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On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters

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Yevgeny Zamyatin was not only the author of the first true dystopia in world literature, but also many short stories, novels, and essays. Today I'm sharing a translation of one of his essays, written in 1923, called "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters".

First published in the 1924 collection "Writers on Art and Themselves", Zamyatin's piece stood out for its innovative and provocative insights and became a focal point for debate. Among the responses to Zamyatin's article was Gruzdev's[1] brief note, where he wrote, "Living literature is built not on the models of the past, but in spite of them," challenging the dreams of Tolstoy and some others to select "the very best" from the "most classical" past as incapable of birthing anything living. Polyansky critiqued Zamyatin's article, arguing against "the most ultimate, the most terrifying, the most fearless why-s and what next-s" that, according to Zamyatin, writers should seek. Polyansky asked how can we progress if we don't fully engage with the vast, significant present that Zamyatin underestimates? Others agreed with Zamyatin and stood by his side, others accusing him of contradictions and poor knowledge of dialectics, mentioned "clumsiness of language" and liberation of the Russian artist from the "cage of military communism".

Even after 100 years since it was first published, in a completely different context, I find the essay still relevant, extremely quotable, thought-provoking, or at least being a good record of Zamyatin's time.



"—Name for me the final number, the very last, the greatest.

—But that's absurd! If the number of numbers is infinite, how can there be a last one?

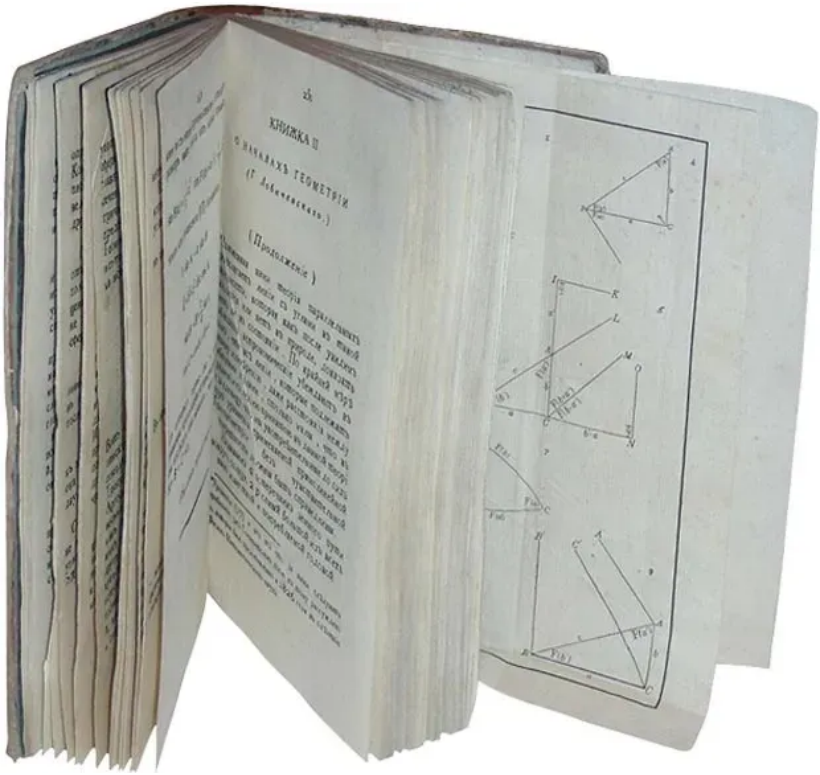
—And what kind of final revolution do you want! There is no final one; revolutions are endless. The concept of a "final one" is for children: infinity frightens children, but they need to sleep peacefully..."

Yevgeny Zamyatin, from the novel "We"

Ask point-blank: what is revolution?

Some will answer à la Louis Quatorze[2]: we are the revolution; some will name a date in the calendar; some will find a word in the dictionary. But if we go beyond the dictionary to syllables, the answer will be:

Two dead, dark stars collide with a silent, deafening roar, igniting a new star: this is revolution. A molecule breaks away from its orbit, intruding into an adjacent atomic universe, birthing a new chemical element: this is revolution. Lobachevsky shatters the millennia-old Euclidean world with a single book[3], opening pathways to countless non-Euclidean spaces: this is revolution.



Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It's infinite. It has no final act, no ultimate number. The social revolution is just one of countless numbers: the law of revolution is not a social law, but immeasurably greater — cosmic, universal (Universum) law, like to the law of conservation of energy and of the dissipation of energy (entropy). Someday, the precise formula for the law of revolution will be established. And in that formula, the numerical values will be nations, classes, molecules, stars — and books.

Crimson, fiery, deadly is the law of revolution, but this death creates a new life, new stars. And cold, blue, like ice, like the icy interplanetary infinities, is the law of entropy. The flame from crimson turns to even pink, warm, no longer deadly, but comfortable. The sun ages into a planet, suitable for highways, shops, beds, prostitutes, prisons: this is the law. And to rekindle youth on the planet, to ignite it, we must throw it off from the smooth highway of evolution: this is the law.

The flame will cool tomorrow or the day after (in the Book of Genesis, days are equal to years, centuries). But someone must see this already today, and speak heretically of tomorrow. Heretics are the sole (bitter) medicine against the entropy of human thought.

When a passionately boiling sphere (in science, religion, social life, art) cools, its fiery magma becomes covered with dogma — a solid, ossified, immovable crust. Dogmatisation in science, religion, social life, art is the entropy of thought. What's dogmatised no longer burns. It warms, it cools. Instead of the Sermon on the Mount, under the scorching sun, above uplifted hands and wails there are sleepy prayers in a sumptuous abbey. Instead of Galileo's tragic "And yet it moves!" there are calm calculations in a cosy observatory. Upon Galileo's foundations, the epigones slowly, in a polyp and coral way, build their own: this is the path of evolution. Until a new heresy explodes and bursts the crust of dogma and all the firmest, stone structures built upon it.



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The Prayer of Jesus (St John Passion - 3), Jacek Andrzej Rossakiewicz, 1990

Explosions are inconvenient. Therefore, those who ignite them, heretics, are justly exterminated by fire, axe, word. To every today, to every evolution, to difficult, slow, useful, most constructive, coral-like work, heretics are harmful. They recklessly, foolishly leap into today from tomorrow. They are romantics. Babeuf in 1797 was justly beheaded[4]: he leaped into 1797, skipping over a hundred and fifty years. Justly beheaded is the heretical, challenging the dogmas literature: this literature is harmful.

But harmful literature is more useful than useful literature. It is anti-entropic, it fights ossification, sclerosis, crust, moss, repose. It is utopian, absurd, like Babeuf was in 1797: it's right only hundred and fifty years later.

What about the adherents of two-finger sign[4], the Avvakums[5]? Aren't they also heretics?

Yes, and the Avvakums are useful. If Nikon[6] knew Darwin, he would daily pray for Avvakum's health.

We know Darwin, we know that after Darwin came mutations, Weismannism, neo-Lamarckism. But these are all balconies, mezzanines: the building is Darwin. And in this building there live not only tadpoles and fungi, but humans tool; there live not only fangs and teeth, but also

human thoughts. Fangs are sharpened only when there's someone to gnaw on. The same laws apply to both fangs and ideas: ideas fed on patties become as toothless as civilised patty-eating people. The Avvakums are necessary for health; if there are none, they must be invented.

But they are yesterday. Living literature lives not by yesterday's clock, nor by today's, but by tomorrow's. It's the sailor sent aloft, from where he sees sinking ships, icebergs, maelstroms, invisible from the deck. You can drag him down from the mast and put to work at the boilers or at the capstan, but that will change nothing: the mast will remain, and from there the next one will see what the first has seen.

In a storm, you need someone aloft. The storm is now, and SOS signals are coming from all sides. Yesterday, writers could afford leisurely strolls on the deck, looking the sea through their Kodaks. But today, who would focus on filmic landscapes when the world has tilted at 45 degrees, with the menacing green abyss wide open and the ship's hull splintering beneath us? Now one can only look and ponder as if facing death, "Well, we're about to die, so what? We've lived, but how? If to live anew, from scratch, differently, then what for?" Now, in literature, we need immense, mast-high, aeroplane-high, philosophical horizons, the most ultimate, the most terrifying, the most fearless "why-s and what-next-s.

Children ask those questions. It makes them the boldest philosophers.

They enter life naked, not covered by a single fig leaf[8] of dogmas, absolutes, creeds. Hence, every question they ask is absurdly naive and terrifyingly complex. The new ones entering life now are as naked and fearless as children, like Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche, they ask “why?” and “what next?”. Genius philosophers, children, and the people are equally wise — because they ask equally foolish questions. Foolish for a civilised person living in a well-furnished apartment with a shiny toilet and a well-furnished dogma.

Organic chemistry has already erased the line between living and dead matter. It’s a mistake to divide people into alive and dead — there are alive-dead and alive-alive. The alive-dead also write, walk, speak, act. But, just like machines, they don’t make mistakes and, just like machines, only produce dead things. The alive-alive are always in errors, in searches, in questions, in torments.

The same is with what we write: it walks and talks, but it can be alive-dead or alive-alive. What is truly alive doesn’t stop anywhere or at anything, seeking answers to absurd, “childish” questions. Let the answers be wrong, let the philosophy be mistaken — error is more valuable than truths: truth is mechanical, error is alive; truth soothes, error disturbs. And even if answers are completely impossible — all the better. Dealing with answered questions is the privilege of brains structured like a cow’s stomach, known to be adapted for chewing cud.

If there was anything immovable in nature, if absolute truths existed,

they would, of course, be wrong. But fortunately, all truths are erroneous. In the dialectical process, today's truths become errors tomorrow. There is no final number.

This (sole) truth is only for the strong. The weak-willed brain needs a limit to the universe, a final number, or, in Nietzsche's words, "crutches of certainty"[7]. The weak-willed lack the strength to include themselves in the dialectical syllogism. It is, indeed, difficult. But that's exactly what Einstein managed to do. He remembered that he, Einstein, observing motion with a watch in hand, is also moving; he managed to look at terrestrial motions from the outside.

In the same way, not minding the final number, great literature watches at earthly movements.

Critics who analyse and speculate now also scrutinise creative words to find something other than what can be touched. They search like a one citizen in a green coat I once met on Nevsky at night, in the rain.

That citizen, in a green coat, swaying and hugging a pole, leaned over to the pavement under a lamp. I asked the citizen: "What are you doing?"

"Looking for my wallet, just lost it somewhere there," he said, waving his hand into the darkness.

"Then why are you searching for it here, near the lamp?"

"Because it's light here, you can see everything."

They search — only under their lamp. And there, they invite everyone else.

[And yet they are only one breed of true critics. Art critics who write stories and tales where the surnames of the heroes are coincidentally Blok, Peshkov, Akhmatova[8] are not critics — they are us, belletrists[9]. A true critic can only be someone who knows how to write anti-art. Knowing how to do that is the hereditary gift of social critics.

Only this kind of critic is useful for the artist: from them, one can learn how not to write and what not to write about. According to the prudent dog ethics[10]: "You know you did good when they feed and pet you; you know you did bad when they beat you". People are often imprudent; and the further they are from the dog prudence, the closer they come to the inverse ethical rule: "You know you did good when they beat you; you know you did bad when they feed and pet you". Without those critics, how would we know which of our literary acts are good, and which are bad?]

The formal trait of living literature is the same as its inner essence: renunciation of truth, that is, of what everyone has known until this minute — going off from canonical rails, from the wide highways.

The highway of Russian literature, worn smooth by the giant wagons of Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekhov, is realism and everyday life. Therefore, going off that road means moving away from everyday life. Other rails, sanctified by Blok, Sologub, Bely[11] is symbolism renouncing everyday life. Therefore, going off that road means moving towards everyday life.

Absurd, yes. An intersection of parallel lines is also absurd. Yet this is absurd only in canonical, flat Euclidean geometry. In non-Euclidean geometry, it's an axiom. One must just stop being flat, rise above the plane. For today's literature, the plane of everyday life is the same as the earth for an aeroplane, only a runway for takeoff to go upwards from everyday life to being, to philosophy, to fantasy. Let yesterday's cart creak along the well-paved highways. The living have strength enough to cut away their yesterday. All of a sudden, Gorky's latest stories are fantasy, Blok's "The Twelve", surprisingly, is a street ditty, and Bely's "The Jockey" shows the mundanity of Arbat.

If you put a police officer or a commissar in a cart it won't stop being a cart. Thus the literature of yesterday remains itself even if you put a "revolutionary spirit" in it but on the well-trodden highway. Even if in a fast, bell-ringing troika[12]. Today is an automobile, an aeroplane, flickering, flying, leaving seconds and dashed lines behind.

Write no more old, drowsy descriptions — instead, a laconism with a tremendous charge of high voltage in every word. In a second you must compress as much as they used to put a sixty-second minute. You must take the syntax, elliptical, agile, complex pyramids of thoughts and dismantle it into the stones of independent sentences. In that succinctness, the canonised escapes the eye and gives birth to unusual, often strange symbolism and lexicon. The images are sharp and fusional. They have only one main feature, only what you would manage to capture from a car. Into the sanctified lexicon (of Moscow's prosphoras[13]) burst the provincial, neologisms, science, mathematics,

technology.

If you perceive this as a rule, then, like a true talent, make the rule an exception. There are already enough of those who turn exceptions into rules.

Science and art are similar in how they project the world onto certain axes. Differences in form are due only to differences in the axes. All realistic forms project onto immovable, flat Euclidean space. In nature, these coordinates, this limited, immovable world do not exist. The world is a surreal and abstract notion. And therefore realism is unreal. Projecting onto speeding curved surfaces, what both new mathematics and new art equally do, is immeasurably closer to reality. Realism that is not primitive, not realia but realiora[16], consists in displacement, distortion, curvature, non-objectivity. Only the camera lens is objective.

The main features of the new form: speed of movement (plot, phrase), shift, curvature (in symbolism and lexicon) are not accidental. They are a consequence of new mathematical axes.

Is the new form not understandable to everyone and difficult for many? Perhaps. The customary, banal is, of course, simpler, more pleasant, more comfortable. Veresaev's Deadlock[14] is very comfortable, yet still it's a deadlock. The Euclidean world is very simple and Einstein's world very difficult but it is no longer possible for us to return to Euclid. No revolution and no heresy are comfortable or easy. Because they are a leap, a break of the smooth evolutionary curve, and a break is a wound, a pain. But that wound is necessary: most people suffer from a

hereditary sleeping disease, and those with the victims of this disease (entropy) must not be allowed to sleep, or it will be their last sleep, death.

Artists and writers often have the same disease. They fall asleep, satiated, in a once-invented and twice-improved form. And they have no strength to wound themselves, to fall out of love with the beloved, to leave behind their cosy, laurel-scented[15] room and to go into the open field and start anew.

Indeed, to wound oneself is difficult, even dangerous. But for those who are alive, living today as yesterday and yesterday as today is still more difficult.

1923

Notes

1. I. A. Gruzdev was a literary scholar and a playwright.
2. Zamyatin used a neologism here referring to "the style of Louis XIV". Louis XIV, known as the "Sun King," is famous for his statement, "L'état, c'est moi," or "I am the state." Hence, "we are the revolution" is a pompous paraphrase with a hint of irony.
3. Nikolai Lobachevsky introduced non-Euclidean geometry with his paper "On the principles of geometry," which was published in 1829. This groundbreaking theory rejected Euclid's parallel postulate and was the final solution to a problem that had baffled mathematicians for 2,000 years.
4. The two-finger sign was central to the Old Believers' practices, a group that split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century over ritual reforms, including changes from the two-finger to the three-finger sign of the cross, marking a significant point in

the schism.

5. Avvakum was a prominent Russian priest and writer who became a leader of the Old Believers, opposing the Russian Orthodox Church's liturgical reforms in the 17th century. His resistance to these changes led to his execution by burning, making him a martyr in the eyes of Old Believer communities.
6. Patriarch Nikon was a 17th-century Russian Orthodox Church reformer whose efforts to standardize liturgical practices led to the Raskol, or Great Schism, within the church. His reforms, aimed at aligning Russian rites more closely with Greek Orthodox practices, sparked significant controversy and division.
7. Nietzsche's influence on Zamyatin can be traced often and even is a matter of research — https://www.jstor.org/stable/3729190.
8. Alexander Blok, Maxim Gorky (born Alexei Peshkov), and Anna Akhmatova were prominent Russian poets and writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, each playing a significant role in the Silver Age of Russian poetry and literature, known for their contributions to Symbolist and Modernist movements and their profound influence on Russian literary culture.
9. A belletrist is someone who engages in belles-lettres, a French term that refers to literature valued more for its aesthetic qualities than its informative or practical content, typically including works of fiction, poetry, drama, and essays that are considered fine writing or literature as an art form.
10. This was very unclear to me in the original and I couldn't found the reference and decided to omit it. Zamyatin mentioned Anatole France's dog Ricke, not just some abstract dog. France, per some online sources, was fond of dogs, so perhaps the quote provided by Zamyatin is a nod towards him.
11. The most prominent symbolist poets of the Silver Age of Russian poetry.
12. A troika is a traditional Russian sled or carriage drawn by three horses harnessed side-by-side, symbolizing speed and often used to represent Russian culture and heritage.
13. Prosphora is a small loaf of leavened bread used in Orthodox Christian liturgies, symbolizing the body of Christ in the Eucharist.
14. Here Zamyatin references Veresaev's novel "The Deadlock", which in the context might mean that Zamyatin didn't like it and it contradicted the vision he's presenting in his essay.
15. Symbol of victory and honor: The bay leaf is traditionally associated with victory and honor, dating back to ancient Greece and Rome where victors and esteemed individuals were crowned with laurel

wreaths. Rooms smelling of bay leaf might symbolize spaces filled with the presence of honor, achievements, or past glories.

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