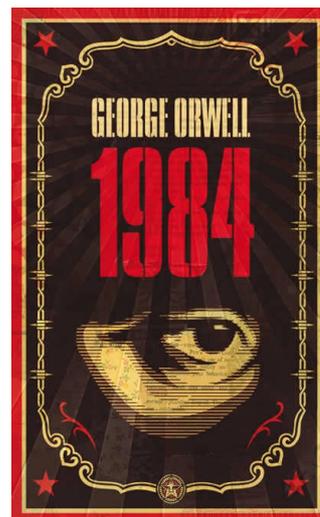
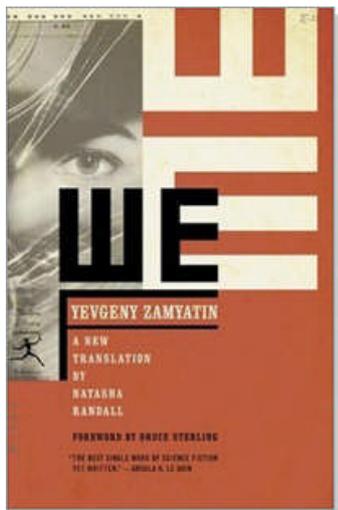


Zamyatin and Orwell

A Comparative Analysis of *We* and *1984*

History 389
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In 1921 Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote the world's first dystopian science fiction novel, *We*. A book of high intellect and metaphor, *We* would prove to be a lasting and universal novel that dissected the relatively fresh (contemporarily speaking) Bolshevik Revolution. Twenty-eight years later another dystopian novel appeared, this time written by the English intellectual George Orwell. *1984* would prove to be the more famous of the two, providing new vocabulary to a world reeling from the Second World War and terrified of the looming "Red Threat." Both novels paint a dark picture of a world oppressed by state machinations and re-created to suit a ruling elite. *We* almost certainly informed Orwell's approach to writing his novel, and similarities can be seen in the way the authors relate sex, history, art and the limitations on freedom imposed by the state. However differences are apparent, most notably in the tone of the novels. Zamyatin's book holds a more hopeful tone; it ascribes revolution a place in totalitarian society, and gives hope for freedom outside the Green Wall. Conversely, Orwell seems convinced that revolution within the confines of a totalitarian state is not only impossible, but in the end simply another machination of the state. This paper will seek to compare the two novels, focusing on the differences and similarities found within their depictions of sex as a revolutionary construct; within their use of history as a controlling mechanism; within the states abject rejection of the artist as heretic; and finally within the limitations used to ultimately exercise the complete control that both the One State and Oceania so desire. This analysis will synthesize both books into a cohesive argument for dystopian science fiction as relevant political commentary.

In both *We* and *1984*, works of “projected political fiction,” sex is seen to have inherently revolutionary potential.¹ Both novels represent regulation and repression of sexual desire as an integral part of their respective totalitarian societies. Free sexual expression is incompatible with the authoritarian regimes of the Benefactor and Big Brother.² Within the One State, sex is highly regulated. This is in contrast to the historic state of generations past, which left sexual life and procreation uncontrolled. D-503 describes the One State’s attack against “the other ruler of the world – Love,” which is “subjugated, i.e., organized and reduced to mathematical order.”³ In his explanation to his “unknown reader,” D-503 describes the rational organization of sexual relationships: “Each number has a right to any other number, as to a sexual commodity.”⁴ The citizens of the One State, subject to medical inspection and allotted a specific number of coupons used to register for sexual partners, are not allowed permanence, co-habitation, or romantic affinity for their partners. Sex is de-naturalized and rationalized in order to remove as much of its subversive potential as possible.

Sex is similarly regulated within Oceania. Members of the Party live within the confines of strict sexual control. The hierarchical society that exists under the watchful gaze of Big Brother is preserved through “governmental control of the sex lives of the members of the middle class.”⁵ The middle class is specifically targeted because they are the most dangerous and the most likely to rise up and challenge the ruling Inner Party. The proles, occupying the lowest strata of society, are free from much of this regulation as explained by the voice of the

¹ Thomas Horan, “Revolutions from the Waist Downwards: Desire as Rebellion in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, George Orwell’s *1984*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*,” *Extrapolation* 48:2 (Summer 2007): 315.

² Paul Robinson, “For the Love of Big Brother: The Sexual Politics of Nineteen Eighty-Four,” in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. Peter Stansky (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983), 148.

³ Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: EOS HarperCollins, 1972), 20.

⁴ Zamyatin, *We*, 20-21.

⁵ Horan, “Revolutions from the Waist Downwards,” 324.

Brotherhood, Emmanuel Goldstein; "...from the proletarians, nothing is to be feared."⁶

However, within *1984* sexual regulation operates gender specifically. Orwell's novel depicts female sexuality as the more dangerous of the two, while Zamyatin's work describes a state that regulates all sexuality regardless of gender. This regulation of the female sex drive within *1984* is depicted as the end result of extreme indoctrination, while little attempt to repress male sexuality is observed.

"The women of the Party were all alike. Chastity was as deeply ingrained in them as Party loyalty. By careful early conditioning, by games and cold water, by the rubbish that was drilled into them at school and in the Spies and the Youth League, by lectures, parades, songs, slogans and martial music, the natural feeling had been driven out of them."⁷

Conversely, the existence of female prostitutes represents an acknowledgement of the Party's inability to completely eradicate male sexual desire and an expectation of women to bear the burden of sexual repression. Within Orwell's novel, sexual desire is inherently dangerous to the Party and Big Brother. Julia was acutely aware of this; she subverted the sexual repression of the Party through deviant sexual activity, and was fully cognizant of the personal political ramifications of her actions. Sexual desire felt for another individual is shown to be, in and of itself, subversive.

Both novels represent sex and desire as catalysts which "provide an opening out of the rigid structure of totalitarianism."⁸ Both novels represent this catalyst in similar fashion, with sexual arousal preceding political awareness in both Winston and D-503. "Love for a free-

⁶ George Orwell, *1984*, 8th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 219.

⁷ Orwell, *1984*, 71.

⁸ Horan, "Revolutions from the Waist Downwards," 315.

spirited and courageous young woman is for both characters a crucial experience.”⁹ Perhaps “sexual desire” would be more accurate than “love.” However, the truth of the statement remains. To further support this argument, Brown states “the germ of revolt enters them by way of spontaneous and satisfying sex, practiced in defiance of strict sexual regulations in the Only State [translational difference] and of anti-sex Puritanism in Oceania.”¹⁰ The act of illicit sex causes both Winston and D-503 to act in ways that would have been unthinkable before these encounters, further cementing the concept of sex as revolutionary power. Both the female characters represent and embody revolutionary ideals, with I-330 going so far as to say “how can there be a final revolution? There is no final one; revolutions are infinite.”¹¹ Further, D-503’s uncomfortable awakening is tied inexorably with I-330. This is most evident with his discomfort at their first meeting, and his acute sexualisation of her at their second. Here we can see the beginnings of “a conflict between his rational self and his passion for her.”¹² This desire transforms D-503; it displaces his focus on reason, logic and rational thought, and introduces ideas which are more mysterious and ungovernable. This transformation reaches its zenith with D-503’s succumbing to his desire; “There were two of me. The former one, D-503, number D-503 and the other...Before, he had just shown his hairy paws from within the shell; now all of him broke out, the shell cracked...”¹³ Thus begins D-503’s descent into revolution, his diagnoses of “having a soul.”¹⁴ He falls further away from expected behaviour, failing to turn in I-330 and

⁹ Edward J. Brown, “Zamyatin’s *We* and Nineteen Eighty-Four,” in *on Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. Peter Stansky, (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983), 161.

¹⁰ Brown, “Zamyatin’s *We* and Nineteen Eighty-Four,” 161.

¹¹ Zamyatin, *We*, 174.

¹² W.H.G. Armytage, *Yesterday’s Tomorrows: A Historical Survey of Future Societies* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd, 1968), 149.

¹³ Zamyatin, *We*, 56.

¹⁴ Zamyatin, *We*, 89.

participating in planned insurrection through his actions as builder of the Integral; all of which are motivated by his sexual desire for I-330.

Similarly, Winston's political transformation is connected to his desire for Julia. However, while Julia specifically embodies revolution much like I-330, she is not an intellectual revolutionary. Her sexuality is a "denial of all forms of mind control, a powerful political rebellion", but waged on a personal level.¹⁵ This revolutionary sexuality is most clearly represented in Winston's dream of Julia in the Golden Country. He is "overwhelmed" with "admiration for the gesture with which she had thrown her clothes aside", her disrobing is seen to have the power to annihilate "a whole culture, a whole system of thought..."¹⁶ This dream is referenced during their first act of sexual rebellion, an act described in revolutionary terms; as "a battle", their climax "a victory" and a "blow struck against the Party."¹⁷ This act transforms Winston, much as it transformed D-503, and he moves from passive to active rebellion. In other words, "sex has changed Winston from a hapless victim of fear and propaganda into a daring revolutionary, inspiring him to openly confront O'Brien about the Brotherhood."¹⁸ In both novels sexual desire is revolutionary, both in the way it changes the trajectory of D-503 and Winston and the way it undermines regulated, controlled totalitarian societies. Towards this point, it is important to note that female characters that embody the concept of revolutionary sexual desire are not allowed to exist within the confines of these societies. At the end of *We*, I-330 is tortured and scheduled for execution. The description is highly sexual; "...she threw her

¹⁵ Anne K. Mellor, "'You're Only a Rebel From the Waist Downwards': Orwell's View of Women," in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. By Peter Stansky (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983), 119

¹⁶ Orwell, *1984*, 33.

¹⁷ Orwell, *1984*, 133.

¹⁸ Horan, "Revolutions From the Waist Downwards," 328.

head back, half closed her eyes; her lips were tightly shut- it reminded me of something.”¹⁹ I-330 and D-503’s highly sexualized relationship exists outside the regulated, rational society of the One State and cannot exist. Similarly, Julia is not allowed to exist in her previous, highly sexualized capacity. Unlike I-330, she is left alive; however, in describing his encounter with Julia post-Ministry of Love, Winston likens her body (previously associated with sexual desire and revolution) to that of a corpse.

“Her waist had grown thicker, and in a surprising way had stiffened. He remembered how once, after the explosion of a rocket bomb, he had helped to drag a corpse out of some ruins, and had been astonished not only by the incredible weight of the thing, but by its rigidity and awkwardness to handle, which made it seem more like stone than flesh. Her body felt like that.”²⁰

Like I-330 within the One State there is no room for Julia, or the sexual rebellion she embodied, within the controlled, regulated and repressed environment of Orwell’s dystopian vision.

The regulation and control of history, like sex, is used in both novels as a tool of oppression. Both D-503 and Winston’s spiral into dissent is facilitated by their access to the past. D-503 quite literally escapes through the Ancient House, while Winston symbolically escapes through his interaction with past memory. Within Zamyatin’s novel, the characters exist in a state uninhibited by reflection on the past. Civil War is hundreds of years prior, and so the citizens of the One State are able to look upon historical relics with derision. This is further evidence of the all-encompassing power of the Benefactor and Party; history does not need to be reshaped since the One State exists far beyond the constraints of memory. There is no evidence that history has been tampered with in *We*, if for no other reason than it does not have to be.²¹

¹⁹ Zamyatin, *We*, 232.

²⁰ Orwell, *1984*, 304-305.

²¹ James Connors, “Zamyatin's "We" and the Genesis of "1984," *Modern Fiction Studies* 21 no.1 (1975): 111.

The citizens of the One State can mock the past because they see no relativity in it. For example, upon entering the Ancient House, D-503 remarks that he "...could barely endure all that chaos."²² The rational oppression of the One State equates remnants of the past with chaos. Likewise, D-503 is horrified by his knowledge that the ancients worshipped Kant over Taylor.²³ Freedom, as well, is derided; it is a historically constructed concept, one that is viewed as a limitation by the citizens of the One State. The Ancients are therefore equated with disorder and absurdity. And yet, there is danger within the chaotic freedom of the Ancients; they dreamt and imagined, both of which are registered as serious mental illnesses within this society. Thus, though history is not tampered with in the One State, it is through his discovery of the past that D-503 begins to recognize his own individuality; literally discovering a world beyond the walls of the One State through the Ancient House and metaphorically discovering his own place in the universe. Despite these discoveries, he continues to struggle with concepts such as pity, individualism, and desire, further emphasizing the conflict between the irrationality of the past and the rationality of the present.

Similarly, Winston's spiral into dissent is influenced by his relationship with history; however, his link to the past is highlighted by his vague memory of a time before Big Brother. When Winston enters a pub in the prole community and sees an old man, thinking: "...he and a few others like him were the last links with the vanished world of capitalism."²⁴ Since links with the past continue to exist, Big Brother must suppress memories through thought control and the falsification of the past. Christopher Hollis suggests that this is an attempt to maintain control,

²² Zamyatin, *We*, 26.

²³ Zamyatin, *We*, 33.

²⁴ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 90.

and to match constantly shifting policy.²⁵ Attachment to relics from the past, according to the Party, “diverts the mind from the unrelieved attachment to abstract ideas, which is necessary for fanaticism.”²⁶ The Party must therefore control the past to control the present. Unlike the One State, accurate history does not exist, let alone for public consumption. Through this constant revision, the Party creates “truth”; a reality that is accepted due to the practice of “doublethink.” This process allows Big Brother to falsify history unobstructed. It also allowed party members to “...forget whatever was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself.”²⁷ In the realm of Oceania “...the narrative of history has no grounding in reality and can be rewritten at will by those in power.”²⁸

Winston has interactions with the past within two spheres: the apartment above Charrington’s shop, and at his job revising history at the Ministry of Truth. In the apartment, Winston discovers history through exposure to art, songs and curiosities that surround him in the prole community. This can also be seen in *We*, when D-503 is exposed to artifacts from the past by I-330; specifically a silk dress, music, cigarettes, and alcohol. Winston imagines himself stuck in time like his coral paperweight: “The paperweight was the room he was in and the coral was Julia’s life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal.”²⁹ Eventually Winston is caught by the Thought Police in the same apartment where, symbolically, a telescreen

²⁵ Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell: The Man and His Works* (London: Hollis and Carter LTD, 1956), 90.

²⁶ Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, 90.

²⁷ Orwell, *1984*, 37.

²⁸ Adrian Wanner, "The Underground Man as Big Brother: Dostoevsky's and Orwell's Anti-Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 8 no. 1 (1997): 82.

²⁹ Orwell, *1984*, 154.

emerges from a steel engraving of St. Clement Danes church.³⁰ In an interesting contrast, Winston's job at the Ministry of Truth is to falsify history, a task that he continues to perform adamantly even after joining the Brotherhood.³¹

Once an analysis of both characters differing relationships with history is complete, it becomes clear that true rebellion is impossible for both. D-503 can only see "utter absurdity"³² in the poetry and art of the Ancients, whereas Winston becomes trapped within a nostalgic "ancestral memory"³³ through his time in Charrington's apartment. Winston understood the hypocrisy of the Party, but internalized their rhetoric, which delayed his rebellion. He continues to perform his job well and destroys the one piece of evidence that proves the Party has falsified history.³⁴ Similarly, D-503 cannot embrace irrationality due to the internalization of the One State's ideals of order and rationality.³⁵ Despite both of the characters interactions with history, they are ultimately unable to pursue the freedom presented to them in their exploration of history and memory.

Symbolically speaking, there is much to discuss concerning both novels. From first glance, one could compare the two novels easily; both are dystopian in nature, both feature male protagonists who descend into rebellion after meeting enigmatic, overly-sexualized women, and both are eventually caught and re-ensnared by oppression. However, it is important to note some very specific details wherein the novels diverge symbolically; specifically, Zamyatin's belief that

³⁰ Orwell, *1984*, 230.

³¹ James Connors, "'Do It to Julia'": Thoughts on Orwell's "1984," *Modern Fiction Studies* 16 no.4 (Winter 1970): 468.

³² Zamyatin, *We*, 67

³³ Orwell, *1984*, 100.

³⁴ Orwell, *1984*, 82.

³⁵ Connors, "Zamyatin's 'We' and the Genesis of '1984,'" 111.

the artist was above all a heretic, and an important one at that. Conversely, Orwell's novel depicts the artist as colluder, and ultimately futile in his attempts to foster rebellion.

In both novels, journals play central roles in the main characters attempts to break free from their respective authoritarian regimes. In *We*, D-503 begins the novel by stating that he intends to write a "record" of what he sees and thinks, but that ultimately "...since this record will be a derivative of our life, of the mathematically perfect life of the One State, will it not be, of itself, and regardless of my will or skill, a poem? It will. I believe, I know it."³⁶ In these lines, Zamyatin is plainly stating a concept he had been working on prior; simply put, a "...philosophy designed to uphold the independence and integrity of the artist by insisting on his right to be a heretic".³⁷ And a heretic is exactly what D-503 becomes. It is through the poetics of numbers, rediscovered philosophy and self-analysis that D-503 begins his journey into individualism and rebellion. Through the journal, he begins to transcribe a series of events and thoughts that would have, until a short time prior, been unthinkable. It would be easy to ascribe his sudden turn-around to his meeting I-330. However, a more subtle eye will notice that his change initiated almost as soon as he began to write in his journal.³⁸ In this way, Zamyatin portrays art as a gateway to heterodoxy; the journal is a poem, initially to the Integral but eventually to the concept of individuality and freedom. It is also a poem leading away from the Benefactor and the One State. By the time he meets the Mephi, his transformation from mathematician to artist is complete; he writes of I-330's speech atop the "...yellow, skull-like

³⁶ Zamyatin, *We*, 2.

³⁷ E.J. Brown, "Brave New World, 1984 and *We*: An Essay on Anti-Utopia," *Zamyatin and English Literature*, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976), 32.

³⁸ Gary Rosenshield, "The Imagination and the "I" in Zamyatin's *We*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 23 no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 52.

stone...” in glowing, poetic terms.³⁹ D-503 sees this change as “...something alien, and the birth of his soul as a sickness which separates him from his true self as well as from his fellow numbers”.⁴⁰ This contrasts *1984*; Winston specifically buys the journal in the junk shop in order to record his private, dangerous thoughts.⁴¹ Winston himself is endemic of the artist as colluder; his job at the Ministry of Truth is that of an historical revisionist. He must change what the Party tells him too, and do it in such a manner as to make it believable. He is an artist who destroys history and creates pseudo-history in order to further the plans and needs of Big Brother.

Both novels share some symbolic elements, though. Despite their differences concerning the role of the artist as necessary (and often doomed) heretic, there are similarities with the societies of the One State and Oceania and how they are structured. E.J. Brown shows that both novels “...share an implicit assumption: that the more complex and highly organized a society becomes, the less free are its individual members”.⁴² In Oceania, there is the complexity of “doublethink”, “newspeak”, and the highly stratified society which boxes in its citizens and forces them into primal modes of survival. In the One State, it has gone even further; the society has progressed along rational lines to the point where there is no difference between any one citizen, and the complex scientific/rational basis for the society has rendered the individual a moot point, and one that could even be seen as dangerous.

A final note on symbols; both novels play with the concept of civilized vs. savage. However, in Zamyatin’s novel, the savages are more free. The Mephi live as noble primitives, simple and open. They live off the land and are not constrained by the highly technological society of the One State. Within Oceania, however, the Party has completely subjugated the

³⁹ Zamyatin, *We*, 156.

⁴⁰ Rosenshield, “Imagination and the ‘I,’” 54.

⁴¹ Orwell, *1984*, 9.

⁴² Brown, “Brave New World, 1984, and *We*,” 38.

more savage proles. They have become labourers without imagination or thought. There is no danger from them, as Goldstein states. This is because they have been swallowed whole by the urban environment, and subjugated to the will of the state. The symbols within both novels are oddly concurrent and divergent; they bring together concepts of art, rationality, and technological advancement.

Finally, we must discuss the limitations presented by the regimes of both novels. In both *We* and *1984*, the insular world of the state is limited in order to allow the continuance of the state and the maintenance of power. Within Zamyatin's novel, this is quite literal; a vast Green Wall separates the citizens of the One State from the unknown wild beyond. Within the novel, this is a matter of course for the citizens; "none of us has been beyond the Green Wall since the Two Hundred Years war."⁴³ On a metaphorical level, the citizens of the One State are obsessed with the concept of walls. I-330's main goal is to break down the walls and to stop the Integral from taking "...these walls up there, into the heights."⁴⁴ When order is restored following the disruptive Unanimity Day, D-503 is relieved that "...the walls are still intact."⁴⁵ This is due to a common thread in the novel; that is, that walls bind their world, and keep the city free from the chaos of the outside. They allow for the efficiency deemed necessary for happiness, and keep passion and irrationality at bay. Similarly, war and geopolitics are the "walls" which the Party uses to control Oceania. Goldstein writes that citizens of Oceania exist in a "sealed universe" which allows the party to completely manipulate reality.⁴⁶ This allows O'Brien to state unequivocally that "Oceania is the world" and have it be possible.⁴⁷ The Party is thereby able to

⁴³ Zamyatin, *We*, 11.

⁴⁴ Zamyatin, *We*, 157.

⁴⁵ Zamyatin, *We*, 149.

⁴⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1950), 204.

⁴⁷ Orwell, *1984*, 277.

assume complete control over Oceania and its metaphorical world. As well, the people of Oceania are in complete ignorance of the world outside the limits of the state. However, unlike *We*, the citizens of Oceania are not ignorant of the natural world, but rather of “one another’s existence, held apart by walls of hatred and fear.”⁴⁸ This world is fundamentally one of social reality and structure. Conversely, the One State is one of science informed by modern thermodynamics. As Bruce Clark remarks “The cosmos of the One State is layered with an overlapping collage of the technoscientific discourses mediating modernity’s various ideological needs.”⁴⁹ In this, the two novels are wholly divergent; the Party’s great technological innovation is the telescreen, and they are still reliant on torture that was “...a common punishment in imperial China.”⁵⁰ Meanwhile, in the One State they have conquered hunger and are able to excise the imagination through surgical means. Thus, while the end result is ultimately the same, the methods by which each authoritarian regime gains said results are different.

Despite this difference, nature and the countryside become linked with freedom, passion and love in both books. In the scientific metaphors of *We*, nature is associated with the energy that counters the entropy of the state, as expressed explicitly by I-330.⁵¹ In Orwell’s novel, Julia is also associated with nature, in the form of the Golden Country and the song of the thrush. Both novels therefore have similar relationships to nature despite different goals of their respective oppressors. It is a difference between happiness as the divine minus, where the state

⁴⁸ Orwell, *1984*, 229.

⁴⁹ Bruce Clark, *Energy Forms : Allegory and Science in the Era of Classical Thermodynamics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 139.

⁵⁰ Orwell, *1984*, 299.

⁵¹ Zamyatin, *We*, 165.

reduces the harshness of its tactics over time, and the future as “a boot stamping on a human face...forever.”⁵²

Both of these novels are inherently linked; one must acknowledge the debt that Orwell owes to Zamyatin, if for nothing else than the creation of dystopian science fiction as a genre. Both novels share similar themes and motives: both view the end result of authoritarian regimes as necessarily egregious to the pursuit of happiness, and both assume a failure on the part of the common man to free himself from the shackles of oppression. However, the two novels are dissimilar in many ways as well. Whereas Orwell was informed by a fear of his political enemies and what he saw as the gradual progression of an unsustainable state model, Zamyatin appears to have been more hopeful. At the end of *We*, the revolution hasn't died; it has simply lost a valuable member. There is a chance for the future, despite the great leap in surgical science that allows them to excise the imagination. Beyond these thematic concepts, though, both novels view revolutionary possibilities in the form of sexual liberation, historical knowledge, artistic freedom, and a limitless world. Both novels, as well, act as a warning for those who would feel it proper to have government without humanity; a brain without a heart, if you will. Separated geographically, chronologically, and by the limits of language, one cannot help but feel that Zamyatin was still able to reach across the intervening decades to inform Orwell's approach to a wholly absorbing genre of fiction.

⁵² Orwell, *1984*, 280

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