revolution is the individuation of the self, represented by the journey of cipher D-503 of the totalitarian One State. This individuation is described as a process of contrast and reflection, characterized by several transformative external experiences that challenge D-503 to orient himself inwardly and to contemplate his identity. These external experiences begin with D-503’s intuitive recognition of the irrational in his self—referred to as the $\sqrt{-1}$—in contrast to the reason, logic, and order of the One State, and include his relationships with female ciphers 1-330, O-90, and U; his dwelling in the Ancient House and in his state-owned apartment; and his interactions with the simultaneously material and natural world. Throughout the narrative D-503 struggles to define and place himself between the “we” and the “they” of revolution, a contrast that demands a submersion into the intermediary “I.” The wisdom he attains during this journey of individuation can be communicated only through the irrational: love, laughter, and the fantastic.¹

The essential, primordial contrast that characterizes D-503’s being is the contamination of his perfect reason, his “quadratic harmony,”² by the irrational $\sqrt{-1}$, a concern that afflicts him in his earliest records and undermines his strict allegiance to the One State. Indeed, in his first record D-503 experiences an involuntary physiological response, a burning in his cheeks, at the declaration of his authorial intentions. This bodily response can also be understood as the

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¹ See Kinyon, 204.
² Zamiatin, We, 5.
pleasure of writing itself. Already D-503 endangers his reputation by closing with a metaphor—an abstraction and therefore an offense to the One State’s governing principles of efficiency and logic—concerning the identity of his narrative: “This text is me, and simultaneously not me.”

His error, however, may be one of design; the decision to write his records in the form of a diary, the most intimate and confessional form of narrative, immediately contradicts the objectivity of a purely mechanical and communicative discourse. David Gillespie, in his study of the form in twentieth-century Russia, agrees that “the diary is the affirmation of the authorial ‘I’, the uncensored and forthright expression of the writer’s right to his own persona: written by and for the ‘self.’” D-503’s relationship with his records is therefore immediately self-conscious, since Record One is dominated by the first-person singular pronoun “I.”

The physical act of writing deepens this consciousness through a bodily connection, represented by the deliberate absence of the typewriter:

Machines figure in virtually every aspect of One State life [...] and yet one device in wide use at the time of the novel’s composition is conspicuously absent: the typewriter. This absence may very well be the key factor in the dissolution of [D-503]’s tempered psyche, his exit from the world of proper mechanicity. [D-503] writes his journal, it should be emphasized, using a pen.

Julia Vaingurt describes how handwriting creates a direct relationship among author, hand, and written text; the essence of writing is thus captured in an authentic dialogue with the self. D-503 nevertheless believes that, like his childhood friend R-13 did with his works of State Poetry, he will sacrifice his records to the One State upon their completion. The text, however, quickly becomes a source of anxiety for D-503 once he realizes that the transparency of his records

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3 See Vaingurt, 117.
4 We, 4.
5 Gillespie, 623.
6 Vaingurt, 114.
suggest the makings of a heretical novel. Straying from the language of the State Gazette, D-503 reveals his struggle through unsteady syntax. Ellipses, volatile questions, and exclamations abound; hyphens, indicating broken or incomplete thoughts, appear 3,271 times throughout the novel. These anomalies represent the rapid onset of ideas and thoughts in D-503’s first engagement with his creative instinct and the awakening of his individual thought.

D-503 traces the source of \( \sqrt{1} \) to his schoolmate R-13, with whom he was taught a lesson on irrational numbers. R-13 is described as a rebel with “African lips,” an emphatic reference to the nineteenth-century Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. By creating this association, Zamiatin suggests that the irrational persists in the anchored consciousness of the historical, cultural, and artistic past; it is irrevocably a part of us, a figment or remnant that reflects the human tendency to seek beauty and nature. It is precisely this deeply embedded romanticism, this world of feeling and emotion, that must be embraced in its mystery before D-503’s genuine submersion into the “I.”

D-503’s persistent anxieties and fears are the result of his many attempts to understand and interpret rationally the mysteries of emerging selfhood, a habit disrupted by his relationship with female cipher I-330. Compared to the simplicity of O-90, I-330 is an impenetrable enigma and thus threatening to D-503 at first sight. It is she who plants the first seed of doubt in D-503 about his indoctrinated principles and syllogisms when she interrupts his confident denial of the subjective self: “‘You see, even in our thoughts. No one is ever ‘one,’ but always ‘one of.’ We are so identical…’ Her words: ‘Are you sure?’” The hatred that D-503 rationally forces himself

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7 Sheiich, 97.
8 We, 20.
9 Ibid., 8.
to feel toward I-330 for disrupting his worldview and tempting him to break the law gradually becomes an obsession, and all at once he realizes that this hatred is a projection of his rational frustrations and a denial of his absolute irrational love for I-330. The fleeting moments of dissolution into her eyes and body, the surreal erotic scenes of their affair, offer D-503 the truest ephemeral experience of his “I,” which he can hardly articulate for his records. He later recalls these poetic expulsions as “gibberish,” a biochemically-induced reaction to poison (i.e., alcohol).10 Their encounter “resembles a rite of passage in reverse, in which D-503 leaves the larger, social sphere for incorporation within a smaller, intimate “nation of two” and “provides him with a temporary illusion of wholeness.”11 Craving unity in his newly unstable and insecure position as a non-conformist in the One State, D-503 finds his freedom to love challenged.

Only when D-503 submits entirely to I-330, however, does his aesthetic language fully take flight: “I unfastened from the Earth and became an independent planet, furiously rotating, rushing down, down—according to some kind of uncalculated orbit…”12 This unmooring symbolizes entry into the “I,” an out-of-body experience that takes place entirely within his self.,His disorientation, meanwhile, suggests the first feeling of political and social individuation, resonating with the imagery of Zamiatin’s own discussion of entropy: “A molecule breaks away from its orbit and, bursting into a neighboring atomic universe, gives birth to a new chemical element: this is revolution.”13 At this point in his narrative D-503 embraces the absurd and is

10 We, 54.
11 Borenstein, 673–4.
12 We, 50.
Я отстегнулся от земли и самостоятельной планетой, неистово вращаясь, понесся вниз, вниз—по какой-то невычисленной орбите… Му, 45.
unapologetic to his audience. He is separated at once from I-330, who, as an actor and a political leader of MEPHI, is crystallized in her time; she always remains part of one transient polarity of history, if not in the “we,” then in the “they” of revolution. She remains, at least in D-503’s subjective narrative, a one-dimensional character.

The female ciphers O-90, I-330, and U are characterized by a common ethereal inaccessibility that prevents D-503 from feeling content in his nascent state of individuation. Regardless of their consciousness and place within the “they” or the “we” of the One State, they all appear to be closer to the truth, to nature, to their “I,” simply because of their femininity. O-90 is an open book, yet her emotions puzzle D-503, and U reveals that she committed treason out of fear of losing his “lov—,” the forbidden word. In Record 36, D-503’s vulnerable longing for a mother suggests that the loss of human nature and individual identity is the result of a weakened connection to the womb, to a natural, ancient spirituality embodied by woman. In his darkest hour, when the Benefactor of the One State suggests that I-330 has used D-503 solely for political purposes, he longs for the ultimate affirmation of individual selfhood: a mother’s love. He contemplates, “If only I had a mother like the Ancients: my—yes, exactly—my own mother. She would know me as—not the Builder of the Integral, and not cipher D-503, and not a molecule of the One State—but simply a fragment of humanity, a fragment of herself.” These three socially-constructed identities, each attractive to one of D-503’s three lovers, are merely categorical limitations of his true “I,” which is only fully understood and loved by his unknown

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14 We, 185.
15 Ibid., 189.

Если бы у меня был мать—как у древних: моя—вот именно—мать. И чтобы для нее—я не строитель «Интеграла», и не номер Д-503, и не молекула Единого Государства, а простой человеческий кусок—кусок её же самой—истоптаный, раздавленный, выброшенный… My, 151.
mother. This most natural love is that which connects ciphers to the creatures beyond the Green Wall, to Mother Nature herself; it is the reason D-503 feels warmth toward the old woman at the Ancient House and the reason he is compelled to help O-90 escape and give birth to their unlawful child beyond the wall. The One State, in order to maintain its artificial, rational, perfectly suspended, and mechanical society free from the epidemic of the soul, must therefore sacrifice all mothers and separate itself from all creatures that allude to her mystery beyond the Green Wall. The Benefactor is “the most enchanted disinfectant,” but MEPHI nevertheless releases its contagion through I-330, a surrogate mother of this dangerous nucleus of love.  

Having established the inadequacy of sexual love between D-503 and other ciphers, Zamiatin next draws a connection between D-503’s journey into his “I” and his environment by providing subtle details that amount to profound contrasts between D-503’s apartment and the Ancient House. These details lie in the dynamic, recurrent descriptions of symbolic objects—blinds, glass, and thread—in several domestic, public, and private spaces. Glass, for example, is the exclusive building material of the One State’s crystalline apartments, emphasizing the complete transparency between ciphers and the artificial, God-like omniscience of the Benefactor. It is also, however, a fragile material; rather than suggesting longevity, it predicts the eventual shattering of the One State. Through its close association with mirrors, glass also becomes a trigger for D-503’s philosophical reflections.

Controlled by the One State’s bureaucracy, apartment blinds are closed only during Personal Hours on days when ciphers are assigned their pink tickets for intimacy. Describing a tour of the Ancient House with I-330, D-503 writes, “Then we stopped in front of a mirror. At that moment, I only saw her eyes. An idea came to me: aren’t human beings constructed as

\[16\] We, 146.
haphazardly as these ridiculous apartments? […] Before me were two terrifyingly dark windows, and within them a very unknown, strange life.”¹⁷ D-503 is perplexed by these eyes, which blink and close like blinds, and even more so by the small quadrilateral windows of the Ancient House, to which he reacts with claustrophobic panic, frightened paradoxically by the oppression he sees in such privacy. Yet this fear is rational, for windows, like eyes, are thresholds into the private, internal life condemned by the One State. One day, when D-503 wanders alone into the Ancient House, descends deep into its underground passages, and discovers I-330 and the doctor from the Bureau of Medicine, he describes a mystical, spiritual experience that unfolds upon crossing the physical threshold of the mirrored wardrobe. Elliot Borenstein argues that this mirror episode is essentially a schizoid experience, a dissociation “between [D-503’s] ‘I’ as linguistic subject and the physical body of the number D-503.”¹⁸ D-503’s physical descent is therefore a simultaneous descent into his “I,” completed not in the moment, but afterward through the act of writing.

Discovering the site of MEPHI’s subversive activities marks a change in D-503’s attitude toward his place in society. Afraid to return to the Ancient House, he also delays returning to the glass prison of his apartment, where he feels increasingly anxious and isolated. At this point in the novel D-503’s diary begins to reveal gaps in time, erratic apologies, and explanations to its imagined readers.¹⁹ Suddenly overwhelmed by solipsism, D-503 reflects, “A

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Borenstein, 670.

¹⁹ See Sheiich, 94.
long time ago I had ceased understanding who ‘they’ were and who ‘we’ were.” In this anxious state he takes long walks and meditates, wandering between the two domiciles, suspended in his “I” in a developmental stage of philosophical self-questioning and self-realization. He is compelled by his journey as a writer, represented by a final and most-humanizing symbol: thread.

Deeply conscious of his “I,” D-503 at last finds solace in the imaginary threads that connect him to other affected ciphers, ultimately realizing that the self can only survive if it is connected to others who value the individual. When D-503 first imagines invisible revolutionary “threads” connecting S with I-330 and the doctor, he believes that one day he will “untangle” them, as if he has the power to rationalize the invisible, to conquer the irrational. Later, submitting to these threads, he writes, “Now I see the familiar, enormous letters—MEPHI—on the rock, and for some reason this is just as it should be, this is the simple, sound thread, connecting everyone.” Thus a revolution begins, as the collective gathering of those infected by the “I” precipitates into a “We.” D-503 marvels that the threads “float along slowly and then you suddenly feel something foreign and invisible on your face. You want to wave it away but no, you can’t, there isn’t any way of getting rid of it…” Eventually these invisible threads are revealed to have been described irrationally by D-503, who cannot otherwise articulate his first contact with pollen, a natural, life-giving substance that infects the atmosphere of the One State

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20 We, 142.
21 We, 124.
22 Ibid., 138.
Вот теперь я вижу на камне знакомые, огромные буквы: «Мефи»—и почему-то это так нужно, это простая, прочная нить, связывающая все. My, 111.
23 We, 148.
Медленно плывут—и вдруг вы чувствуете: что-то постороннее, невидимое у вас на лице, вы хотите смахнуть—и нет: не можете, никак не отделаться… My, 119.
upon the explosion of the Green Wall. Although this destruction does not immediately put a stop to the Great Operation, the contamination is complete, for nature undermines the “temporary wall of high voltage waves” constructed by the One State.²⁴

One final, essential contradiction in D-503’s life is his dual duty to the One State as the Builder of the Integral and to MEPHI as a trusted ally. D-503 neglects both duties when his attempt to hijack the Integral is foiled, and he appears to fail himself as well when, at the end of his records, the Great Operation subjugates him and thus strips him of the imagination or “soul” he had discovered on the journey into his “I.” Historically, defiant martyr-figures like I-330 are the revolutionary individuals most remembered and idolized for their sacrifices. D-503’s contributions, however, while less conspicuous, are no less valuable. Through his commitment to recording his experiences in honest reflection and meditation—the ultimate struggle with his “I”—he creates literature, a powerful and lasting form of resistance in a totalitarian state. I-330’s actions may directly affect countless ciphers, and her legacy may one day be that of a folk hero, but D-503 the writer possesses the ability to mobilize an entire nation, to spread the “epidemic” of revolution.

As Zamiatin himself proclaims, “The only weapon worthy of man—of tomorrow’s man—is the word. With the word, the Russian intelligentsia, Russian literature, have fought for decades for the great human tomorrow.”²⁵ Borenstein finds this sentiment explicitly illustrated in We: “When [D-503] decides to kill U in Entry 35, he rolls up his manuscript into a tube and stuffs it into a pipe, turning his journal into a murder weapon.”²⁶ On the other hand, by establishing the manuscript as an organic piece of D-503’s identity—as in Record One, where

²⁴ We, 203.
²⁵ Zamiatin, “Tomorrow,” 52.
²⁶ Borenstein, 679.
the protagonist compares the act of writing to childbirth—Zamiatin “implies that words are not fit to be weapons or instruments; rather, words are self-propagating and revelatory.” D-503’s decision to spare U’s life, for example, illustrates the hero’s non-violent resolution. Choosing a higher purpose, he sublimates his aggression into creating literature. If the power of revolutionary writing lies in the collective realization of the “I,” of individuation and the sense of an internal, shared purpose, then the writer has a heroic duty: he must access the internal through the eternal, through metaphor and the abstract, through philosophy and the questions that conjure up the absurd and the irrational, and through the “soul” that at once turns us inward and allows us to perceive the timeless thread that weaves us together in the essence of our humanity.

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27 Vaingurt, 118.
Works Cited


