

# Threatening a Utopian World: The Post-Romantic Aesthetics of the “Melusine” in Zamyatin’s *We*

## A ameaça de um mundo utópico: a estética pós-romântica da “Melusina” em *Nós* de Zamyatin

Alessandra Carbone<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This work analyses the famous anti-utopian novel "My" ("We", in English) by Evgenij Zamyatin, written in Russian in 1920 and published for the first time in English in the United States in 1924. The novel was banned in the Soviet Union and published in the original language only in 1988. Writing a review about it George Orwell was one of the first commentators to recognize its innovative scope and crucial socio-political meaning, calling it «a study of the Machine, the genie that man has thoughtlessly let out of its bottle and cannot be put back again» (Orwell, 1946). We will examine how the author succeeds to construct an evident contrast between the Utopia of the new, exaggeratedly futuristic world of the machines in the "Single State" of the imaginary XXVI century - where the novel is set and where the weather is always sunny, - and the cultural and aesthetic references to the Modernism of the actual early XX century (mainly – to post-romantic and pre-revolutionary Russia), that seem here to be loaded with a strong subversive potential against the utopian and collectivistic State of “We”.

**Keywords:** Zamyatin; we; post-romantic; Modern aesthetics; *femme fatale*; Zamyatin and Blok, Melusine.

**Resumo** Esse ensaio analisará o romance anti-utópico *My* (*Nós*, em português) de Evgenij Zamyatin, escrito em russo em 1920 e publicado pela primeira vez em inglês nos Estados Unidos em 1924. O romance foi banido na União Soviética e publicado no idioma original apenas em 1988. Examinaremos como o autor interpreta a utopia do novo mundo exageradamente futurista das máquinas do “Estado Único” do imaginário do século XXVI. Em particular, consideraremos as referências culturais, pictóricas, imagéticas e estéticas do modernismo da Rússia pré-revolucionária porque no romance elas são carregadas de um forte potencial subversivo contra a ideia do estado utópico e coletivista.

**Palavras-chave:** Zamyatin; *Nós*; pós-romântico; Estética moderna; *femme fatale*; Zamyatin e Blok; Melusine.

*If I could master the art of Vrubel' I'd create a Demon.*<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Russian Language and Literature, University of Siena, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> In Russian: “Если бы я обладал средствами Врубеля, я бы создал Демона”. Aleksandr Blok “O sovremennom sostojanii russkogo simvolizma”, 1910. The English translation is mine, A.C.

The novel *We* by E. Zamyatin is known to be one of the first dystopias in Russian literature of the twentieth century, already inspiring *1984* by George Orwell. In the early 1920s the naval engineer Evgenij Zamyatin builds in literature a world in a very distant future, the XXXII century, which is based on the mathematical prediction of man's primary needs. A perfect world, where everything apparently works with precision and has no problems.

The social and historical context in which the novel «We» is written is known: less than three years have passed since the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The elegant era of the late reign of Nicholas the II could not appear further away, while that decadent, refined Russian aesthetic hedonism of that time was often defined as ephemeral as "the last music on the Titanic bridge"<sup>3</sup>.

In the futuristic world of *We* by Zamyatin we are pushed forward by thousands years, in a world where human needs are maximized thanks to synthesized food, where hunger and poverty no longer exist, thanks to a strict politics on births ("materinskaja norma"), and on childcare, but where love does not even exist anymore, and sex is reduced to a primary human need, useful to keep people's "mental hygiene", and where the partner is assigned by the State, without the need for courtship rituals, without the need to "conquer" or suffer for love.

Even the houses have no decorations, we could even say that in the One State the aesthetic standard *tends to 0* as in a successful mathematical limit: the houses and apartments are entirely transparent, including the furniture, and the uniforms called «*junif*» (made of a silky futuristic material, of grey-blue color) replace clothes.

In the distant dystopic future of *We* where individualism is condemned and collectivism is internalized by every citizen of the One State, mathematical precision plays a fundamental role. It symbolizes the absolute rationality of that world, and it is the familiar and reassuring element also for the narrator, and main hero of the novel, called D-503.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. B. Kolonickij (2010); G. Carpi (2017).

Like any literary dystopia, it is often the love story between the two main characters that acts as a disturbing, a-rational, revolutionary element of the apparent perfect society of the future. This also occurs in the novel *We*, through the construction and development of the love plot between the female heroine called I-330 and the male protagonist D-503.

*We*, in fact, is mainly *a story of seduction*. But how is this seduction «built» from a literary technique point of view?

In my paper I will point out that the character of I-330 is knowingly constructed by Zamyatin as a disturbing element of the society of the future, by continuous references to a precise epoch of the "past", that is the years immediately preceding the Bolshevik Revolution, a late *Belle époque* that we could situate in the end of the 19th century and in the first ten years of the 20th century. Not only. The "disturbing" element within the I-330's character-seducer is, as we will see, a totalizing aesthetics that we can define as *post-romantic* as well, that Zamyatin makes particularly recognizable for the reader as the author builds a peculiar *storytelling* in which the famous «femme fatale» of the late 19th century in art and literature is *both Eve and the snake*<sup>4</sup>.

### **1) I-330 as a *Femme fatale*:**

In one of his first meetings with I-330 the hero D-503 sees the woman in a decidedly unusual context within the routine of the One State. Invited to witness a sort of demonstration on the superiority of contemporary "industrial music", on the "old style" one, I-330 is called to play "in the old" manner and performs a piece by Aleksandr Skryabin.

To the effect caused by the music, we add the peculiarity of the look of I-330, which deliberately does not wear the uniform *junif*:

She wore the fantastic costume of the ancient epoch: a closely fitting black dress, which sharply emphasized the whiteness of her bare shoulders and

---

<sup>4</sup> There is a large literature about the *Holy Bible* as a prototext for Zamyatin's *We*.

breast, with that warm shadow, stirring with her breath, between...and the dazzling, almost angry teeth.... [...] - Then she sat down and began to play. Something savage, spasmodic, variegated, and at that time not a trace of rational mechanical method.<sup>5</sup>

The description of the I-330's look suggests a close-fitting, long, elegant gown; the representation on the strong contrasts black dress / whiteness of the shoulders is a clear visual reference to the European ladies of the *Belle époque*, very similar to the famous female portraits by Giovanni Boldini<sup>6</sup>, who was at the time worldwide known, or, in Russia, by Valentin Serov<sup>7</sup>



G. Boldini, Portrait of Marchesa Luisa Casati with a greyhound, 1908.

---

<sup>5</sup> Here and below in the text all English quotations of the novel *We* will be in the translation by Clarence Brown (E. Zamyatin, Penguin Classics, 1993). In Russian: “Она была в фантастическом костюме древней эпохи: плотно облегающее черное платье, остро подчеркнута белое открытых плечей и груди, и эта теплая, колыхающаяся от дыхания тень между... и ослепительные, почти злые зубы... [...] Села, заиграла. Дикое, судорожное, пестрое, как вся тогдашняя их жизнь, — ни тени разумной механичности.” Russian quotation will be from E. Zamyatin *Sobranie sočinenij v 4ch tomach*. T.1. Moscow, 2014, p..

<sup>6</sup> See, just as an example, Giovanni Boldini's portrait of *Marchesa Luisa Casati with a greyhound* (1908).

<sup>7</sup> Just to quote two of his most famous paintings, see Valentin Serov's *Portrait of Henrietta L. Giršman* (1907) and the *Portrait of Princess Olga Orlova* (1911).

The next meeting between the two takes place at the "old house", a building of the twentieth century, preserved, like a museum exhibit, in a huge glass bubble.

The impressions of D-503 are initially on the "hostile" and coloured environment, the protagonist is struck by the shapes and bright colors, in particular, by the sinuous shapes of the *furniture*, which contrast so much with the clean and transparent lines of the crystal houses architecture of the One State. The words that are used for this type of furniture is "disorder", "disorganized", "epileptic".

«I opened a heavy, creaking, opaque door, and we stepped into a gloomy, **disorderly place** (they called it an "apartment"). The same strange "royal" musical instrument— and again the wild, **disorganized**, mad music, like the other time, a jumble of colours and forms. A white flat area above; dark blue walls; red, green, and orange bindings of ancient books; yellow bronze chandeliers, a statue of Buddha; **furniture built along lines convulsed in epilepsy**, incapable of being fitted into an equation<sup>8</sup>»

There is here a clear reference to the sinuous forms of the Art Nouveau aesthetics, and to the *Moderne*, which had contaminated architecture, design, furniture and colours in *fin the siècle* Russia too<sup>9</sup>. Thus, in Zamyatin's long list of things and extravagant objects ("yellow bronze chandeliers, a statue of Buddha") there could also be a reminiscence (or maybe, a parody?) from J.-K. Huysmans decadent famous "lists of objects" in interior design we can find in his novel *À rebours*<sup>10</sup>. Here the main

---

<sup>8</sup> «Я открыл тяжелую, скрипучую, непрозрачную дверь — и мы в мрачном **беспорядочном** помещении (это называлось у них «квартира»). Тот самый странный, «королевский» музыкальный инструмент — и дикая, **неорганизованная, сумасшедшая** — как тогдашняя музыка — пестрота красок и форм. Белая плоскость — вверху; темно-синие стены; красные, зеленые, оранжевые переплеты древних книг; желтая бронза — канделябры, статуя Будды; **исковерканные эпилепсией**, не укладывающиеся ни в какие уравнения — линии мебели». (Zamyatin, 2014: ...).

<sup>9</sup> In Russia there were many examples of this aesthetics. In Moscow architectures by F. Šechtel' were iconic, see the mansion of the Russian banker Stepan Rjabušinskij, built in 1900-1901 (after the Bolshevik Revolution this house was given to M. Gor'kij, and it is now a museum), or the beautiful interiors of the Saltykov-Šertkov villa, with an "epileptic" fireplace designed by M. Vrubel' in 1897.

<sup>10</sup> The novel *À rebours*, by J.K. Huysmans (Paris, 1884) had a good fortune in Russia. The first translation, in 1906 (Ž.-K. Guismans *Naoborot*, Moscow, typography of A.I. Mamontov, translation of M.A. Golovkina), was followed by a second edition in 1909 (Moscow, typography of V.M. Sablin, same translation), and by a luxurious edition of the complete works of Huysmans in 1912 (Ž.-K. Guismans. *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, Moscow, in three volumes, translation by Ju. Spasskij, K.F. Nekrasov publisher. Second edition in 1916). Starting from 1920 this novel, as expected, was no longer translated or published in Russia until 1990.

hero Des Esseintes similarly describes some "sensual" pieces of furniture which furnish his mansion near Paris. The references to this novel, apparently so distant from Zamyatin and to his ultra-futuristic novel *We* are maybe not random: in fact Zamyatin once cited Huysmans, the author of the decadent novel *par excellence*, in one of his famous speeches about creative writing he made in Petrograd in 1919 at the *House of the Arts*<sup>11</sup>. And in this novel there is an interesting *ekphrasis*, as Des Esseintes describes Gustave Moreau's painting of *Salomé* (who is, once again, another *femme fatale*).

After the tour of the "old house", I-330 opens an antique wardrobe, takes off her uniform and wears an elegant yellow and black dress:

« [...] the rustle of silk, I barely restrained myself from going in and - I don't remember exactly – I must have wanted to say very sharp words to her. But she had already come out. **She wore a short, old style, vivid yellow dress, a black hat, black stockings.** The dress was of **light silk. I could see the stockings, very long, much higher than the knees.** And the bare throat, and the shadow between...»<sup>12</sup>

Critiques have already pointed out how I-330's black and yellow dress recalls in color both the Tolstoyan precedent of one of the earliest versions of *Anna Karenina* (1872), where for Tolstoy the combination of black and of the seductive yellow were a symbol for an irrepressible, carnal seduction, making maybe a reference to "yellow - prostitution" connection, due to the practice of the *želtyj билет* (yellow passport) in

---

<sup>11</sup> The speech was then published in Zamyatin's collected works. See: *Lekcii po tehnike chudožestvennoj prozy. Psichologija pisatelja* (Zamyatin 2014, t.4: xx): «Мне не раз приходило в голову, что, вероятно, под гипнозом писатель писал бы в 10 раз быстрее и легче. К сожалению, опытов в этом направлении не производилось. Вся трудность творческой работы в том, что писателю приходится совмещать в себе и гипнотизера, и гипнотизируемого, приходится гипнотизировать себя самого, самому усыплять свое сознание, а для этого, конечно, нужна *очень сильная воля* и *очень живая фантазия*. Недаром же многие писатели, как известно, прибегают во время работы к *наркотикам*, для того чтобы усыпить работу сознания и оживить работу подсознания, фантазии. *Пшибышевский* не мог писать иначе, как имея перед собой коньяк; *Гюисманс*, да и не он один, пользовался для этой цели опиумом, морфием. *Андреев* во время работы пил крепчайший чай. *Ремизов*, когда пишет, пьет кофе и курит. *Я* без папиросы не могу написать и страницы». In the same speech Zamyatin briefly talked also about Flaubert's *Salammbô*.

<sup>12</sup> «Но она уже вышла. Была в коротком, старинном ярко-желтом платье, черной шляпе, черных чулках. Платье легкого шелка — мне было ясно видно: чулки очень длинные, гораздо выше колен, — и открытая шея, тень между...» (Zamyatin, *op.cit.* p. – xx).

Tsarist Russia until the Revolution. This black-yellow visual contrast can also be found in M. Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* and in Russian mass-literature of the early XXth century even in a nowadays edition: for example, in the modern version of the famous feuilleton *Mar'ja Lus'eva* by A. Amfiteatrov, which was published for the first time in 1904, telling the life and adventures of a young Russian prostitute<sup>13</sup> and which had at the time a huge editorial success, the cover portraits a young woman dressed in yellow and black<sup>14</sup>. The visual impact of these two colours<sup>15</sup>, that Zamyatin knew and aimed to somehow point out, was central in the characterizations of the provocative image of I-330<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> A. Amfiteatrov (1862 – 1938) wrote one of the first Russian mass-literature novel in the early XXth century, beginning with the novel-feuilleton *Mar'ja Lus'eva* (Saint-Petersburg, 1904, published with major censorship cuts), having also a sequel with *Mar'ja Lus'eva za granicej* [Mar'ja Lus'eva goes abroad], Saint-Peterbourg, 1908.

<sup>14</sup> A. Amfiteatrov, *Mar'ja Lus'eva*, Moscow: Geleos, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> About colorism in Zamyatin, and in particular, in the novel *We*, there are several literary works. See, as main references: Sabat (1994), Šenceva (1994), Averincev (1973 – this work yet is in general about east-cristian colorism in Russian literature), Kožemjakova (1997), Sedova (2006); Gudeleva (2008), Davydova (2018).

<sup>16</sup> It is also interesting to note that not always this point was received by those who worked with Zamyatin's novel. For example, in the film about "We" by German / Czech director Vojtěch Jasný ("Wir", 1982), in the "old house" scene the character of I-330 wears a pink, vaporous romantic dress.



A. Amfiteatrov "Mar'ja Luseva". Cover of the novel, edition of 2004.

A yellow dress (saffron-yellow) will dominate completely in the third encounter between D-503 and I-330, in a *crescendo* of passion and erotic tension, where the seduction passes right through the shape and colour of the dress:

I turned. She was in a light, saffron-yellow dress<sup>17</sup> of the ancient model. This was a thousand times crueller than if she had worn nothing<sup>18</sup>.

As far as the particular of women's clothing is concerned, and due to its seductive scope, it is perhaps also necessary to refer to the conception that one of the major Russian philosophers of the pre-revolutionary period, Nikolaj Fëdorov (1829 – 1903), had about fashion: he believed that modern civilizations just obeyed the

---

<sup>17</sup> About colorism in Zamyatin, and in particular, in the novel *We*, there are several literary works. See, as main references: Sabat (1994), Šenceva (1994), Averincev (1973 – this work yet is in general about east-cristian colorism in Russian literature), Kožemjakova (1997), Sedova (2006); Gudeleva (2008), Davydova (2018).

<sup>18</sup> «Я обернулся. Она была в легком, шафранно-желтом, древнего образца платье. Это было в тысячу раз злее, чем если бы она была без всего.» (Zamyatin, *op.cit.* p. – xx)



imperatives of sex, and that «the textile industry worked only to produce clothes that, like peacock feathers, could make erotic play possible among humans» (Fëdorov, 1982: 402-406). We note that this, in reality, is also the scope of the message of I-330 in *We*: the use that the female protagonist makes of clothing and the impact it has on the senses of man (both visual and auditory / tactile impact) is aimed exclusively at his seduction, exactly in the way Fëdorov intended. Even by being a strong and decisive woman, I-330 is far from the "feminist" idea *à la Kollontaj*<sup>19</sup> that ruled in Russia just after the Bolshevik Revolution. In Zamyatin's XXXII century, in a world totally made of glass (just remember that in those years in Russia there was someone who theorized that in the future humans would wear just glass, transparent clothes<sup>20</sup>), the heroine wears (literally) the clothes of a femme fatale of the *Belle époque*, and she also behaves as such one: she seduces for a functional reason to her own purposes.

I-330 seduces because she *needs* a man to do exactly what she, in the first person, is not entitled to do, because, ultimately, it is not *her* the engineer, but it is still a *man*, even in such far future, who does that kind of work. I-330, in fact, is indeed a partisan, a political antagonist<sup>21</sup>, but, ultimately, what is its only active role within the plot economy in the novel? To *seduce*.

She seduces one of the *Guardians-Chraniteli* S-1147, who is therefore somehow neutralized. She seduces the doctor to get fake medical certificates. She

---

<sup>19</sup> Aleksandra Kollontaj (1872-1952) was a pioneer of feminism, a Marxist revolutionary and the People's Commissar for Social Wealth in the first Soviet government just after the October. She theorized a new concept for love and sex that would be totally free and independent from men-manipulating aims. See her works as *Sem'ja i kommunističeskoe gosudarstvo* [The family and the Communist state, Moscow-Petrograd 1918] or *Novaja moral' i rabočij klass*, [The new moral and the working class], 1919. L. Heller defines her works and essays as "almost utopian" (Heller, 1992: 594). Zamyatin's post-romantic role model of I-330 as a manipulator rather than a "new", "Kollontaj style" feminist is a precise author's choice.

<sup>20</sup> See M. Ščekin's work *Kak žit' po-novomu: sem'ja, ljubov', brak, prostitucija* [How to live in a new way: family, love, marriage, prostitution] Kostromà, 1923, and, again L. Heller's essay (Heller 1992, p. 593).

<sup>21</sup> I-330 has often been compared by critics to some of the most iconic women-terrorists of Imperial Russia, as Sof'ja Perovskaja (1853-1881), one of the leader of the terrorist society "Narodnaja volja", hanged in 1881 after the murder of the Tsar Aleksandr II, or Vera Zasulich (1849-1919). In post-October era we should remember Fanny Kaplan (1890-1918), a political activist of the Russian social-revolutionary party, who tried to kill Lenin on August the 30th, 1918. She was executed four days after.

seduces the protagonist D-503 because he is the chief engineer of a potential devastating weapon. In her courageous act of resistance, she is fact the perfect prototype of the astute late-nineteenth-century woman-manipulator, and not one of the new post-October revolutionary heroines. In this interpretation of a fascinating diabolical character, I-330 is therefore not very different from the post-romantic heroines of European literature.

## 2) I-330 as a «Snake-woman»:

D-503 first impressions of I-330 are about «sharp teeth», «almost angry teeth» and a «smile as a bite»<sup>22</sup>. She also has a triangular face, and yellow-gold eyes, like ones of the reptiles, she's thin, she moves fast, and she is sinuously seductive.

Thus, in his expressionist style Zamyatin creates not only the portrait of a femme fatale, but also of an elegant woman-huntress, a decadent *schlangengottin*.

The suspense and the erotic tension between I-330 and D-503 is then often constructed through seductive, and at the same time, disturbing auditory perceptions of silk, the rustling of the silky (artificial, futuristic) material of the uniform that falls down while she undresses (like the skin of a snake who does the wetsuit), and that of pure silk, this “ancient fashion material”, of the beautiful dress she wears to seduce D:

**«Sharp teeth, smile: «But now you are in my hands.** You remember — “Every number who has failed to report to the Office of the Guardians within forty-eight hours, is considered...” [...] **My heart thumped so violently** [...] And stupidly I kept silent. **And I felt: I'm trapped, I cannot move** a hand or a foot. **She stood up and stretched lazily.** Then she pressed a button, and the shades dropped, crackling lightly. **I was cut off from the world, alone with her, I-330 was somewhere behind me,** near the closet. **Her unif rustled, fell. I listened, all of me listened** [...] The glass silk rustled down the shoulders, knees, dropped to the floor. **I heard** [...] one foot step out of the bluish-grey silk pile, the other [...] And I heard — I saw her behind me, thinking for a second. And now — the closet doors, the click of an opening

---

<sup>22</sup> In the Russian original we see: «она, тонкая, резкая, упрямо-гибкая, как хлыст», «почти злые зубы...Улыбка — укус» (Zamyatin 2014, t. 1, p xxx).

lid — **and again silk, silk...** «Well, if you please...». I turned. She was in a light, saffron-yellow dress of the ancient model»<sup>23</sup>

We note here how the feelings of D-503 are of attraction, but also of actual fear, a fear that immobilizes him like a snake's *prey*, like a rabbit<sup>24</sup>. D-503 feels attraction, but at the same time, he realizes that he has no way out, that he is trapped. In this regard we see how I-330 underlines this inferior position of D-503, while she is perfectly at her ease: «But now you are in my hands. [...] *She stood up and stretched lazily*». She is perfectly in her environment, like a huntress who is preparing to seduce but at the same time to pursue his prey. Her initial position and her slow movements recall those of a sumptuous, heavy snake, a rolled and patient python, while D-503's heart beats so wildly that he is afraid she could hear it (Zamyatin calls his heart a "hammer that pounded inside me"), as we see in the next quotation:

«**She sat<sup>25</sup> in a low** armchair. On the rectangular table before her, a bottle with something poisonously green, two tiny glasses on stems. [...] The membrane still quivered. **The hammer pounded inside me** against the red-hot iron rods. I dearly heard each blow, and suddenly: what if she heard it too? **But she puffed calmly, glancing at me calmly, and carelessly shook off** the ash — on my pink coupon. [...] **She poured the liquid front the bottle into her glass, sipped it. - Delicious liqueur. Would you like some?** »<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> «Но зато теперь вы — в моих руках. Вы помните: «Всякий номер, в течение 48 часов не заявивший Бюро, считается...» [...] Сердце стукнуло так, что прутья согнулись. Как мальчишка, — глупо, как мальчишка, попался, глупо молчал. И чувствовал: запутался — ни рукой, ни ногой...Она встала, потянулась лениво. Надавила кнопку, с легким треском упали со всех сторон шторы. Я был отрезан от мира — вдвоем с ней. I была где-то там у меня за спиной, возле шкафа. **Юнифа шуршала**, падала — **я слушал — весь слушал**. [...] Вот теперь **щелкнула** кнопка у ворота — на груди — **еще ниже**. **Стекланный шелк шуршит** по плечам, коленам — по полу. **Я слышу** — и это **еще яснее**, чем видеть, — из голубовато-серой **шелковой** груди **вышагнула** одна нога и другая...[...] **И я слышу — я вижу**: она, сзади, думает **секунду**. Вот — двери **шкафа**, вот — стукнула какая-то **крышка — и снова шелк, шелк...** — Я обернулся. Она была в лёгком, **шафранно-желтом**, древнего образца платье. (Zamyatin, *op. cit.*: xx). See the alliteration of the sounds /sh/ /shch/, /zh/, sje/ s'/ which remind the hisses and the sound of a snake. Unfortunately in the translation the reader loses all these expressionist auditive references.

<sup>24</sup> This reminds the verse by Aleksandr Blok in the poem *Neznakomka* (1906), where the drunk men look at the beautiful and mysterious unknown woman dressed in black “глазами кроликов” - with rabbit eyes.

<sup>25</sup> In the Russian original I-330 was *already* sitting in the armchair, there is no movement: «она сидела в ниженьком кресле».

<sup>26</sup> «Она **сидела** в низеньком кресле. На четырехугольном столике перед ней флакон с чем-то ядовито-зеленым, два крошечных стаканчика на ножках. В углу рта у нее **дымилось** — в

Just after this brief moment of lazy pause (how many times does Zamyatin repeat the word *calm/ calmly?*), In which I-330 slowly contemplates the lover and "her" green poison (the elegant glass of absinthe), it's when "the attack" happens: I-330 moves fast, suddenly rises, and in a second she attacks "from behind" his prey-lover, D:

«She **tilted** the whole glassful of green poison into her mouth, **stood up**, and, glowing pink through the transparent room, **took** several steps...and **stopped** behind my chair. **Suddenly**, an **arm around my neck**, lips into lips – no, **somewhere still deeper, still more terrifying**. I swear, this **took me completely by surprise** [...]»<sup>27</sup>

The verbs from the first passage (starting from “she was sitting in the armchair...she puffed calmly, glancing at me calmly...” see below, note n. 27) in the Russian original are in the *imperfective* aspect, they express a *status quo*, a duration, rather than an *action*; but starting from the drinking of the absinthe I-330 starts to make decisive movements, and verbs are then expressed in the *perfective* aspect: actions follow one after the other *fast* and all of a sudden, until she comes into an unexpected suffocating attack from behind (this is expressed even *without* any verb: “suddenly – an arm around my neck”), and doesn't stop until she gets what she wants: a deep and passionate kiss/bite, in which she leaves his poison-wormwood in the lover's mouth: «Intolerably sweet lips (I suppose it must have been the taste of the “liqueur!”) – and a mouth full of fiery poison flowed into me– then more, and more»<sup>28</sup>.

Starting from this moment the rational engineer D-503 will never be the same: he becomes possessive, jealous, madly in love, cursed by this *schlangengottin* will be

---

тончайшей бумажной трубочке это древнее курение (как называется — сейчас забыл). Молот бил там — внутри у меня — в накаленные докрасна прутья. Я отчетливо **слышал** каждый удар и... и вдруг она это тоже слышит? Но она **спокойно дымила, спокойно поглядывала** на меня» (Zamyatin *op. cit.* p. ).

<sup>27</sup> «Хотите? [...] I смеялась очень странно и долго. [...] **Опрокинула** в рот весь стаканчик зеленого яду, **встала** и, просвечивая сквозь шафранное розовым, — **сделала** несколько шагов — **остановилась сзади** моего кресла... **Вдруг** — **рука вокруг моей шеи** — **губами в губы**... нет, куда-то еще глубже, еще **страшнее**... Клянусь, это было **совершенно неожиданно для меня** [...]». (Zamyatin, *ibidem*).

<sup>28</sup> «Нестерпимо-сладкие губы (я полагаю — это был вкус «ликера») — и в меня влит глоток жгучего яда — и еще — и еще...» (Zamyatin, *ibidem*).

at the complete disposal of I-330, who is, in fact, a very dangerous member of the revolutionary association of «Mefi», whose sole purpose is to destroy the One State and its apparent mathematical perfection of happiness. D-503 will talk about it as a new «slavery of love»: «She used the ancient, long forgotten "thou" — the "thou" of the master to the slave. It entered into me slowly, sharply. Yes, I was a slave, and this, too, was necessary, it was good»<sup>29</sup>

This relationship with this kind of femme fatale is not only a reminiscence of West-European decadent and post-romantic aesthetics, but is also connected to the Russian literature of 19th century up to a late symbolism: see the fascinating snake-woman in the novel by Nikolaj Leskov *The enchanted wanderer* (1873), who was an author that Zamyatin loved, and, of course, some of the most “serpentine” verses by Aleksandr Blok (in particular in his late poetry starting from 1909). Referring to this, we would like to make just some comparisons between Blok’s poem *Humiliation* (1911), in which the hero, completely subjugated by his lover-mistress, somehow compares her to a powerful snake, and Zamyatin’s I-330 in *We*:

Through the **naked black** boughs in window  
I see **yellow winter sunset**. (Maybe in such a time the convicted  
Men are carried to penalty death)<sup>30</sup>.

We have the same colourism of the situation is based on yellow and black, and there is the inevitable decadent association of *eros* and *thanatos*. The lover-woman is not directly described, but thanks to the poet’s technique, everything is described with the male-lover’s eyes: her powerful and suffocating hugs, her threatening and creepy whistle (in Russian: «свист», «свищешь опять и опять» is also the snakes’ sound)

---

<sup>29</sup> «Это древнее, давно забытое "ты", "ты" властелина к рабу - вошло в меня остро, медленно: да, я раб, и это - тоже нужно, тоже хорошо» (Zamyatin, *op. cit.* p.).

<sup>30</sup> «В черных сучьях дерев обнаженных/ Желтый зимний закат за окном. / (К эшафоту на казнь осужденных/ Поведут на закате таком). » A. Blok, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v 20 t.* Moscow, 1997. T. Xx p. xx

In the yellow, great winter sunset  
There the bed sank (so fluffy) as yet...  
It hard even breathe of embraces,  
But you whistle again and again...<sup>31</sup>

As in *We*, the poet insists on the *sonorous dimension* that paralyses the lover. The whistle of the woman is death-like, the emotional climax rises up to the metaphor of the "satisfied snake"

It is not joyful - your **whistle, death-like...**  
Hush! Again I hear the murmur of spurs...  
**As a satisfied snake, the dress train crawled**  
**Down from the armchairs to floor...**<sup>32</sup>

And we have a claim to a final attack with something *sharp*:

You are brave! Let's be the more fearless!  
I'm not your bridegroom, husband, friend!  
**Let you pierce heart, the yesterday's angel,**  
**With your french heel, so sharp and so bad!**<sup>33</sup>

Of course, E. Zamyatin may have been inspired by many other myths and literary references about the *femme fatale*, about this modern "Melusine" of the post-romantic era, since there are thousands of examples of such fascinating snake-women in European literature and art (see also Flaubert's *Salammbô*, also quoted by Zamyatin in his speech about the *Technique of prose*), but it is also true that these last references to Blok's poem can be considerate punctual, and they seem to be built on purpose to be easily identified by the Russian cultured reader of that period, in a series of several *à clés* references that are typical of the Zamyatin literary technique: he somehow "tickles" the intellectual component of his reader through recognizable quotations and bookish references. In *We* there are many of them, as Old testament ones, but also references to Puškin (in *We* R-15 is the poet with "negroid-fleshy lips" and the portrait in the old house), to Blok's *Faina* poetry cycle, but also to the Russian

---

<sup>31</sup> «В желтом, зимнем, огромном закате/ Утонула (так пышно!) кровать.../ Еще тесно дышать от объятий, / Но ты свищешь опять и опять...» (A. Blok, *ibidem*).

<sup>32</sup> «Он не весел - твой свист замогильный... / Чу! опять - бормотание шпор... /Словно змей, тяжкий, сытый и пыльный,/ Шлейф твой с кресел ползет на ковер...» (A. Blok, *ibidem*).

<sup>33</sup> «Ты смела! Так еще будь бесстрашней! Я - не муж, не жених твой, не друг! Так вонзай же, мой ангел вчерашний, В сердце - острый французский каблук!» (A. Blok, *ibidem*).

femme fatale Nastas'ja Filippovna, or to Majakovskij poem *Cloud in trousers* love verses about lips<sup>34</sup>, *et cetera*.

E. Zamyatin, then, knowingly constructs piece by piece his extremely innovative anti-utopia, the first real modern science fiction book in all Russian literature, and one of the first literary dystopias of the modern era, and, at the same time, "erodes" its own futuristic work thanks to the equal and opposite action of the post-romantic and modernist aesthetics in I-330's character construction, to destroy this same futuristic and rational world.

## Bibliography

AA.VV. «Zamyatinskaya énciklopedija» v meždunarodnoy diskussii: [materialy «kruglogo stola»]. [Proceedings of the Panel Discussion "Zamyatin Encyclopaedia" in the international discussion". Tambov, Tambovskij gos. Universitet, 2019]. in Neofilologija - Neophilology, 2019, vol. 5, no. 18, pp. 221-260. DOI 10.20310/2587-6953-2019-5-18-221-260 (In Russian, Abstr. in Engl. Among the authors we quote in particular: Poljakova L.V. (pp. 222, 250-252), Ljubimova M.Y. (pp. 222-223), Osmuchina O.Y. (pp. 223-226), Boroda E.V. (pp. 226-227), Komlik N.N. (pp. 227-232), Heller L. (pp. 232-234), Nakano Y. (pp. 234-235), Oliander L.K. (pp. 235-236), Altabaeva E.V. (pp. 236-238), Golubkov M.M. (pp. 238-239), Shaitanov I.O. (pp. 239-241), Cooke B.L. (pp. 241-242), Vanjukov A.I. (pp. 242-244), Kol'cova N.Z. (pp. 244-246), Kolčanov V.V. (pp. 246-248), Červinska O.V. (p. 248), Tolmačeva O.V. (pp. 248-249), Goldt R. (pp. 249-250) (reports authors, materials prepared by O.V. Tolmačeva). 2019

BEAUJOUR, E. K. *Zamiatin's «We» and Modernist Architecture* in Russian Review. 1988. Vol. XLVII. No 1. P. 49-60. 1988

BRAUN, JA. *Vzyskujučij čeloveka: tvorčestvo Evg. Zamyatina. Kn. 5-6. Novosibirsk: Sibirskie ogni, 1923.* (Flaubert, cultura occidentale di Zamyatin). 1923

CHATJAMOVA, M.A. *Tvorčestvo E.I. Zamyatina v kontekste povestvovatel'nyh strategij pervoj treći XX veka: sozdanie avtorsogo mifa.* Tomsk: izd.-vo Tomsk. Gos. Ped. Un-ta., 2006.

CHATJAMOVA, M.A. *Metatekstovaja struktura romana E. Zamyatina «My»* in Pro et contra, Sankt-Peterburg: RchGA, pp. 510-512. 2014.

COLLINS, C. *Evgenij Zamyatin: an interpretive study.* The Hague: Mouton, 1973.

CONNOLLY, J.W. "A Modernist's palette": color in the fiction of Evgenij Zamyatin in Russian Language Journal, N. 33, pp. 82-98. 1979

COOK, B. *Zamyatin's We* in Canadian-American Slavic studies N.45/3-4, 2011.

---

<sup>34</sup> In Majakovskij's *Cloud in trousers*: «But can you turn yourselves inside out, like me/ And become just two lips entirely»; In Zamyatin's *We*: «all women are lips, nothing but lips».

- COOK, B. *Secondary sources on Zamyatin's "We"* Canadian-American Slavic studies N.45/3-4, pp. 447 – 488. 2011.
- CURTIS, J. *The Englishman from Lebedian. A Life of Evgeniy Zamiatin (1884–1837)*. Boston: Ars Rossica, 2013.
- DAVYDOVA, T.T. *Zamyatinskaja énciklopedija*, Moscow: Flinta, 2018.
- FĚDOROV, N. *Sočinenija*, Moscow, pp. 402-406; 411; 413, 448. 1982.
- FOLLIOU, F-R. *Présences démoniques et fonctions romanesques de Barbey d'Aurevilly à M. Boulgakov* in *Revue des études slaves*, Paris, LVIII/4, p. 653-659. 1986.
- GREGG, R. *Two Adams and Eve in the Crystal Palace: Dostoevsky, the Bible and «We»* in *Slavic Review*. Vol. 24. No 4. P. 66. 1965.
- GUDELEVA, E.M. *Simvolika cveta v tvorčestve E.I.Zamyatina*. Dissertacija kandidata filologičeskich nauk: 10.01.01 (Ivanovskij gos. Universitet, Ivanovo, 2008).
- HELLER, L. *A la recherche d'un nouveau monde amoureux: l'utopie russe et la sexualité* in *Revue des études slaves*, Paris LXIV/4, pp. 583 – 602. 1992.
- HOISINGTON, S.- Imbery L. *Zamiatin's Modernist Palette: Colors and their Function in «We»* in *Slavic and East European Journal*. Vol. XXXVI. No 2. P. 168. 1992.
- HOISINGTON, S. *The Mismeasure of I-330 in A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*. Evanston, Ill., 1995. P. 88.
- KOL'COVA, N.Z. *Roman Evgenija Zamyatina "My" i "peterburgskij tekst russkoj literatury"* in *Voprosy Literatury*. N. 4. pp. 66. 1999
- KOŽEMJAKOVA, E.A. *Simvolika cvetooboznačenij v romane Zamyatina "My"* in *Naučnye doklady, stat'i, očerki, zametki, tezisy*, Tambov: Tambovskij gos. Universitet im. Deržavina, pp. 106-119. 1997.
- LAYTON, S. *Zamyatin and Literary Modernism* in *Slavic and East European Journal*. Vol. 17/N. 3. pp. 279–287. 1973.
- LJUBIMOVA, M.Ju.; J. Curtis *My: tekst i materialy k tvorcheskoj istorii romana*, Mir: Sankt-Peterburg, 2011.
- MILTON, E. *Zamyatin's Aesthetics in Zamyatin's "We": A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gary Kern, Ann Arbor: Ardis, p. 130-139. 1988
- PISKUNOVA, S.I. *"My" E. Zamyatina: mefistofel' i androgin* in *E. Zamajtin: pro et contra*, Sankt-Peterburg: RchGA, 2014.
- P'JANYCH, M.F. *A.Blok i E. Zamyatin: ljubovnye sjužety v "Dvenadcati" i v romane "My"* in E.I. Zamyatin. *Ličnost' i tvorčestvo pisatelja v ocenkach otečestvennyh i zarubežnyh issledovatelej*. S.Peterburg: RchGA, pp- 150-155. 2015.



PROFFER, C. *Notes on the Imagery in Zamyatin's «We»* in *Slavic and East European Journal*. Vol. 7. No 3. P. 269–278. 1963

SABAT, A.N. *Masterstvo sozdanija portreta v romane E. Zamyatina «My» in Tvorčeskoe nasledie E. Zamyatina: vzgljad iz segodnja v 2ch č. Č. 1.* Tambov: Tambov Gos. Universitet, p. 115. 1994

SEDOVA, O.V. *Poëtika cveta v proze E.I. Zamyatina: dissertacija kandidata filologičeskich nauk: 10.01.01.* – Elec, 2006.

SELEZNEVA, E.N. *Ženskaja paradigma prozy E.I. Zamyatina v kontekste russkich narodnyh kul'tur. Dissertacija kandidata filologičeskich nauk,* Tambov: Tambovskij gos. Universitet, 2007.

ŠENCEVA, N.V. *“Zritel'nye” i “zvukovye” lejtmotivy v rasskazach E. Zamyatina in Tvorčeskoe nasledie E. Zamyatina: vzgljad iz segodnja v 2ch č. Č. 1.* Tambov, pp. 264-265. 1994

ULPH, O. *I-330: reconsideration on the Sex of Satan* in *Russian Literary Triquarterly*, 9: 262-75. 1974

ŽELTOVA, N. Ju. *Proza E.I. Zamyatina: puti tvorčeskogo voploščeniya russkogo nacional'nogo charaktera.* Tambov: izdatel'stvo Tambovskogo gos. Universiteta im. Deržavina, 2003.