

Dystopian Present and Future: The Temporal Orientation of Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* and
Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

A recent genre study by Erika Gottlieb (2001) divides dystopian literature into two temporal categories, which she calls West and East. Within this framework, Gottlieb places Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* (1921) within her Western framework comprised of authors primarily concerned with envisaging future totalitarian societies. Conversely, she places Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* (1930) within her Eastern framework of authors concerned with providing descriptive works of those totalitarian societies come to pass in the present. It is with these classifications that this thesis takes issue. It is my contention that in *We* Zamiatin was actually centrally concerned with providing a description and critical account of both the volatile, repressive socialist system of contemporary Leninist Russia and the claim that post-revolutionary Russia now inhabited a post-historical epoch. I further argue that in *The Foundation Pit* Platonov was as concerned with questions of the future as he was with the society of the present: in his implied criticism of Stalin's Five-Year Plans, he engages not merely with the political policies of a particular moment in time, but with the larger view of how the present relates to the future which underlies them.

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Dedication

To mum, dad, Sarah and Erica.

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Note on Transliteration

This thesis uses the Library of Congress system of transliteration from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet. Alternative spellings of names are used only when quoting directly. For names that have widely accepted spellings in English, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, these equivalents are used.

Introduction

0.1 Utopia and Dystopia in Literary History

Chad Walsh defines utopian literature as “any imaginary society presented as superior to the actual world” (25). Some of the common features associated with utopia, according to Walsh, are an element of satire (26), the elimination of democracy (61), architecture that is “massive, functional, glistening and clean” (63), and a government that likes “to keep an eye on you, for your own good and that of society” (64). Lyman Sargent adds that a typical utopian feature is a rejection of time and of history. As he states, utopia is “related to the millennium, the end of history or the escape from time...one of the major themes in utopia is stability, the desire to avoid change” (581-82).

Plato’s *The Republic* is considered by some authors to be the first work of utopian literature (Gottlieb 25; Walsh 32). The imagined society it describes was dependent on an extreme form of communism which included the complete abolition of private property and the family unit to ensure its success. Plato considered both democracy and oligarchy to be fundamentally flawed because they always allow for the possibility of corruption. His system, termed a timocracy, sought to eliminate the possibility of corruption through lack of personal and material want and through rigorous study of philosophy.

The imposed barrenness of life in Plato’s Republic did not extend to those people below the status of philosopher. In the realm of justice and politics Plato compared the working classes to sheep who must be constantly instructed how to think and act (25-27). Those deemed to have insufficient intelligence to be a philosopher were also deemed not to have enough intelligence to govern their own reason and sense of justice efficiently.

They became entirely dependent on the benevolence of their rulers to govern their day-to-day lives and ensure social harmony.

Plato's treatment of the majority of society's members as mindless drones to be herded and controlled has parallels in twentieth-century fiction, though in a dystopian context. Yet it is a more immediate response to Plato's utopian ideal that is seen as the first dystopia. The playwright Aristophanes' *The Ecclesiazusae* satirised the system of sexual relations advocated by Plato and imagined a world where women ruled society (Walsh 73). Walsh describes dystopia as utopia's "mocking rival" (24), which is seen clearly in the relationship between *The Republic* and *The Ecclesiazusae*.

The uneasy relationship between utopia and dystopia would manifest itself again some 1800 years after *The Republic* with the publication of Thomas More's seminal *Utopia* in 1516. More's fictional island exists in geographical isolation and is the model of communal uniformity and bliss. The cities of the island have the same populations, architecture, culture, language and functions. Everybody is equal (except for the slaves), while the concept of the individual is marginalised in favour of the social whole.

In the centuries following its publication, More's *Utopia* has been held to be one of the great visions of the utopian ideal. Martin Fleisher states that More's *Utopia* was created to inspire a religiously divided and increasingly secular Europe to return to the ideals of early Christianity (171). There has long been debate, however, over whether More actually believed his fictional society to be the ideal embodiment of earthly paradise. Scholars such as James Nendza believe that More actually created his utopia in order to show that the complexity of human nature and desire makes such a social system not merely unattractive, but also impossible (428-29). In this view, it can be said that

what More actually created was a work of dystopian literature, his title notwithstanding. Either way, we see with both More and Plato that the divide between utopia and dystopia is not necessarily clear cut.

Utopian fiction remained outside the mainstream until the late nineteenth century with the publication of Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, set in the year 2000. Writing in response to the growing economic inequality produced by the Industrial Revolution, Bellamy presented the marriage of socialism and technology as the keys to a harmonious society. In Boston in the early twenty-first century, there is no unemployment; there is equality of wages, universal public education and an all-encompassing social welfare system. The novel was a hit with the growing Marxist movement (Geoghegan 39) and inspired nearly one thousand 'Bellamy Societies' in Europe and North America with the aim of living out its principles. Meanwhile alarm bells were sounded amongst conservative populations about Bellamy's socialist designs (Walsh 74). These fears led to the publication of several second-rate dystopian works decrying Bellamy's future Boston, including Richard C. Michaelis' *Looking Forward* (1890) and Konrad Wilbrandt's *Mr. East's Experiences in Mr. Bellamy's World* (1891). These works mark the unequivocal beginning of the dystopian genre as separate from utopia (Walsh 74-75). The genre of dystopia has subsequently flourished. Sargent states that this flourishing resulted from a tendency in the twentieth-century to "equate utopia with force, violence and totalitarianism" (568). He asserts that this equation came about as people realised the impossibility of creating a perfect, utopian society. As a result features common to utopia, such as pervasive government presence and the elimination of democracy, henceforth became equated with dystopian systems (568-69). Some of the

most well-known works of English literature, such as H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) contain elements illustrating the shift in characteristics equated with utopian literature to its dystopian counterpart.

The growth in dystopian literature has seen a corresponding boom in genre studies over the past forty-five years. Over this period, successive scholars have attempted to break down and categorise the genre in various ways; from this, we have gained terms such as 'anti-utopia,' (a society imagined in specific opposition to utopian ideals) (Stansky 4), 'counter utopia' (a society with conflicting utopian ideals) (Sayre 622) and 'meta-utopia' (a work that exists on utopian borders delving into social consciousness) (Gottlieb 4-5). Publications by such authors as Tom Moylan and Brock Stimson are excellent starting points for delving into the various sub-categories of the dystopian genre. For the purpose of this thesis I use a definition of dystopian literature set out by M. Keith Booker:

Dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions. (3)

0.2 Erika Gottlieb's East-West Division of Dystopian Literature

A recent genre study by Erika Gottlieb (2001) divides dystopian literature into two categories, West and East. In dystopias of the Western type, “authors envisage a monster state in the future, a society that reflects the writers’ fear of the possible development of totalitarian dictatorship in their own societies,” whereas dystopias of the Eastern type “written about, against, and under totalitarian dictatorship – present us with a nightmare world not as a phantasmagorical vision of the future but as an accurate reflection of the ‘worst of all possible worlds’ experienced as a historical reality” (17). Although there is some correlation between a work’s place of provenance and its place in Gottlieb’s scheme, it is important to note that geography is not the definitive factor in classification. The defining factor is temporal orientation: dystopias in the Western category are oriented towards the future, those in the Eastern category towards the present. Thus works written in Eastern Europe by East European writers may be placed in the Western category of dystopias, and vice versa.

Gottlieb’s focus is on literary representatives of what she terms the Eastern branch of genre: she undertakes the study of twenty dystopian works in this class. She analyses only six works that she considers Western in their orientation. It is Gottlieb’s categorisation of two works of dystopia written in Russian that this thesis takes issue with. She places Zamiatin’s *We* (1921) within a Western framework of dystopia concerned with the future, while placing Andrei Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit* (1930) in the Eastern framework concerned primarily with the present. Neither classification, however, is satisfactory. It is my contention that Zamiatin was primarily concerned with the present

state of affairs in early Soviet Russia, while Platonov was as concerned with the future as he was with the present.

As Brett Cooke states, Gottlieb's study "focuses almost exclusively on the intentional miscarriage of justice in the societies depicted, all supposedly created to effect a moral social harmony" (534). This approach is problematic for her central argument regarding temporal orientation because in her analysis of individual works she rarely engages with the question of the author's temporal intentions. For example, the primary concern in her analysis of *We* is to show the injustices carried out by the regime of the Benefactor, and she does not explain how these injustices reveal the orientation towards the future which she attributes to Zamiatin in her classification of *We* as a Western dystopia (60-63).

Regarding both *We* and *The Foundation Pit*, Gottlieb's placement of the two authors in their respective temporal categories seems to owe more to a preconceived idea about the geopolitical circumstances in which each novel was written than to actual analysis of the novels' themes, events and characters. In other words, I contend that Gottlieb categorises these novels based on where she believes they should fit, rather than where they actually do fit, which, in the instance of *The Foundation Pit*, is in my view not even simply within the boundaries of one category.

0.3 Zamiatin and Platonov: Background

Born in 1884 in Tambov province, Zamiatin was a naval architect prior to the revolution, only turning to writing full time with the disappearance of the ship-building

industry in post-revolutionary Russia. *We*, his best known work, was written while he was employed at the state-run House of the Arts as a prose writing instructor. It was rejected by Bolshevik censors but the manuscript was smuggled abroad to New York and translated into English in 1924 and subsequently into other European languages (Glenny 12). An unofficial Russian edition of the novel appeared in Prague in 1927 in back translation from a Czech edition of the novel. The existence of this Russian edition, “even published abroad in a corrupt text, was regarded as peculiarly heinous and was used as the pretext for an all-out intensification of the anti-Zamyatin campaign” (Glenny 12).

By 1930 life in the Soviet Union was unbearable for Zamyatin. He had become a pariah, unable to secure work anywhere. Thanks to the influence of Maksim Gor’kii, Zamyatin and his wife were able to travel abroad at a time when many writers were being sent to the Gulag . He died of a heart attack in Paris in 1937, the year that saw the height of the Great Purge which would eventually take the lives of other prominent cultural figures such as Osip Mandel’shtam (d. 1938), Isaak Babel’ (d. 1940), and Vsevolod Meierkhol’d (d. 1940). *We* was not published in the USSR in Russian until 1988, almost seventy years after it was written and some fifty years after Zamyatin’s death.

Andrei Platonov was born in 1899 just outside Voronezh. He began his literary career working as a journalist for Party newspapers during the revolution. The young Platonov published prolifically: from 1920 to 1922 he would write “over two hundred articles on the most complex social-philosophical issues, publish a volume of poems, and establish himself as a writer of literary prose” (Seifrid 5). Though a communist, Platonov found himself consistently at odds with Soviet censors by the late 1920s, for his literary output was increasingly critical of the Stalinist regime. As a result, the Soviet authorities

banned Platonov from publishing between 1931 and 1934. Though he was singled out and ostracised by the regime, Platonov's situation never reached the extremity that Zamiatin's did. After being accused of "nothing less than disseminating kulak ideology" (Seifrid 11), Platonov worked tirelessly to mend his relationship with the Union of Socialist Writers, producing manuscripts in favour of the Five-Year Plan.

World War II allowed Platonov considerably more freedom to publish, though generally only works glorifying Soviet soldiers in action and peasants on the home front. The war period was a time of personal tragedy: his son was arrested in 1938 after having been accused of terrorism and was sent to the Gulag. He was released in 1942 after the novelist Mikhail Sholokhov interceded, but he died soon after his release from tuberculosis, with which he infected his father. Platonov struggled with the disease throughout the 1940s, finally dying from complications in 1951. Only in 1958 with the onset of the Khrushchev Thaw did Platonov's reputation begin to be rehabilitated, and then only with the publication of a slim volume of selected works. *The Foundation Pit* was not published in the West until 1973 and in the Soviet Union until 1987.

What is exciting about examining *We* and *The Foundation Pit* is that each novel was written at the beginning of an era. Zamiatin was writing in the aftermath of the revolution, at the beginning of the Leninist period of Russian history, and Platonov was writing at the beginning of the Stalinist regime. Though the novels were written only ten years apart and though both are concerned with the socialist dream in Russia/the Soviet Union, Zamiatin and Platonov were writing at the onset of eras that differed radically from each another in terms of leadership and long- and short-term goals. The temporal

orientation of their novels – the attitudes to present and future and the very process of history that are manifested in them – is what I will now investigate.

0.4 The Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 is concerned with the interpretation and analysis of *We*. Chapter 2 follows a similar pattern for *The Foundation Pit*, incorporating aspects of comparison and analysis with *We*. Each chapter begins with a review of secondary literature. A brief concluding chapter focuses on summarising my study and considering the implications of this thesis for the broader study of the dystopian genre.

Chapter 1: Evgenii Zamiatin's *We*

1.1 Influences on and Critical Reception of *We*

Gottlieb places the One State of Zamiatin's *We* alongside the World State of Huxley and Orwell's Oceania on the grounds that it is primarily concerned with providing a warning against totalitarian states of the future (4). According to Gottlieb, the strategies of Zamiatin, Huxley and Orwell are those of warning. She states that "as readers we are made to contemplate Zamiatin's One State, Huxley's World State and Orwell's Oceania, each a hellscape from which the inhabitants can no longer return, so that we realize what the flaws of our own society may lead to for the next generations unless we try to eradicate these flaws today" (4). The three works do indeed have much in common, with the futuristic societies of each author being controlled by omnipresent, shadowy governments that carefully engineer and control a societal organ meant to maximise happiness by minimising independent thought, which is equated with feelings of indecision, disappointment and pain. According to Gottlieb, the central message of these three works is a caution that once a totalitarian state is allowed to come to power, there will be no way of returning to the societal norms of before. This bleak message of the permanence of the totalitarian state is manifest in the endings of each novel with the fate of the protagonist who rebels against government control. In *We*, the government, headed by the shadowy figure of the Benefactor, has engineered a way to make its citizens more robotic and thus happier (in the One State machines are held as the pinnacle of perfection). Calling fantasy "the last barricade on the road to happiness," they have found a way to remove the "Centre of Fantasy," within the brain through something they

have termed a “fantasiectomy” (173). D-503, the protagonist, resists undergoing this operation and plots, along with the female number I-330, to bring down the Benefactor. In the end, however, his plan is found out and the operation is forced upon him. Henceforth devoid of the means to think rationally, D-503 falls back into line as a mindless drone to the state.

In the genetically engineered world of Huxley’s World State in *Brave New World*, a passive and contented population is maintained through strict government-controlled social conditioning from birth as well as a continuous supply of *soma*, a mood-controlling drug that produces a feeling of euphoric happiness. John Savage, brought to the World State from a still ‘uncivilised’ Indian Reserve, is unable to adjust to this new world where happiness is administered through medication, there is no God, and free thought is entirely prohibited. John becomes increasingly disillusioned with his surroundings and eventually feels as though there is only one option of escape from them – suicide.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the protagonist, Winston Smith, becomes involved in an underground movement to overthrow Big Brother – the government apparatus that both openly and secretly watches over its population twenty-four hours a day. When it becomes clear that Big Brother has known about this organisation all along, Winston is subjected to physical and psychological torture until he suffers a mental collapse. By the novel’s end, he declares his complete devotion to Big Brother once again and the reader is left with the impression that any future voices of dissent have no hope against the all-encompassing government machine.

The shared themes, settings and outcomes of *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have led scholars prior to Gottlieb to link the three works within a singular

dystopian tradition. In the first book-length analysis of the dystopian genre, Chad Walsh summed up what he considered to be the central warning for the future in both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where post-revolutionary communist (or communist-esque) governments have come into power:

[T]he apparatus of the police state was presumably considered at first a necessary evil for a transition period. But the transition has hardened into a permanent pattern. There is no longer the pretence that some day, however far in the future, the spies and hidden microphones and torture chambers can be done away with. As instruments of a sacred revolution they have become sacred. (157-58)

Several prominent dystopian and science fiction authors have subsequently expanded upon this claim by Walsh. Robert C. Elliott discusses *We* and *Brave New World* as representations of the utopian dreams of the late nineteenth century come to pass and resulting in a terrifying present (91). Similarly, discussion of *We* within the broader framework of genre consistently relates it to the works of Huxley, Orwell and H. G. Wells, as the constituents of the canonical form of dystopia in the West. Paul K. Alkon, for example, states that, “in the hands of such masters as Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, futuristic fiction also offers our most powerful literary defense against unthinking collusion with the impulses behind our worst nightmares” (4).

The close linking of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell, as well as the broader placement of *We* within a framework of English-language dystopian literature, owes a great deal to H. G. Wells. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) was a response to a post-industrial revolutionary world that Brian Stableford has termed the Age of Anxiety, when

Western society began to realise that humankind itself was more than capable of destroying its own civilisation through the concept of so-called progress (101-2). Progress in the nineteenth century meant a deepening reliance on mechanisation, which fuelled a growing gap between rich and poor. The resulting class tensions were seized upon and further stoked by Marxist and socialist organisations and political parties. The Marxists promised an end to the inequities of the capitalist, class-based social hierarchy, which would be replaced with a utopian dictatorship of the proletariat. Promises of an end to social strife were well received, though many intellectuals became alarmed about the negative possibilities of a society where equality and harmony are *enforced* within the population (Kumar 62).

It was within this period of great social inequality and unrest that Wells penned *The Time Machine*. The unnamed Time Traveller finds himself in London in the year 802,701. Expecting to find a utopian paradise, he instead discovers the weak and passive Eloi people, who are treated as a food supply by the nocturnal, animal-like Morlock people. The Traveller theorises that the Eloi must have been the aristocracy in the past. Through exploiting the labour of the Morlocks, they grew lazy and feeble, allowing the Morlocks to rise up against them and seize power. M. Keith Booker believes that Wells' central cautionary message in *The Time Machine* is the danger of dehumanising the proletariat through exploitation in an industrialised capitalist society. The Time Traveller's sympathies throughout the novel are clearly aligned with the Eloi, and Booker as a result believes that, "the book potentially becomes not a critique of capitalism so much as an expression of fear of Communism – and of the growing threat posed by the lower classes in general" (285).

Fluent in English and an admirer of English society, Zamiatin was well read in English-language literature, translating and analysing the works of authors such as Francis Bacon, George Bernard Shaw and O. Henry. His longest critical essays on English literature, however, were on the subject of Wells, whom Zamiatin considered to have “created the literary genre [dystopia] most perfectly suited to a writer’s need to comment on our exciting yet terrifying age” (Glenny 10-11). The influence of *The Time Machine* and the later novel *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910) on *We* have been well documented by scholars: the heavily mechanised and dehumanised city-state, the emphasis on cleanliness, symmetry and efficiency, and a strong aversion to the natural world are all features of Wells’ themes that were appropriated by Zamiatin in *We* (Collins, “Zamyatin” 351-53).

Wells, then, was instrumental in influencing *We*, and *We* influenced subsequent masters of English-language dystopia. Orwell openly admitted to using *We* as one of his models for the creation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Parrinder 127). Huxley denied the influence of *We* on *Brave New World*, but scholars have questioned the veracity of this claim. Orwell himself stated that the number of similarities between *We* and *Brave New World* were such that Huxley must have been influenced by Zamiatin’s novel (Parrinder 127). The influence of *We* on other notable works of English-language dystopia has been chronicled and debated; these works include Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* (1938) (Milgram 134-41) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) (McClintock 489).

Thus, the inclusion of *We* within a Western (i.e. English-language) tradition has been largely based upon a chain of influences, beginning with Wells and carrying on through Zamiatin, Huxley, Orwell and beyond, taking into account similarities in settings

and themes. The idea of placing *Zamiatin* within a framework of Soviet and Eastern European dystopia was not considered until Gottlieb explicitly theorised a division between the two traditions – West versus East. However, as with previous studies of genre that classified Western dystopia on thematic rather than geographic grounds, Gottlieb’s East-West divide is not one based on geographic location. Rather, she separates the two branches of genre based on temporal orientation.

Gottlieb’s main argument is that Western dystopian literature is concerned primarily with providing a warning of a miserable future, while Eastern dystopia is more a description of that miserable future come to pass in the present. Within this framework, *We* is again classified within the Western tradition and, more specifically, in a subgroup with *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Such a claim is not new; however, Gottlieb’s argument that the primary reason for this link is based on a rather strict break between the temporal orientation of dystopian literature is an interesting concept that goes beyond the broad thematic links and chain of influences discussed in previous academic studies.

In her analysis of *We*, Gottlieb discusses the themes of “the worship of the machine, Taylorism, utilitarianism, [and] the cold, emotionless worship of reason in the 1920s” (63). She contends that *Zamiatin*’s primary concern in including these themes in *We* was to provide a warning that these Leninist trends could one day lead to “a totalitarian One State where the original promise of the Messiah of science and socialism would be subverted by the Deceiver, the totalitarian dictator posing as the Benefactor of his people” (63). She goes on to state that *Zamiatin*’s motivation in penning *We* was the fear of “seeing the live spirit of the revolution turn into the dead dogma of dictatorship,

an anticipation born from the historical moment at the time of writing in 1920” (63).

What this argument strongly implies is that *We* primarily foreshadows the future Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union.

When we take into account the socio-political and cultural climate in which *We* was written, however, Gottlieb’s temporal orientation is open to question. As previously stated, communist fears have been discerned in Wells’ *The Time Machine*; Huxley’s *Brave New World* was partially a reaction to a surge in pro-Soviet sentiment during the Great Depression; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provided commentary on the wilful ignorance of Stalinist policies in the West; and Zamiatin was concerned with the status of the Marxist-Leninist project (Geoghegan 85). The connecting link is that all four authors used their literature to express fear and caution of communist systems and ideals. Yet it can hardly be claimed that each author was writing with the same temporal orientation in mind. One obvious difference between them is that Zamiatin’s Western counterparts wrote their cautionary tales from within capitalist democracies, while Zamiatin wrote *We* in the early years following the revolution that brought the communist Bolshevik Party to power. Is Gottlieb’s decision to place Zamiatin within a Western framework of temporal orientation toward the future appropriate, then, when he was writing within a communist system similar to those authors Gottlieb regards as temporally oriented toward the present?

The style of *We* has been examined by Neil Cornwell, who states that Zamiatin looked to the previous works of Wells, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Andrei Belyi as influences. At the same time, however, Cornwell posits that the style of *We* “can be seen as the first in a series of experimental, modernist anti-Utopian European fictions” (par. 10). That Zamiatin’s style cannot be easily classified solely within one tradition is a

starting point for questioning his orientation in other aspects of *We*, including, here, his temporal orientation.

The contention that Zamiatin used *We* as a means to interpret and describe contemporary Leninist Russia is explored here in two main ways. First of all, I compare the political situation in early Leninist Russia with the political situation in Zamiatin's fictional One State. After a general overview, I focus on three aspects in particular: a) the policies implemented by the two states (1.2.1); b) the relationship between the states and the individuals which make up their populations (1.2.2); and c) the relationship between the state and the arts. Second, I extend the discussion to consider not just Zamiatin's attitude toward the Leninist regime itself, but also the attitude towards the overarching concept of communism which can be discerned in the novel.

1.2 Fact and Fiction: The Temporal Setting of the One State

M. Keith Booker considers defamiliarisation to be essential to the dystopian genre. According to Booker, "by focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted and considered natural and inevitable" (3-4). This defamiliarisation is manifested in Zamiatin's novel through the setting of *We* one thousand years into the future in a civilisation that, on the surface, is vastly different from twentieth-century life. The founding of the One State occurred following the Two-Hundred Years' War. The reasons for this war and when it took place relative to the contemporary post-revolutionary timeframe are not explicitly stated, though Zamiatin

provides enough clues to allow his audience to orientate itself to both the reasons for and the timing of this war that resulted in such sweeping changes to known civilisation.

Throughout his letters D-503 makes references continuously to one pre-Two-Hundred Years' War timeframe: the twentieth century.

The temporal links to this period are clear, as this century is the only one held explicitly up to derision within the One State. The music of Scriabin is played in order to demonstrate the ridiculousness of music composed while in a state of “psychic disease” known only as “seizures of *inspiration*” (33-34); paintings of twentieth-century streets are displayed so that the numbers (i.e. the people) of the One State might shudder at how horrifyingly chaotic a scene they made. The most biting criticism of this ancient timeframe occurs with a loudspeaker announcement that a book by a twentieth-century author has been unearthed. The author of this book ridicules a savage attempting to manipulate a barometer in order to produce rain. When the assembled numbers begin to laugh at the savage, the voice from the loudspeaker asks whether it is not the European of the twentieth century who was more deserving of laughter and incredulity:

The European wanted rain, just as the savage did – but the European wanted his rain with an uppercase R, an algebraic rain, but he stood before that barometer like a wet hen. The savage at least had more daring and energy and logic – even though it was wild logic. (33)

D-503 indicates that it is this chaos, emotion and irrationality that led to the Two Hundred Years' War – the battle between the rational and the irrational and, as D-503 also refers to it, the war between city and village (36) and the final revolution (169). With the victory of the rational and the city, the new One State regime sets about making its

new civilisation as different from the twentieth century as possible by making life increasingly regimented and static. The ways in which the contemporary state maintains control over its citizens are chronicled in detail. The Tables of Hourly Commandments regulate the activities of each hour of the day, so that “At the very same hour we mono-millionedly begin work – and, when we finish it, we do so mono-millionedly. And merging into but one body with multi-millionedly hands, at the very same second designated by the Tables of Hourly Commandments we bring our spoons up to our mouths” (28-29). According to D-503, private life has been eliminated: numbers live in apartments with sheer glass walls. They cannot leave the One State because it is surrounded by the Green Wall, meant to keep all nature out and all numbers in. The state, it would seem, controls all food production and distribution as well as the right to have sex and bear children.

Zamiatin’s continued references to the twentieth century suggest that the Two Hundred Years’ War took place contemporary to the Russian Revolution – in or around the year 1917 – with One State society the result. In light of this, the defamiliarisation that appears at first so prominent in the novel can subsequently be considered secondary to the political similarities between the One State and Russia of the year 1920.

1.2.1 Fact and Fiction: The State and its Policies

We was written in the aftermath of three major upheavals in Russia: World War I, the revolution, and the civil war. By 1920 the Bolsheviks to a large extent had cemented their hold on power within Russia, though civil unrest continued throughout urban and –

especially – rural areas. The Marxist-Leninists, while championing the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, were still very evasive on how exactly the structures and institutions of a utopian communist paradise would be brought about. In 1918, Nikolai Bukharin asked Lenin to detail his vision of the future socialist Russia. Lenin replied that it was not possible for anyone to speculate on such things (Collins, *Evgenij Zamiatin* 42). Two years later, as Zamiatin was writing *We*, this situation of confusion and uncertainty remained the same, with government policies geared toward immediate concerns rather than long-term planning (Applebaum 4). Despite this, Zamiatin was writing in a post-revolutionary socialist society which Lenin hoped quickly to transform into a communist paradise. The Bolsheviks themselves appeared to be in no hurry to map out the formal steps necessary for such a transformation; Zamiatin, on the other hand, imagines the “utopian” consequences and results of the codification of contemporary trends.

D-503 states that, “Some ancient sage or other once said something clever (by pure chance of course): ‘Love and Hunger rule the universe.’ *Ergo*, in order to win sovereignty over the universe man must win sovereignty over the sovereigns of the universe” (36). The One State, then, upon gaining predominance, sets out to gain mastery over these two sovereigns.

D-503 states that toward the end of the Two Hundred Year’ War food was abolished and a derivative form of oil began to be consumed. This switch to a hydrocarbon diet resulted in only 0.2 percent of the world’s population surviving. That almost the entire population had to die in order to gain victory over one of these ruling elements appears to be inconsequential; what is important is only the end result and the subsequent power it gave the state over its remaining people as the sole provider of

sustenance. The government's culpability in catastrophic deaths related to food production and consumption is linked to the situation of post-revolutionary Russia, where until 1921 the Bolsheviks refused to make concessions in their communist programme in order to bolster agricultural production and urban employment opportunities.

Living conditions for the majority of the Russian populace post-civil war were dire both in urban and rural areas. Heavy industry had collapsed along with agriculture. Famine and disease were widespread, killing some twenty million people between 1914 and 1921 (Thompson 148). The urban proletariat, which had suffered huge casualties during World War I, were facing mass unemployment and starvation as grain requisitions from rural areas could not match demand. The rural peasantry, already a hostile element to the Bolsheviks, resented greatly the little grain they had being forcefully taken. The New Economic Policy, commonly known by the acronym NEP (1921-1928), would ease the suffering of the Russian populace and help restore the economy to pre-World War I norms, but the decision to implement it did not occur until Zamiatin had written the majority of *We*. Up until 1921, Lenin had been vehemently opposed to introducing such a reform package as the NEP because it entailed a partial return to capitalism. In 1920, then, the Leninist government, still shaky in its own grasp on power, appeared little different from the One State government as it consolidated its power during the Two Hundred Years' War: seemingly unwilling to compromise its ideals in order to relieve the suffering of its citizens. As I demonstrate throughout this chapter, however, it is not simply the One State of the past that Leninist Russia mirrors in its ill-treatment of its citizens; the regime of the Benefactor maintains its self-serving practices into the present with no regard to basic human rights or emotions.

1.2.2 Fact and Fiction: The State and the Individual

The victory over hunger in the One State was much later joined by a victory over love and the accompanying emotion of jealousy through the introduction, three hundred years before D-503's time, of the document *Lex Sexualis*. It states that any number has the right to choose a sexual partner with any other number and there is no such thing as proper dating, marriage or a family unit. Numbers are given pink coupons that they must exchange for sex through a system of registration, but only within set Sexual Hours.

The object of familial love is removed by the raising of children entirely by the state; children never know their birth parents. They are not even given an opportunity to grow close to individual adults as role models, which becomes obvious when D-503 describes his long-ago math instructor, Plyappa, whom he looks back upon fondly. D-503 says that Plyappa was “considerably second-hand by that time, with all his bolts sprung, and when the monitor put the plug in his back the first thing that always issued from the loudspeaker was *plya-plya-plya-tshhh*, and the lesson would come only after that” (52). From early childhood numbers are conditioned only to feel affection for and loyalty to the state and the rationality of machines. The relationship between the One State's attitude toward love and the attitude of the Bolsheviks again has clear parallels.

Attempts by the Bolsheviks to regulate sexual and familial norms were prevalent from the very beginning of their rule. Already in 1919, the First All-Russian Congress on Nursery Education championed the advantages of children being raised in public nurseries in order that they could be brought up in the spirit of communist ideals. As Catriona Kelly states, “Children themselves were used as instruments of indoctrination, disseminating hygiene information and haranguing adults, particularly their parents,

about the advantages of modern ways” (257). In contrast to the laissez-faire attitude of pre-revolutionary childcare, “the Soviet nursery school, on the other hand, was meant to offer upbringing of the most active kind: an introduction to rational modern living” (Kelly 259).

The destabilisation of romantic and familial love was also tested by the changing role of women in early Leninist Russia. The progressive and empowering society that many believed would result from the revolution led many of Russia’s youth to question sexual behaviour and norms (Carleton 231). The result was the so-called ‘Sexual Revolution’ in Russia: a brief period in the early 1920s when sexuality was debated openly, not only by the general populace, but within government organs and media as well. Following the prominent Bolshevik Aleksandra Kollontai’s lead, many Russians came to believe in the concepts of ‘free love’ – eschewing the confines of marriage, remaining single and valuing work over love (Toth 660). These beliefs are similar to the attitudes toward sexuality prevalent in the One State, strengthening the argument that Zamiatin is satirising the present as opposed to foretelling the future.

Zamiatin’s attitude toward the raising of children by the state is much more clear cut than his attitude toward a ‘free love’ society. He constructs O-90, D-503’s pseudo-girlfriend, as an increasingly sympathetic character. She is simple-minded, sweet and loyal – and entirely unable to compete with I-330 in her confidence, sensuality and passion. All she wants is a baby, specifically D-503’s baby, something that is punishable by death under law. Eventually, her maternal drive and instincts supersede her loyalty to the state and she requests that D-503 impregnate her. He does not initially understand O-90’s need to give maternal love, though he himself later experiences the overwhelming

desire to receive it. In the aftermath of the failed attempt to hijack the Integral, D-503 wishes dearly for a mother of his own, someone who will see him as, “not the builder of the Integral, and not a number, D-503, and not a molecule of the One State, but a bit of common humanity, a bit of her own self” (206). With these examples, Zamiatin portrays the effects of human desire and the need to experience close, familial love, something that the impersonal state can never adequately compensate for.

The initially more uncertain attitude of Zamiatin toward the Sexual Revolution is apparent in the characterisation of I-330, whose connection to this era of free love will be expounded upon in greater detail further on in the chapter. The hope for a freedom from repression that is evident in her early treasonous attitude to the state is dampened by her ill-treatment of D-503. He is hopelessly in love with her, which she fully knows, yet she continuously strings him along, appearing in his life only when it suits her. I-330’s attitude toward love in general appears to be callous and cold. Her most heartless act toward D-503 occurs when she tricks him into betraying the state, relying on his infatuation with her to bring him over to her cause.

In the end, however, I-330 has become as smitten with D-503 as he has been with her. In a tragic reversal of roles, it is D-503 who informs the state of I-330’s crimes. Her capture by the state is, along with D-503’s fantasiectomy, the most tragic defeat in the novel, symbolising the loss of hope for an entire society. The ambivalent stance that Zamiatin appears to adopt toward I-330 is, then, on the whole eclipsed by the despair that results from her downfall as well as the downfall of everything that she and her movement represent. Interestingly enough, however, it is the sexually liberated qualities of I-330 that align the character most closely to the state despite her vehement opposition

to the regime. In this regard, it is D-503 who changes I-330 as much as she changes him. She teaches him to open his eyes to the repressive injustices all around him and he eventually teaches her the value of love. That both this free thought and love are subsequently conquered by the state makes for a crushing dénouement.

1.2.3 Fact and Fiction: The State and the Arts

The ambiguity that characterises Zamiatin's attitude to the Sexual Revolution as manifest through I-330 is present on a larger scale in the relationship between the state and the arts. D-503 and his closest friend, the poet R-13, are the primary representatives of the cultural elements of the One State. Through his letters D-503 transmits his culture to an unknown audience. It is clear from his letters that poetry and music remain important cultural elements in the One State. However, the regime appears to face the same challenge of the Leninist government: how to maintain the cultural life of its society without opening itself up to ideologically subversive attacks – whether real or perceived.

As early as 1905, Lenin had written an essay outlining his beliefs on the function of art. This document strongly resembled the programme of Socialist Realism that would not be codified until almost thirty years later. As Gottlieb states, "Lenin's essay reads like a trial where literature, or freedom of expression in general, is put in the dock, and the speaker figures as prosecutor, judge, and defence counsel in the same person: he simply brooks no opposition, whether engaged in politics or in literary criticism" (120). The strict control of the arts, so strongly associated with Stalin, was already an issue under

Lenin. This would explain why *We* was banned from publication in Russia in the Leninist era (Shane 74).

Musically, the problem of subversion is solved through the invention of the musicometer, which composes music purely through mathematical equations. The greatest feat of the musicometer, according to state propaganda is that “[b]y merely turning this handle any one of you can produce up to three sonatas an hour” (33). This turns music into an entirely rational – and entirely safe – cultural entity to be enjoyed by the masses.

The problem of regulating poetry, however, still remains an issue, raising the question of why the state has not introduced a machine similar to the musicometer to compose poems. Perhaps it is because of the great influence that poetry – and specifically the poetry of Alexander Pushkin – continued to wield in Bolshevik Russia that poets are granted a (relatively) large degree of freedom in the One State. It seems hardly coincidental, then, that the free-spirited state poet, R-13, bears a striking resemblance to Pushkin both physically and in character. R-13 is prone to making statements that push the boundaries of acceptability in the rigidly regulated One State. One statement in particular, made in a friendly argument with D-503, appears to be dangerously rebellious:

Oh come now – knowledge! Your knowledge is nothing but cowardice.
What’s the use of arguing – that’s a fact. You simply want to fence in, to wall in the infinite – but when it comes to taking a peek behind that wall you’re scared. Yes! And if you should peek out you would have to close your eyes – yes, sir! (53)

These words are aimed directly at D-503, yet seem dangerously critical of the broader attitude of the state in attempting to eradicate or hide all elements of the unknown and irrational instead of endeavouring to understand them.

Yet when it comes to his duties to the regime, R-13 falls in line with the ideological demands of state-approved art. When R-13 is called upon to deliver a poem at the public execution of a fellow state poet, D-503 describes his delivery as follows: “Chorees – abrupt, swift, falling like a keen axe. About an unheard-of crime, about sacrilegious verses in which the Benefactor was styled as – No, I cannot bring myself to repeat the names” (60). R-13, then, is a curious combination of the loyal and the subversive, which is perhaps Zamiatin’s acknowledgement of the complicated relationship that Pushkin himself maintained with the imperial government.

Poetically, although D-503 denigrates his own abilities to write, he shows his own ability to create beautiful prose well within the confines of the demands of the state for pure, mathematic rationality. As he observes:

This morning I was at the launching site where the Integral is under construction – and I suddenly caught sight of the work benches. Sightlessly, in self-oblivion, the globes of the regulators rotated; the cranks, glittering, bent to right and left; a balanced beam swayed its shoulders proudly; the blade of a gouging lathe was doing a squatting dance in time to unheard music. I suddenly perceived all the beauty of this grandiose mechanical ballet, flood-lighted by the ethereal, azure-surrounded sun. (21)

Interestingly, D-503 makes reference here to the sun, a part of the natural world that the regime was unable to regulate within its walls. The focus, however, is on the beauty of the machines; and, as D-503 goes on to state, their movement is only beautiful to him “because this was *nonfree* motion, because all of the profound meaning of the dance lay precisely in absolute, aesthetic submissiveness, in ideal *nonfreedom*” (22).

The state is able to keep obedient such numbers as D-503 through a combination of fear and religious reverence. Where the ancients believed their God to be divine and remote, “the God of the One State is the One State. And, more specifically, the Benefactor” (58). When looking at the Tables of Hourly Commandments, D-503 writes: “One is involuntarily reminded of the object the ancients used to call an *icon*, and a desire springs up within me to compose verses of prayers (which are one and the same)” (28). By portraying itself consistently and frequently as the benevolent liberator from chaotic freedom, the regime endeavors to indoctrinate its citizens into unquestioning devotion to the state.

Yet should this indoctrination fail, the state maintains a judicial system that provides a strong incentive to numbers to remain model citizens: infractions against the state are punished by public execution. Until D-503 meets I-330, he is a shining example of the successes of the regime’s methods of indoctrination. He laments that the Table of Hourly Commandments allows for any personal hours at all and hopes that, “sooner or later the day will come when we shall find a place in the general formula for these hours also, a day when all of its 86,400 seconds will be included in The Tables of Hourly Commandments” (29). He finds it laughably absurd that the state of the ancients did not always regulate sexual intercourse and childbearing and watches with approval as a rogue

number is executed in front of the masses. It is his overwhelming attraction to I-330 that causes him to begin to question the very foundations of the One State and his relationship to it. As D-503's mode of thinking shifts, so does his motivation for showing loyalty to the regime: from reverence to an almost paranoid fear of the consequences of being caught.

1.2.4 Fact and Fiction: Summing up

The balance of reverence and fear employed by the One State is analogous with the Bolshevik style of governance in the post-revolutionary period. Lenin was hailed, not least of all by the Party and himself, as the saviour of Russia from the tyranny and gross inequalities of the imperial regime. Through the concept of 'Continuous Revolution' – the idea that following Russia's lead the proletariat of the world would rise up in revolution – Lenin and the Bolsheviks were also able to project themselves as just crusaders against inequality across the globe. This notion of the Bolsheviks as ideal world leaders is mocked by Zamiatin through the countdown in *We* to the launch of the Integral, a manned rocket that will allow the One State to bring even the planets of the most distant cosmos under its command. Initially, the countdown to the Integral's launch is anticipated with bated breath by D-503, even though the regime, in an article in its newspaper the *State Gazette*, openly states that “should [the interstellar populations] fail to understand that we are bringing them a mathematically infallible happiness, it will be our duty to compel them to be happy. But, before resorting to weapons, we shall try words” (19). The regime's attitude to the unknown masses, then, is no different from its

attitude toward its own citizens: submission and devotion to the regime or death. This attitude differs little from Lenin's stance on dissent or the possibility of such.

As early as November 1917, prison sentences, forced-labour terms and executions were meted out to what the Bolsheviks sketchily defined as 'class enemies' – those people considered to be of bourgeois backgrounds whom Lenin believed would have reason to rise up against the Bolshevik state (Applebaum 5-6). This fear of retribution from the bourgeois was the catalyst behind Lenin's Red Terror, a massive hunt for enemies of the revolution. Lenin's answer to the resulting overcrowding of prisons was to open forced labour camps. As Anne Applebaum states, "Although there are no reliable figures for numbers of prisoners, by the end of 1919 there were twenty-one registered camps in Russia. At the end of 1920 there were 107, five times as many" (9). The seemingly arbitrary approach to justice, combined with the collapse of industry and the rise of famine and disease, meant that Zamiatin – not a supporter of the revolution to begin with – did not have to look to the future to predict the frightful realities of the Bolshevik state; they were already all around him.

1.3 Fiction and Political Philosophy: Questioning Utopia

In D-503's early letters, Zamiatin seems to suggest that post-revolutionary Russia inhabits a sort of temporal 'no man's land' that exists between the Two Hundred Years' War (the Russian Revolution) and the contemporary One State (the successful implementation of utopia as promised by the revolution). The Two Hundred Years' War allowed the regime of the Benefactor to implement the rational, utopian society that D-

503 says exists one thousand years later. Yet how the regime was able to utterly transform an entire society is glossed over by D-503. The state has supposedly eliminated traditional food, but how was it able to implement such a change that resulted in the deaths of the vast majority of the population without that same population first rising up in revolt? In the same vein, how did the state manage to obliterate the family unit? What mechanisms were in place to carry out a shift that involved the entire population relinquishing the tight bonds of the family unit?

Despite these open-ended questions, D-503, prior to falling under the influence of the rebellious I-330, regards the socio-political situation as satisfactory. In his mind, the One State is the best possible society there could be, which suggests that it has achieved its utopian ideals in regulating emotion and behaviour. The One State, at least as it is seen through the eyes of D-503, appears to be a contrast to Soviet Russia, which continued to experience great uncertainty and upheaval.

As the plot of *We* develops, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the perfect One State of D-503's description is merely an illusion. Although the regime of the Benefactor has achieved its utopian goals, the problems that D-503 and the state associate with twentieth-century life still simmer below the glossy surface of One State society. If life is really so wonderfully content, then why was D-503 recently called upon to help design a new secret listening device for the One State spy agency? As D-503 describes, "these membranes, elegantly camouflaged, are now placed along all the avenues and record for the Bureau of Guardians all conversations carried on out of doors" (65). Also, why must the mail of all numbers be screened and all blinds be kept open during Personal

Hours that have not been scheduled for sexual activity? The self-declared benevolent state is afraid of its people, but why?

Even in the early stages of *We*, as D-503 portrays the state in glowing terms, Zamiatin hints that the regime actually has only a superficial control over the thoughts and emotions of numbers and that opposition to the state is fairly widespread and organised. I-330, the head of the rogue Mephi organisation, appears to have many high-ranking friends willing to cover up her frequent disregard of the law, and more than one of D-503's letters makes reference to numbers being discovered as saboteurs (Sixth and Eighth letters), giving the impression that this is a regular and problematic occurrence, despite the casual tone in which D-503 refers to it. The strength of dissent is not realised by D-503 or the reader, however, until the Day of Unanimity, when the Benefactor is voted into office for another year through a show of hands. Never before in the history of the One State (or so D-503 thinks) has there been anybody who has voted against the Benefactor in this election; however, in this particular vote, D-503 describes what occurred when it was asked whether there was anybody against the re-election:

It was but a hundredth part of a second, but a hair's-breath. I saw:
thousands of hands beat, winglike, upward, *against* – then lowered. I saw:
the pale face of [I-330] with a cross marking it, her raised hand. (143)

With this seemingly unthinkable act of defiance, the façade of utopian bliss is shattered and open revolt against the state ensues. The growing chaos and rioting highlight the fact that the One State, some one thousand years following the Two Hundred Years' War, has still not managed to create utopia – be it through propaganda, fear or force. It has merely created the illusion of it. This means that even the contemporary One State inhabits a

temporal no man's land, caught between the historical march of time and the timeless utopia that the state insists has resulted from the Two Hundred Years' War.

The events that take place during and following the Day of Unanimity are shocking, though not terribly unexpected given the events and actions that occurred prior to the vote. Though D-503 states that the victory over jealousy occurred hundreds of years ago, it is clear that it still very much exists. When O-90 timidly expresses her desire to sleep with D-503 on a day they are not scheduled to be together, it does not occur to D-503 that her feelings for him go far beyond the stipulations of the *Lex Sexualis*. When D-503 and O-90 first meet I-330, D-503 feels as though I-330 is staring at him and measuring him up. Seemingly out of nowhere, O-90 declares: "he is registered in my name." Irritated by this, D-503 thinks: "It would have been better if she had kept quiet; her remark was an utter non sequitur" (25). He attributes O-90's thoughtless remark to his belief that "the velocity of her tongue is not calculated correctly: the velocity of the tongue per second should always be a trifle slower than the velocity per second of thought, and not by any means the reverse" (25). Again, he is completely oblivious to the fact that O-90's statement is an alarmed reaction to the amount of attention that I-330 pays to him. O-90 does indeed have reason to worry, because D-503 does find himself inextricably attracted to I-330, to the point where he is enraged at the thought of other numbers sleeping with her. Though the One State has claimed victory over human emotions, this is obviously not the case when even a very loyal subject to the regime finds himself suddenly charged with emotions that he himself thought no longer existed.

Even the tone of D-503's description shifts during this period. From the poetic, yet ideologically safe, recounting of the movement of parts at the site of the Integral, his

later description of a flight with I-330 contains none of the references to mechanisation or timed motion as in the earlier description. In fact, he writes only of nature – the very thing that the One State abhors. As he explains:

We got an aero at a half-empty hangar at the corner. E-¹ again took the pilot's seat, as she had done that other time, pressed the starter, and we took off and soared. And everything took off in our wake: the roseately aureate fog; the sun; the thinnest-of-blades-profile of the physician, who had suddenly become so beloved and near. Hitherto everything had revolved about the sun; now I knew that everything was revolving about me – slowly, beautifully, with puckered eyes... (82).

D-503's poetic shift from the mechanical to the natural is not completely unexpected. Despite his original abhorrence of all things irrational, D-503's emotions, very early in the novel, are stirred almost uncontrollably by I-330's playing of Scriabin's music. Despite his original adherence to the norms of the One State, it can be said that D-503 perhaps harboured a subversive side similar to R-13's prior to his conscious awakening to the darker intentions of the One State regime. For example, he cannot bear to have people look at his hands because "they're all grown over with hair, shaggy – some sort of ridiculous atavism" (25). It is the connection to the past through his physical appearance, in fact, that is one of the features that first draws I-330 to him.

Thus, though initially it appears that the One State represents Lenin's utopian future come to pass one thousand years into the future, it is really just as tumultuous as the pre-revolutionary twentieth century, with tensions rising to a boil in a similar fashion to the initial February Revolution, when increasing strikes and unrest finally led to the

¹ The translation of *We* that I have used renders the *I-330* of the Russian-language text as *E-330*.

overthrow of the tsarist regime. Through *We*, Zamiatin points out the ridiculousness of attempting to force a society into utopian bliss. The complete eradication of free thought and emotion is impossible; they can be suppressed, as in the instance of D-503, but they are still there and still pose a threat to the regime. The one seemingly absolute solution to these problems of thought and emotion, Zamiatin sardonically implies, would be for the Bolsheviks to perform something akin to the fantasiectomy conceived of by the One State. In the beginning, this operation is optional. After the riots begin, it becomes a forced procedure.

By the novel's end, D-503 himself is forced into a fantasiectomy, while I-330 is caught and tortured when their plot to hijack the Integral is discovered. With D-503 now physically unable to think freely, it appears as though the regime has won and gained complete totalitarian control. Yet there remains hope even with the mass lobotomies occurring. In D-503's final letter, he still writes of major pockets of unrest in the state: "the western districts of the city are still full of chaos, roaring, corpses, and – regrettably – a considerable body of numbers who have betrayed rationality" (221). So, although the state has defeated D-503 and I-330, the protagonists of the novel, there is still a small hope that the dissidents might ultimately succeed in toppling the regime.

Another potential challenge to the One State's crushing power is that there are people who live outside of the Green Wall. O-90, after she illegally becomes pregnant with D-503's baby, escapes over the wall to this free society. There may also be other numbers of the One State living permanently there, as D-503 spots several unifs (the grey-blue clothing all One State numbers wear) among the masses gathered under I-330's direction. So, even if the regime is successful in carrying out fantasiectomies on all of its

citizens, there remains free society outside of its grasp and, even more importantly, citizens of the One State who were able to escape government control despite its frenzied and psychopathic efforts. Members of this free society helped I-330 participate in her failed revolt against the state, and there remains the possibility that they will participate in any future revolts as well.

However, despite the hopefulness that the pregnant O-90's escape represents, the society that exists beyond the Green Wall is perhaps not ideal either. It is inhabited by a group of people that appear to be the pre-historic counterparts to the post-historic One State. I-330 states that the outer-wall people are those from the countryside who escaped the control of the One State during its creation one thousand years ago: "naked they took to the forests. There they learned from the trees, beasts, birds, colours, sun. They became hirsute, but to make up for that they had preserved warm, red blood under their hirsuteness" (161). When D-503 first sees them, he says of the men that "they were all unclothed and all were grown over with short, glossy pelage, somewhat like that of the stuffed *horse* which anyone may see at the Prehistoric Museum" (153). This description implies that these outer-wall people have not evolved much, if at all, in the past one thousand years and conjures up a stereotypical image of a caveman that places them at a point of existence comparable to Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers. Since Marxism-Leninism stated that class conflict only arose as humanity abandoned this hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Engels 318-19), O-90 can be said to have escaped from one version of Marxist-Leninist paradise to another, with neither being desirable or realistic. Because the outer-wall people were from the rural areas and therefore likely farmers before they were forced from their homes, it does not make sense that they would escape from the One State

regime and then revert completely to a foraging lifestyle; rudimentary farming at least would have begun, if not with the first generation then with the second. Instead, these people are stuck in an ever-present stasis with no hope for evolution. The ridiculousness of their situation mirrors the absurd stasis that the One State hopes to create with lobotomies. State removal of the ability for numbers to think means that socio-political changes can only occur by governmental decree.

Of course, the Bolsheviks had no intention of meting out lobotomies in reality; Zamiatin simply points out that even the use of extreme measures can never result in the successful implementation of social utopia because the entire concept of forced equality and happiness is impossibly flawed because freedom of thought can never be completely eradicated or suppressed. With this mocking of both versions of the Marxist-Leninist paradise, Zamiatin makes the pre-revolutionary twentieth century appear to be actually quite decent. Though it may indeed have been chaotic, at least people like Scriabin were able to compose through emotion and free will, rather than rational calculations.

A further explanation for Zamiatin's less than complimentary attitude toward the outer-wall dwellers is that they can be seen to represent the first wave of emigration from Soviet Russia. While other members of the intelligentsia fled abroad, Zamiatin remained in Russia and eked out a living as a lecturer, editor and official of the Writers' Union. He only finally left Russia in 1931 when his situation under Stalin became so excruciating that exile was the only viable option (Glenny 12-17). That D-503 helps the pregnant O-90 escape to the outside world yet eschews this 'safe' move himself can be seen as Zamiatin's biting commentary on the able-bodied Russians who fled at the first opportunity following the revolution when things became difficult for them.

The central characters, beginning with O-90, are often symbolic of various factions and social groups that were evident in early Soviet Russia. O-90 can be said to be representative of a throwback to the views of family and gender roles that grew to be predominant over the course of the nineteenth-century and that contrasted so sharply with the Bolsheviks' attitude to such matters. As Barbara Alpern Engel states, "Westernized elites read conduct books and educational manuals (often in translation) which placed new emphasis upon women's domestic responsibilities, including their need to please their husband and supervise their children's moral education" (356). O-90 fits the mould of the perfect nineteenth-century woman: she is not terribly clever, she is devoted and subservient to D-503, and, more than anything, she wants to have a child with him. Interestingly enough as well, O-90 is never mentioned in relation to a workplace or job. Her existence appears only to be in relation to D-503.

But if O-90 is representative of a strict division between gender roles, then I-330 is exactly the opposite. Parallels can be drawn between her and Aleksandra Kollontai. Kollontai, whose influence was at its peak at the time Zamiatin wrote *We*, was a vocal and tireless advocate for the emancipation of the socialist woman. She was also the only woman in Lenin's Central Committee. I-330 can in many ways be seen to be the fictionalised counterpart of Kollontai: she drinks and smokes, which were scandalous activities Kollontai was often accused of (Toth 660).

The hopelessness of the regime is embodied through S-4711, the member of the Guardians who lurks in the shadows and has also infiltrated the Mephi movement, working as a double agent. It does not take D-503 long to realise that no matter where he goes or what he does, S-4711 is always present and always watching. Even when he is

amongst the outer-wall people, D-503 is sure that he catches sight of S-4711. S-4711 is the eyes and ears of the One State, just as the Cheka during Lenin's Red Terror was meant to be the all-knowing organ of the Bolshevik state (Applebaum 6). The ability of S-4711 to monitor and strike fear into the population is as important to quelling rebellion as Lenin believed the Cheka to be.

All four of these characters surrounding D-503 are successful in their influence of him at various points in the novel, though in the end the various directions that D-503 is torn between must necessarily be reduced to one which he actually follows, although not by choice. O-90, representing both safety and a subset of imperial ideals, convinces him to impregnate her; however, when she emigrates from the One State, D-503 does not join her in safety, choosing instead to remain behind for the incredibly risky attempt to hijack the Integral. R-13, as the freedom embodied in art, influences D-503 to a more subversive rebellion against the regime – he encourages him to think freely, but even these small victories are eventually crushed as D-503 finds R-13's lifeless body during the revolts after the Day of Unanimity. I-330, representing liberalisation, wins D-503's devotion, and through that, his allegiance to the Mephi cause. When the Integral plan fails, however, the liberalisation that I-330 represents is destroyed and D-503 confesses all the crimes of the Mephi and has the fantasiectomy, which, since it removes a portion of the brain, appears to remove entirely and irrevocably all vestiges of free thought. S-4711, the all-seeing, all-knowing vassal of the state, is ultimately victorious.

With the victory of the state, the significance of letter symbolism connected with the first person personal pronoun disappears. In both Russian and English this pronoun is represented by a single letter: 'I' in English and 'я' in Russian. It is significant that the

title of the novel is *We* but the main form of expression utilised by D-503 is ‘I’ – even before his awakening to the evils of the regime by I-330. Following the fantasiectomy, D-503’s final letter marks this shift: “We have, however, succeeded in constructing a temporary wall of high voltage waves on the transversal 40th Prospect. And I hope that we will conquer. More than that: I am certain that we shall. For rationality must conquer” (221). The shift is not all-encompassing as D-503 continues to use the ‘I’ form, but it marks an emphasis on the collective that has not been a feature in most letters, especially following his introduction to I-330.

The message of the victory of the police state over these other competing elements is representative of Zamiatin’s response to communism and the ways in which the Bolsheviks were trying to achieve it – through violence and fear without any real coherent long-term plan. With such a system, there was really no room for competing ideologies, which is why the intelligentsia was suppressed and Aleksandra Kollontai was a thorn in the side of many prominent Bolsheviks.

1.4 Conclusions

The examination of the political situation and the relationships that arise from it reveal, both in Leninist Russia and the One State, deeply volatile societies that reside beneath a surface layer of regimented government control and repression that is claimed in the name of fostering utopia. The similarities between the real and the fictional are hardly in keeping with Gottlieb’s claim that Zamiatin feared a future deterioration of the “live spirit of the revolution” (63). This is a spirit that is never manifest in *We*, even as D-

503 initially believes wholeheartedly in the glorious benefits of regimented One State society. At the same time as he praises the regime, he unintentionally undermines it by revealing its darker side to the reader through such revelations that opposition to the regime is punished through execution and the Benefactor plans on subjugating the cosmos through force.

As D-503 is awakened to the realities of the absurd attitudes and policies of the state, he is plagued by internal questions of the relationship and obligations of the state to its people. This questioning is finally and irreversibly resolved through D-503's fantasiectomy, which results in an elimination of moral ambiguity. The irrevocable turn of the protagonist to unquestioning devotion to the state results in an overwhelmingly pessimistic ending for the audience, though Zamiatin does leave open the possibility that the inhuman regime can still be toppled, whether in the near future through the continued rioting in certain districts, or in the distant future through a coup by the outer-wall populations. However, if D-503 can be said to be representative of Russia itself, then Zamiatin's own view of Bolshevik ideals and systems is overwhelmingly negative, and this attitude is displayed through the absurd nature of the One State. The Bolsheviks promised utopia without being able to answer the most pivotal of questions: how? To this, Zamiatin provides the answer through the fate of D-503, that is, through the complete elimination of free will.

This ludicrously frightful solution offered by Zamiatin is representative of a broader attitude toward the very concept of communism and its promise of egalitarian utopia. This is evidenced most clearly through a portrayal of both extremes of the Marxist view of communist paradise as comprising societies in a mode of complete stasis. That

both ‘ideal’ societies continue to function at the novel’s end is frustrating because the rationality these societies are meant to represent is contrasted by the irrationality of their very existence. But this is the very point that is made – the impossibility of constructing the rational by irrational means; that is, through the concept of a post-historical society free from conflict and inequality. Such a post-historical society is the very basis of the Marxist-Leninist project. Zamiatin, then, is not simply criticising Leninist Russia, but rather the entire premises of utopian communist society.

That the plot of *We* does end so concretely for D-503 does not find a parallel in Andrei Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit*, which sees its central character as morally lost in the denouement as he was when first introduced. The questioning tone with which Platonov ends his novel, in contrast to *We*, provides a starting point for questioning the temporal orientation of this later, Stalinist-era novel.

Chapter 2: Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*

2.1 Critical Responses to *The Foundation Pit*

The extensive coverage that *We* has received in English-language studies of genre has not piqued widespread interest in the study of dystopian fiction of the Soviet era. The most obvious explanation for this is that subsequent Soviet dystopian literature has not been supposed to be influential on masterpieces of English-language dystopia.

That said, in the Stalinist era very few dystopian works were written in the USSR anyway. This was the result of the programme of socialist realism and the authoritarian, repressive nature of the Stalinist regime. In fact, the two most prominent Russian authors of dystopian fiction were émigrés who produced well-known works criticising the regime in the English language. These were Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* (1947).

Despite the overall lack of post-Zamiatin Soviet fiction in studies of dystopia as a genre, it is nevertheless particularly puzzling that Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* has not received more critical attention on account of the quality of Platonov's novels. Victor Terras considers Platonov to be "one of the most original writers of the twentieth century" (580). In his analysis of *The Foundation Pit*, Terras states: "Nowhere in Russian literature has the futility of the effort that created Soviet society been revealed with such honesty and penetration" (582). Gottlieb echoes the sentiments of Terras (152), before offering her opinion as to why Western scholars and readers alike have shied away from the novel, despite its originality and insight into the Stalinist regime: "[a] difficulty for the Western reader is the need to be intimately familiar with the historical political

context in order to get the references and often subtle allusions to the reality the writer is *forbidden* to criticize openly” (152). In addition, the complex style of writing in *The Foundation Pit*, discussed in detail by Thomas Seifrid (160-75), is very problematic to translation in a manner that retains the original’s spirit, intricacies and flow.

Despite the disregard for Platonov in studies of dystopia as a genre a number of books and articles have been devoted solely to the author. Thomas Seifrid’s *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* remains the most prominent book-length analysis of the life and work of the author, though studies have also been carried out by Ayleen Teskey, Philip Ross Bullock and Marion Jordan. Hallie A. White and Angela Livingstone have each written an article on the concept of time in Platonov’s earlier dystopian novel *Chevengur*.

Erika Gottlieb classifies *The Foundation Pit* as belonging to her Eastern tradition of the dystopian genre; that is, she considers it a work primarily concerned with describing the present state of affairs under a totalitarian regime. It is with this classification that I take issue. As she states, “it is important to notice that the novel does *not* take us to the future. The central metaphor, the foundation pit, refers to the present generation’s *dream* about the future” (152). As I shall show in section 2.2, it is indeed easy to conclude that the temporal setting of *The Foundation Pit* corresponds to the period of the first of Stalin’s Five-Year Plans, even though a date is not explicitly given. Yet that the novel is set in the present does not entail that Platonov was centrally concerned only with providing a descriptive and interpretive narrative of the present in the vein of Zamiatin’s *We*. Gottlieb herself opens her classification up to question

through her very assertion that the central metaphor of the novel is concerned with a collective anticipation and apprehension of the future.

Platonov does provide a striking view of contemporary life under Stalin, but I contend that he was as much concerned in *The Foundation Pit* with providing a predictive and cautionary message of a Soviet future characterised by the concept of a never-ending ‘building of socialism,’ by successive Five-Year Plans and little indication of when exactly this ‘building’ would result in a socialism that had actually been built.

My argument here will be presented in a similar fashion to the organisation of the previous chapter on Zamiatin’s *We*. I begin with links between aspects of *The Foundation Pit* and the politics of Stalinist society during the first Five-Year Plan in section 2.2. Then, in section 2.3 I will analyse the attitudes toward communism as a concept which can be discerned in the novel.

2.2 Fact and Fiction: Building Socialism toward Communism

The push for the building of socialism resulted from a shift in Bolshevik thought and policy. In accordance with Marxist thought, many prominent Bolsheviks, Lenin included, had previously considered the advanced capitalist countries in Western Europe best able carry through the push towards communism begun unexpectedly in Russia. But as the 1920s wore on it became increasingly clear that revolutions in the capitalist West might not occur. At the end of 1924, the dogma of ‘socialism in one country’ was officially put forward. It stated that “Soviet Russia not only could make a proletarian

revolution before the more advanced Western countries, but also could proceed successfully to establish a socialist society without waiting for the West” (McNeal 86).

The Foundation Pit portrays several aspects of the building of socialism: the first Five-Year Plan; the attempts to liquidate the kulak social class; the continued state indoctrination of the masses; and the growing influence of the state over the arts.

The shift away from belief in Europe-wide revolutions was most prominently expressed with the introduction of the first Five-Year Plan in 1928. With the implementation of this plan, the Bolsheviks had the goal of rapid industrial growth through central planning and the widespread collectivisation of agriculture. As McNeal states, the ultimate ambition of Stalin appears to have been to create “a gigantically industrialized completely collectivized, totally disciplined utopia” (95). It is this process of ‘utopianisation’ that Platonov addresses and comments on in often absurd ways through the experiences of a group of proletarian diggers – the literal builders of socialism – whose thoughts and actions are representative of the central theme of questioning the merits and realities of present existence in a system entirely preoccupied with the future.

In *The Foundation Pit* the construction boom of apartment buildings and public facilities in the unnamed city is to be enhanced by the construction of “a single building in which the entire local class of the proletariat would take up living quarters,” and which will “tower above the entire city” (18). Among those charged with the digging and supervision of the foundation pit for this impressive structure are several proletarian and intellectual characters identified only by their surnames.

At the same time as the massive structures of urban socialism are being constructed, full-scale efforts are underway to bring all local peasants into the Socialised Farmhouse Number 7 located close to the foundation pit. The collectivisation of the novel mirrors almost exactly what was really occurring in the Soviet Union as peasants destroyed or ate all their surplus livestock and grain in anticipation of losing their individual property rights to the collective farms. When crop shortages hit in 1932, there was no longer a surplus to fall back on. Despite this, the state continued to demand unreasonable requisitions to feed its cities, with massive famine the result (Khlevniuk 54). The figures from this famine are staggering: it is estimated that between 1931 and 1933 between six and seven million people in the Soviet Union died of starvation (Khlevniuk 64). Yet one bad harvest by itself could not have been enough to trigger such a catastrophe, and in fact it was not. It was simply the trigger of a disaster long in the making. It is the making of this disaster that Platonov describes.

John M. Thompson describes the methods of collectivisation as follows: “Young Communist activists were recruited to go door to door in villages trying to persuade peasants to join. If they were not won over, the army would be called in, the village surrounded, and the most recalcitrant peasants loaded on trucks” (221). These peasants would then be transported “to farms in Central Asia or to forced labor camps in Siberia” (221). The “loading on trucks” of kulaks has an interesting equivalent in *The Foundation Pit*. In the novel a raft is built for the kulaks onto which they are placed en masse and floated out to sea. The successful elimination of this enemy class is met with music and celebration. Indeed, as the events of the novel unfold, both the proletarians and collectivised peasants have much to celebrate: collectivisation of their area is achieved

and the digging of the foundation pit is also completed. The building of socialism appears to be well under way and is already producing successful results.

Despite the media proclamations that all is wonderful in the drive to socialism, the events, situations and mindsets that permeate the central storyline of *The Foundation Pit* rarely conjure up an atmosphere of celebration or enthusiasm. The rural peasants are given two choices: join the collective farm or join the kulaks as they are forcibly displaced out to sea. For those who choose to be collectivised, it is not easy to come to terms with the fact that all of their livestock, the foundation of their existence, will become the property of the collective. How they choose to come to terms with this impending loss of individual identity is described by the narrator:

The snow was falling upon the cold ground, ready to stay there the whole winter; the peaceful covering was bedding down for sleep the entire visible earth; it was only around the stables that the snow had melted and that the earth was black, because warm blood of cows and sheep emerged from beneath the walls to the outside, and the summer places grew bare. Having liquidated all of their smoking livestock, the peasants began to eat meat and ordered all their family members to eat it as well. (111)

It is this building of socialism in both spheres, the urban and the rural, that the plot and setting of *The Foundation Pit* is concerned with. Though the central characters all hail from the ranks of the urban proletariat or Soviet bureaucracy, they are also heavily involved with the collectivisation process of the peasantry, which the state is having a difficult time achieving since many peasants publicly refuse to relinquish their private property. Less public, though no less obvious, is the fact that the state faces an

even more difficult task in turning its prize class, the urban proletariat, into model, unquestioning citizens of the state. Encouraging the masses is the state culture and propaganda machine, whose effects are experienced most frighteningly through characters spouting various Party lines and slogans. Again, the parallels with historical events are obvious. Howard Woolston states that “the prevailing theory of Russian education is that a society must foster a type of culture fitted to meet the basic needs of its people...Classes, clubs, and occupational groups reiterate Marxian precepts concerning proletarian leadership until the ideas become fixed in the minds of members” (34). To rebel against this indoctrination was dangerous.

Orlando Figes has termed the Stalinist generation as one of ‘whisperers’, where “children were taught to hold their tongues, not to speak about their families to anyone, not to judge or criticize anything they saw outside the home” (xxxix). Such words of all-important caution are captured in the novel when a character’s dying words to her daughter are to keep secret her bourgeois origins by never mentioning her mother at all: “When you go away from me do not say that I am dead here. Do not tell anyone at all that I was your mother, for if you do they will mistreat you. Go far away from here, and when you get there just forget about yourself, then you will stay alive” (60). The daughter, Nastia, agrees to conceal her origins, stating, “Because you were born a long long time ago, and I was not...When you die I won’t tell anyone, and no one will ever know whether you existed or not” (61).

The Russia of *The Foundation Pit* mirrors its non-fictional counterpart: life on the surface appears calm and optimistic, yet below the surface there is uncertainty, repression and fear in a society where characters die without rhyme or reason and without any

lasting impact on society or other characters. When one of the characters, the unnamed activist, takes a blanket away from the sick Nastia, he is punched in the stomach and dies. His death elicits nothing more than indifference. When two well-known diggers die in the village, the result is the same. The other characters do not express grief for their passing. Nastia simply bemoans the fact that she has had to give up the coffins she used as a bed and toy box: “Safronov and Kozlov died in a peasant hut, and they have been given my coffins now; well, just what are you going to do?!” (82).

However, several facets of Platonov’s writing suggest that his ultimate purpose in *The Foundation Pit* is not to depict things as they are, but to question whether the present endeavours will or indeed can produce the glorious future in whose name they are carried out. It is first suggested that the diggers get a radio for their barracks for the sole purpose of listening to achievements and directives. When they do get the radio, the main sounds that come forth from it are often hysterical commands. A small example of the contrariness of the management of political policy is an enthusiastic summons to gather willow bark:

The activist, on hearing the report, thought about it so as to remember it, so as not to forget about the willow bark drive and thereby not to become notorious in the entire district as a ‘delinquent’ as had happened with him the last time when he had forgotten about organization of a ‘bush day,’ as a result of which the whole collective farm now had no willow withes.

(128)

Why there is a need for a willow bark drive, or a bush day for that matter, remains conspicuously unexplained. Though it can be surmised that it is somehow for the

construction of a most glorious future, no actual connection between present activities and future outcomes is made explicit.

The most obvious way in which Platonov questions whether the socialist present will lead to a communist future is in the fate of his characters. An unnamed activist is the main organiser and proponent of the liquidation of the kulak class. He is the character in the novel most clearly committed to the socialist cause; however he undergoes a rapid political about-face as a result of disillusionment at the hands of the Party apparatus. Prior to this disillusionment, he is the perfect bureaucrat, zealously devoted to the state machine and constantly “engaged in building the essential future and preparing an eternal place for himself within it” (83). Even the signatures and sealing stamps of new government directives bring tears to his eyes when he contemplates that “the whole earthly sphere, all its softness, [will] soon belong to those precise, iron hands” (84). After sending a report to the government “with great satisfaction” (143) at the successful elimination of the kulaks, he receives a prompt reply that he was not at all expecting.

The elimination of the kulaks, it seems, is not enough to guarantee the safety and success of the future socialist system. Provincial Party headquarters demands “an increased vigilance of activists towards middle peasants” because “did not their rushing into the collective farms mean this was a general fact of secret evil intention, carried out on the initiative of the masses of the prokulaks?” (143) Further to this, the activist himself is accused of being a wrecker against the Soviet state and an enemy of the proletariat for putting himself before the “local poor and middle peasant masses which are irrepressibly driving forward into the far distance of history, to the peak of universal unheard-of times” (144). They nonsensically accuse him of having “put the cart ahead of the horse and

fallen into the leftist swamp of rightist opportunism” (144). Having received this letter of denunciation, the activist promptly renounces his faith in the socialist system, wondering if it is not too late for capitalism to return.

One character in the novel muses explicitly on his standing in relation to the passing of time and the accompanying development of society. Prushevskii is an engineer and as such remains something akin to the bourgeoisie, putting him at odds with the “future proletarian world” (56) that is being built with socialism. He feels that he has no place in Soviet society. He hates the loneliness that results from his position as an engineer but he cannot easily find camaraderie within the proletariat. He has his own apartment but spends his nights wishing that he could be in the barracks with the labourers. When he does actually spend a night sleeping there, he is berated in the morning by Kozlov:

Every citizen, as the expression goes, is duty bound to carry out the directive issued to him, but you are trampling on yours and equating yourself with backwardness. This is no good at all for anything, I am going to appeal to higher authorities, you are spoiling our line, you are against tempo and leadership – what sort of things is this anyway? (49)

Yet it was Prushevskii who proposed the idea of a House of the Proletariat and oversees its construction. This places him in a sort of ‘necessary enemy’ category within society. Perhaps it is this tenuous nature of his social position that contributes to Prushevskii’s view of himself as a superfluous man and the present as a superfluous period: “In ten or twenty years’ time another engineer would build a tower at the centre of the world into which the workers of the whole world would move for eternal, joyous residence” (28). As

a result of this view, he comes to the conclusion that, “maybe the thing for me to do is die” (28). Prushevskii never does commit suicide, however, nor does he die suddenly of some seemingly insignificant ailment or injury as other characters do. In refusing to endorse Prushevskii’s view of his own superfluosity in the plotting of the novel, Platonov undermines a model of socio-political development in which Prushevskii and men like him have only a temporary, transitional role: rather, such men will continue to be present and necessary even in the future.

The digger Chiklin appears to be the most well-adjusted of the characters in terms of his unquestioning attitude toward the building of socialism. His secret for successfully labouring without the distractions of desire, uncertainty and ambiguity is simply not to think at all: “Chiklin without let-up or intermission smashed with the crowbar at the slab of native stone, not halting either for thought or mood; he did not know for what else he should live – one could otherwise either become a thief or disturb the revolution” (32). For Chiklin, these are the only options: mindless proletarian labour or a life of crime and dishonesty.

But Chiklin, too, has weaknesses. First of all, he is kind to Prushevskii even when others berate the engineer for being of a non-proletarian caste. Second, when he is not working, he cannot help but reminisce fondly about his youthful days before the revolution. He is especially nostalgic for a girl, the daughter of the owner of a tile factory, who once kissed him on the cheek. It turns out that Prushevskii once had a similar experience in his youth with a mystery girl and this bonds the two men together, for they surmise that it may have been the same girl. They search for her at the tile factory, where they find her dying with only her young daughter Nastia for company. Chiklin takes

Nastia back to the barracks with him, where they form a close bond. Although she becomes for Chiklin a beacon of hope for the future, the suspicion arises that his affection for her has its origins in bourgeois sentimentality for the past rather than a deeply felt emotional commitment to a vision of a different future. Like the activist, the character of Chiklin casts doubt upon the viability of the transition from a socialist present to a communist future. Whereas the activist ultimately proves to be weak in his psychological commitment to the building of socialism, other seemingly committed characters such as Prushevskii and Chiklin arguably fail at an emotional level.

When we turn to the character of Nastia herself, we see that the hope she represents for various characters as “an element of the future” (64) paradoxically does not translate into a hopeful or even into a sympathetic character. Nastia embodies the spirit of the Stalinist regime, which appears to be very one-dimensional indeed. When two peasants arrive at the foundation pit Nastia tells the digger Safronov to kill them because she believes them to be of bourgeois origins. When she writes a letter to Chiklin who has gone off to supervise the collectivisation of the peasants, all she writes is: “Liquidate the kulak as a class. Hail Lenin, Kozlov, and Safronov!” (94) (Kozlov is another of the diggers.) Even the crude and seemingly fearless cripple Zhachev is afraid of Nastia. When he accidentally awakens her in the night she threatens him: “the bourgeois cut your legs off just like that, and now you want your teeth to be gone too?” (132).

But as with the seemingly well-adjusted Chiklin, even the perfect Stalinist being that is Nastia, so removed in her actions from the pre-revolutionary world, cannot help but display human emotions and fears as her own life ebbs away. When she falls ill, her bourgeois origins slip out. Although her mother, the (believed to be) daughter of the tile

factory owner, instructed her daughter never mention her lest Nastia be mistreated for her family origins, a deathly ill Nastia declares: “Chiklin, give me mama’s bones, I will embrace them and go to sleep. I have gotten so depressed now” (153). The child born and indoctrinated into the utopian Soviet world in the end longs for a bond that represents a non-Soviet element in society: a familial bond that goes beyond social and political leanings and backgrounds.

All these details of plot and characterisation suggest that Platonov is more concerned with exploring the connection between past, present and future and the development of society than he is in parodying the present state of affairs. The imagery and symbolism of the novel point also towards this conclusion.

Nastia’s death, along with the earlier death of her mother, leaves a strong imprint on several of the characters. Unlike the workers, Nastia does not remember the imperial period of Russia’s history. As she herself states in reference to the leading figures of the revolution: “The main one is Lenin, and second Budyonny. When they weren’t there, and only the bourgeois people lived, then I was not born, because I didn’t want to be. And when Lenin appeared then I came” (69). Nastia represents the new, Soviet Russia and the diggers look eagerly to her future maturation as coinciding with the maturation of socialism. The digger Voshchev believes that this girl will “some day feel that warming flood of the meaning of life, and her mind [will] see a time which was like the first primeval day” (71). In this statement, we see parallels with the ‘utopian’ hunter-gatherer society of the outside wall people in Zamiatin’s *We*: the belief that only the pre-historic and post-historic eras could achieve egalitarian utopia. The newly hired digger Voshchev

believes that this post-historic era is close as hand, though not close enough that he can hope one day to experience it. Yet Nastia, this symbol of a better future, dies.

Though unthinking labour in accordance with the Five-Year Plan grants hope to Voshchev that he will find the answers he most desperately contemplates concerning the meaning of existence, it quickly becomes apparent that this will not be the case. As he realises when he begins digging, “there was much clay and common earth left – it was necessary to have much more of a very long life in order to overcome with oblivion and labour this deposited world, hiding in its darkness the truth of all existence” (22). Yet he continues to search while maintaining a faith in the future, placing these hopes on the Soviet youth who will have many more years than he will to find truth. With the death of Nastia, most centrally representative of the hope of youth, “Voshchev would have reconciled himself to not knowing anything again and to living without hope in the dim passionate longing of futile mind, if only the girl were again whole, intact, ready for life” (156). With the death of youth, Voshchev is left just as empty and searching as he was at the beginning of the novel after he had been fired from his factory job “as a consequence of a growth in the strength of his weakness and of pensiveness in the midst of the general tempo of labor” (3).

It is particularly revealing that the onset of Nastia’s fatal illness coincides with the activist receiving the letter from the Party which denounces him. By this point, the foundation pit has already changed location once and has undergone an enlargement further to the original blueprints. With Nastia’s death, the diggers can no longer accept that they have finally dug it deep enough and they compensate for their loss of future hope by digging the pit “even wider and deeper” (156). The novel ends with this decision

and the reader is left with a final impression that the pit will never be complete. Socialism will never be built, the symbolism seems to suggest. No matter how sincerely people believe that their labour and sacrifices in the present will lead to the perfect future, something will always get in the way of its realisation: the working of the government itself (as with the activist and the willow bark directive); the human propensity for nostalgic clinging to the past (Chiklin); or the human need for close personal relationships (Nastia).

2.3 Fiction and Political Philosophy: Questioning Socialism

As we have seen, the characters of *The Foundation Pit* live in an atmosphere of listlessness, fear and depression that permeates both the central and the background action of the novel. The central symbol of hope, Nastia, does not ultimately induce hope at all, nor is there any indication from the narrator that life will improve in the foreseeable future. The disturbing trends and events of the late 1920s, such as stagnant bureaucracy, catastrophic famine and a society of isolation and repression, are present at all stages of the novel. Like the characters, the plot development is mired in ambiguity, questioning and a bizarre conception of reality. It is the surreal nature of *The Foundation Pit* that makes for interesting comparison with the defamiliarisation manifest in Zamiatin's *We*. On the surface, it is *We* that holds more closely to the definition of defamiliarisation as described by M. Keith Booker: it is set far into the future in a new, unfamiliar civilisation. Yet as discussed in the previous chapter, there are so many striking similarities between Leninist Russia and the One State as to render the setting of

the novel uncomfortably familiar. *The Foundation Pit*, on the other hand, is readily identifiable as taking place in late 1920s Russia under the principles of the first Five-Year Plan. Yet the effect of the absurd events and characters of the novel is to produce an atmosphere of uncertainty and the questioning of communist ideals, though not the outright rejection of them.

To be sure, Platonov rejects the means by which the Stalinist regime goes about implementing the building of socialism. Prior to turning to writing as a full-time career, Platonov worked as an engineer for the Department of Agriculture in the mid-1920s, heading land reclamation bureaus. This period “has been seen by many as marking a radical realignment in his world view” when he was “expos[ed] to the realities of Soviet power and the difficulty of transforming the countryside” (Seifrid 7). Prior to this period, Platonov’s scientific training had “led him to adopt an optimistic view of life, for it made him aware not only of Russia’s potential for development on a large scale, but also of the small ways in which the lives of the peasants could be radically transformed with the introduction of just a few simple techniques” (Teskey 23). His transformed attitude to the realities of the collectivisation process would result in Platonov facing major repercussions when his short story “Vprok” was published in 1931. The story was a satirical portrayal of collectivisation efforts, which of course are also satirised in *The Foundation Pit*, though *The Foundation Pit*, perhaps fortunately for Platonov, was not published until the Gorbachev years.

The elements of the absurd in the novel reveal the darker side of the Stalinist government. This was a regime that believed that a large scale deportation of a particular social or ethnic group to barely hospitable regions was a legitimate and long-term

solution to social problems. It was also a government terribly bogged down in bureaucracy, as we have already seen. Platonov experienced these darker elements of the regime first-hand.

In *The Foundation Pit* there is the impression of a society trapped in a paradox of building continuously toward the future while becoming increasingly bogged down in stasis. That the emphasis of the state is on the future is undeniable. This is the position that the current generation of adults is meant to subscribe to as well. Yet it appears that the rhetoric of the regime in this push for the future differs greatly from the reality of the situation.

However, the psychological treatment of the characters' reactions to their society suggests that Platonov is reluctant to conclude that the fundamental ideals of communism are flawed, even if the steps being taken to realise it are severely flawed. Note how the characters view themselves in relation to the regime. They are willing to question their own motivations and reasoning in life, but not the motivations and reasoning of their government. And this is not simply a matter of keeping such views silent because of fear: the reader is privy to the inner world of several of the characters. Their questioning on the level of human existence never shifts to a questioning of the existence of the state. It appears that many of the characters do truly believe that, despite the gloomy circumstances of the present, one day the state will indeed implement socialism, but that they themselves are entirely unworthy of being included in such a world.

Voshchev tells Chiklin one night that he cannot sleep because "I am frightened of the perplexity of the heart, Comrade Chiklin. I myself do not know what. It keeps seeming to me as if far far away there is something special, or some luxurious

unattainable object, and I meanwhile am living sadly” (92). At the same time that Voshchev is revealing these thoughts, there is a state indoctrination session going on in the Organisational Yard (Org-Yard) of the collective farm which consists of

[t]he unproven kulaks and various penalized members of the collective – some of them had gotten there for falling into a petty mood of doubt, others because they had wept during a time of cheerfulness and kissed fenceposts in their own farmyards when they had departed for the collectivized yard, and still others for something else again... (92)

But it does not occur to Voshchev that the sadness of his being could stem from a societal system that goes so far as to dictate emotion. His restless melancholy is always internalised until the end of the novel when he blames the activist alone for his inability to find truth: “So *that’s* the reason I did not know meaning! It would seem that you, you dry soul, had sucked the blood not only from me but from the entire class as well, leaving us to wander about like quiet dregs, knowing nothing” (150).

The reality of the situation, though, is that it is not the proletarian people who are inadequate, nor any single person: it is the state itself, with its rampant bureaucracy and disregard for its people, that is inadequate. This is where the surreal meets reality. The fictional ridiculousness of the activist, for example, is the very real ridiculousness of the bureaucracy of the Soviet state. The very fact that he is not even given a name is telling of Platonov’s attitude toward the interchangeable and abundant element of bureaucratic middlemen. But the failings of the state become the failings of the people. When the activist writes his report to the party about the successful liquidation of the kulak class, he is “unable to put a comma after the word ‘kulak,’ since there was none in the directive”

(108). The inability of the activist to decide simple questions of punctuation for himself is certainly a biting criticism of the effect that Stalinist centralisation had on the efficient running of a country, where local and municipal citizens and government workers felt powerless against the Moscow Kremlin-oriented government organ. But, more damningly still, it is a biting criticism of the impact of the state on the psychology of the individual.

With other characters, no access is given to their inner turmoil until a life-altering event takes place. In the case of the activist, the reader does not know that his attachment to the regime is only superficial because it is doubtful that he even is fully conscious of it himself before his dismissal from his post. He is so busy trying to please day and night that there really is no time for him actually to contemplate his motivations and true attitude toward the Party. Whereas the activist is devoid of the ability to question and reflect right up until his final – and only – disillusionment, other characters retain greater abilities to reflect on the larger questions of life. At the other end of the psychological spectrum from the unquestioning, uncritical activist is Zhachev, who is one of only two characters who is able consistently to get away with speaking his mind. He is the exception to the society of whisperers. This could be, at least in part, due to his grotesque appearance:

Voshchev directed his attention to the fact that the cripple had no legs, one of them gone entirely and in place of the other a wooden stump. The maimed man supported himself on his crutches and on the wooden extension of his severed right leg. The cripple had no teeth at all, he had worn them to nothing on food, and on the other hand he had an enormous

face and a fat remaining torso; his brown, narrowly opened eyes kept a watch over the outer world with the greediness of deprivation, with the longing of accumulated passion, and in his mouth his gums rubbed together, pronouncing the inaudible thoughts of a legless man. (9-10)

The grotesque description notwithstanding, none of the characters seems terribly shocked by Zhachev's appearance, with Voshchev supposing simply that Zhachev must have lost his legs in the war. How then, does he get away with openly criticising and mocking anybody of his choosing, whether manual labourer or Party bureaucrat?

Parallels can be drawn between Zhachev and the Russian concept of the 'holy fool' and its secular, folkloric equivalent 'Ivan the Fool.' Dana Heller and Elena Volkova state that "On the surface, Ivan the Fool seems lazy and stupid but he is 'a chosen one'" (par. 2). On the surface, Zhachev appears grotesque, crass and dangerously talkative. But it is the very things that he says and his appearance that put him above reproach. He cannot be criticised for not fulfilling his duties as a full-fledged proletarian since he cannot perform physical labour. This leaves him free to criticise the labour of others. Also, because Zhachev is so free and consistent in his criticisms (and not only in the area of labour), people are genuinely afraid of him. Denunciations could have very serious consequences and Zhachev uses fear of denunciation to his full advantage. People are too preoccupied with trying to remain on his good side really to think about how manipulative he is and how he does not appear to have one ounce of moral decency within hi. In this sense, he truly does embody the Soviet tendency to value progress and the socialist cause over any loyalty or feelings toward people. His grotesque physical appearance is, then, entirely in keeping with his psychological being. He does not even

act out of the motive of personal gain; he simply enjoys the power he has over people to make them afraid for their livelihoods and lives. Effectively, he endorses the status quo through criticising and manipulating to his own ends. He has no idealism and no genuine belief in a better future. Whereas the activist becomes disillusioned, Zhachev never has any illusions to begin with.

Another of the characters, the digger Kozlov, is similar to Zhachev in that he threatens and denounces others freely. Like Zhachev, he gets away with this because he knows how to threaten people in a way that makes them afraid to strike back. Unlike Zhachev, he does this purely for reasons of personal gain. Unlike many of the other characters, Kozlov believes that the building of socialism will soon be complete. He worms his way into the bureaucratic echelon because his body is too weak to survive much longer as a manual labourer. But the pains he takes to ensure that he will survive into socialism ultimately fail not because his body gives out but because he is killed by a peasant in the village of the collective farm without any reason ever given as to why.

In between the unquestioning activist and the ultra-critical Zhachev, in between disillusionment and lack of illusions, are more complex characters such as Prushevskii and Voshchev. Prushevskii is a trickier character to understand than Voshchev. Whereas the reader is consistently given access to Voshchev's searching mind, access is only sporadically granted to Prushevskii's inner world. The reader learns that Prushevskii has reached such a low point as to decide to commit suicide. After Prushevskii, in his depression, has decided to kill himself, he falls asleep in a state of happiness, having made up his mind on the matter:

Before he had managed to feel the entirety of happiness, however, he awakened at three o'clock in the morning, and lighting up his apartment, sat in the midst of the light and the quiet, surrounded by the nearby apple trees, till the very dawn, and then he opened the window so as to hear the birds and the steps of those walking by. (30)

Perhaps it is finally feeling a measure of control that brings Prushevskii this happiness and the accompanying ability to recognise the beauty of nature even in a world increasingly dominated by shiny buildings. Perhaps it is the feeling of release from a life caught between two worlds of worthless intelligentsia and dedicated proletariat and a life of struggling constantly to find a meaningful place. It appears that psychological independence is necessary to his peace of mind, even if it comes at the cost of his physical existence.

Yet his decision not to commit suicide after all is reflected in a shift to an emphasis on the beauty of the material world:

Prushevskii looked quietly upon the entire foggy old age of nature and saw at its end white peaceful buildings, shining more brightly than there was light in the air. He did not know the name of this completed construction nor its purpose, though one could understand that those distant buildings were built not merely for use, but also for gladness. (70)

This shift in thinking about nature by Prushevskii is similar to D-503's in *We*, though in reverse. Upon completely abandoning his struggle to fit into an alien world, Prushevskii is able to experience the beauty of nature untainted by materialism. His return to living life on the margins of acceptable Soviet society sees him once again placing all faith in

steel and concrete. Prushevskii's unexpected about-face in his attitude toward the state and its policies appears to stem not from external factors but rather from within. It is as though his brief moment of tranquil harmony with nature renews his strength and will to survive. What Prushevskii does not appear cognizant of, however, is that this renewed vitality results from his psychological release from the pressures of Stalinist society. He returns to his former social position but in the long run is no more content than he was before because nothing about his societal standing has actually changed.

Yet Platonov, through Prushevskii's alienation, does not appear to critique the overarching concepts of communism, but rather the methods by which Stalin hoped to achieve those concepts through a complete emphasis on monumental feats of building concurrent with the marginalisation of individuals and entire social groups leaving people in a state of vacant degeneration.

Even nature appears constantly in a state of listless existence that seems to correspond with the human characters. While wandering about aimlessly following his expulsion from his first job, Voshchev has the following experience:

[W]eary of thinking, [he] lay down in the dusty grass by the road. It was hot, a daytime wind was blowing, and off in the distance village roosters were crowing – everything was devoting itself to unresponding existence – and only Voshchev kept himself apart and separate in silence. A dead fallen leaf lay alongside Voshchev's head, brought by the wind from a distant tree, and now this leaf had ahead of it resignation in the earth.

Voshchev picked up the dried leaf and hid it away in a secret compartment

of his bag where he used to keep all kinds of objects of unhappiness and
obscurity. (8)

The camaraderie of misery that Voshchev experiences with the dead leaf is symbolically important. Voshchev exists in a world where he is unable to articulate the thoughts and emotions most prevalent in his mind. Really, he exists in a world where it is impermissible to think. This puts him on a level with the leaf in that leaves are alive but not sentient. In a way, Voshchev's existence is similar even to being dead because in reality it is only his physical being that is permitted to exist in the Soviet Union. The very essence of his intellectual existence must be repressed and – at least outwardly – shifted to unquestioning devotion to the state.

I argue that Voshchev is the protagonist in the novel as he is the character first introduced to the reader and the one who most explicitly seeks the answers to the most fundamental of human questions: what is truth and what is the meaning of existence? After being fired from his factory job, Voshchev stumbles upon the barracks of the workers digging the foundation pit. Here, it appears that unquestioning labour for socialism may bring the answers he seeks. As an unnamed digger tells him, “we give existence to all organizations!” (15). Voshchev decides then to remain there and help with the digging, proving to the other labourers his proletarian right to exist, even as he continues to question internally the very meaning of this existence.

Voshchev learns to keep his melancholic state of being to himself. This is one of the ways in which the repression and the resulting isolation that permeates the Soviet Union of the novel are shown to have various social consequences. Platonov, however, through his narrator continues to allow the reader into Voshchev's mind, where his

outward appearance of a dedicated and entirely trustworthy proletarian is countered by his secret desire to live far away in an “unfenced-in distance, where the heart could beat not only from the cold air but also from the honest gladness of overcoming the whole dull substance of the soil” (150). By forcing him into silence, the state has potentially created a far more dangerous element than when Voshchev felt confident enough to question openly. Now Voshchev looks and acts like a good socialist worker, but beneath still lurks heavy turmoil.

This is the world that the characters of *The Foundation Pit* inhabit. It is surreal, grotesque, repressive and isolated. It is no wonder that they look so eagerly to the future: a dream for the perfect socialist future is an escape from the realities of a present that is horribly flawed. The futility of this escape is perhaps best indicated by the celebrations that occur following the liquidation of the kulaks. The celebrators hear music “which made one want to march forward” (125-26). The activist fetches a “radio loud speaker from which the march of the great onward drive was broadcast, and the whole collective farm, together with the foot traveller guests from the surrounding area, was joyfully stamping up and down in place” (126). It is telling that one of the rare instances of characters experiencing joy in the novel is as a result of bringing misery and destruction upon an entire social class. This liquidation is meant to bring the Soviet Union closer to its utopian goals, but nobody ever explains how.

The symbolic meaning of Nastia’s death, the understated climax of the novel, is ambiguous. I interpret it as a commentary on the necessity of distinguishing between Stalinism and socialism. Rejection of the former does not necessarily entail abandonment of the ideals of the latter, and wilful ignorance of the absurdities and cruelty of the

present makes the realisation of a better future ever more unlikely. In internalising their questions, characters such as Voshchev and Prushevskii retain their idealism and beliefs in a better future, but, ironically, they make that future all the less likely by doing so.

Nastia has simply been for them the equivalent to what the Party was for the activist: a shiny hope to latch on to in order to give their lives purpose without having to look too closely at what it is exactly that they are latching on to. Nastia's death does not result in the characters abandoning hope for the future, though their hopes were previously tied so closely to her existence. Instead, they lose themselves even further in dreams of the realisation of the socialist project. It is decided that the pit must be dug even wider and deeper with no specifications given to how much so. As the narrator states, "it was as if they wished to save themselves forever in the abyss of the foundation pit" (157). The pit has become the new Nastia. One cannot help but wonder, then, what will happen when the pit itself is finally complete – and indeed if it ever will be complete. Will the workers simply drift to one large-scale building project after another in order to give their lives a modicum of significance and meaning?

As the labourers abandon themselves more completely to unquestioning construction at the novel's end, they are further aided by the peasants of the collective farm who have decided to join the ranks of the proletariat: the madness appears to spread even further with no end in sight. In this respect, *The Foundation Pit* differs significantly from *We*. Whereas the status of the One State and the characters that inhabit it is left in little doubt in the denouement, the USSR of *The Foundation Pit* appears to be marching on at an ever more brisk pace as symbolised by the celebrations of dekulakisation at the collective farm. None of the characters has found any peace, nor has anything really been

accomplished. The questioning and aimlessness pervasive at the beginning of the novel are equally present at its end; the only difference is that at the end the characters have given themselves over more fully to acknowledging it on a personal level while ignoring it on the broader scale of Soviet existence.

The only character apart from the deceased activist who gives up on his dream to build socialism through the construction of the House of the Proletariat is Zhachev, who “crawled off to the city and never more returned to the foundation pit” (157). Again though, he has not given up on the dream for socialism, he has merely given up on himself: “You can see that I am a monstrosity of imperialism; and communism is a thing for children, and for that I loved Nastya” (157).

2.4 Comparisons and Conclusions

Platonov, unlike Zamiatin, was a communist and remained one until his death in 1951 (Seifrid 12-13). Why, then, would he author such a biting criticism of contemporary Soviet life and of its emphasis on future glories? What is the nature of his complaint against communism? This question is especially pertinent in the light of the extreme difficulties Zamiatin faced when attempting to publish *We* ten years before. That era, though repressive, was nonetheless more open than the Stalinist one. Platonov would have surely been familiar with Zamiatin’s very public shunning, as well as with that of Boris Pil’niak. The answer seems to lie in just what it is Platonov was criticising in comparison to Zamiatin.

I have argued that in *We* Zamiatin appears not only to criticise the Leninist regime but also the entire concept of communism as first outlined by Marx and Engels. He satirises the concept of both pre-and-post historic society and questions how either one could possibly exist in a state of continuous egalitarian utopia. Zamiatin's conclusion is that, short of lobotomy to disable free thought, this is an absurd and impossible dream. However, this broader questioning of overarching philosophies is not Platonov's aim: his criticisms appear to be aimed at the culture of the Five-Year Plans and Stalin's programme of building the future.

Platonov depicts a present that exists solely as a building block for the future. The government holds to this vision of the present as a mere stepping-stone because the current state of affairs is mired in repression and uncertainty. Individual characters hold to it because of their personal doubts and because of coercion and their supposedly tainted existence as "former participants in imperialism" (126). Such people as the activist choose to believe that life is getting better because it is easier – and safer – to think about a wonderful future than to contemplate the realities of a terrible present. Easier and safer as well, to limit their questioning of existence to their own individual lives without contemplating their existence within the broader societal picture. (No doubt this was also the safer route for Platonov to take.)

We ends with the future almost certainly decided: the coup against the Benefactor has been unsuccessful, I-330 is caught and tortured, and the regime goes ahead with mass lobotomies to which D-503 falls victim. *The Foundation Pit* ends with the future of the Stalinist regime in particular and socialism in the Soviet Union in general very much undecided. The finished product of a built socialist society has neither target date for

completion nor any idea of what completion actually constitutes. The implications of this vagueness for future Soviet generations is left as a question mark, though one gets the impression that these future generations, no matter how removed from the imperial era they are, will find themselves in the same position as the characters of *The Foundation Pit*: in a society marching toward an out-of-reach future while being unable to voice any murmur of dissent.

Platonov appears to suggest that Stalinist Russia inhabits a temporal no man's land. The faces will change, as will the building projects, but the Soviet Union will go nowhere. The past will drift further away but the future will never arrive. The tone of the novel does not suggest that Platonov is at all optimistic that this can change. When after Nastia's death the diggers state that they will continue digging until "every person who now lives in barracks or a clay hut [can] move into our building" (156), there is little doubt that they will actually attempt to do this. With the never-ending project of digging the foundation pit, Platonov makes clear the ridiculousness of throwing oneself into such an endeavour, just as he points out the atrocities of liquidating classes en masse because they are an undefined threat to the regime. Yet after drawing attention to these elements of Stalinist society, Platonov does not offer any solutions. One cannot help but wonder if perhaps this is because he felt just as lost and uncertain in this new world as did his characters.

Summary and Conclusions

3.1 Summary

This thesis has taken issue with Erika Gottlieb's temporal classification of two particular dystopian novels written during the regimes of Lenin and Stalin respectively. Gottlieb states that Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* is primarily a cautionary novel in the same vein as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, warning of the possibility of a future dictatorship resulting from current social trends. However, as I have demonstrated, Zamiatin was concerned first and foremost with the volatile, repressive social system of Leninist Russia and the absurd claim that post-revolutionary Russia now inhabited a post-historical epoch.

In contrast, Gottlieb contends that Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* is primarily a descriptive account of life in the Soviet Union under Stalin. However, I have shown that Platonov's central preoccupation is with questioning the merits of a present that appears to exist solely as a prelude to an ill-defined and seemingly unattainable future. Rather than taking issue with the entire philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, he criticises the programme of the first Five-Year Plan and the repressive measures deemed necessary to build a utopian socialist future.

This thesis has shown the necessity of rethinking Gottlieb's temporal categorisations of both *We* and *The Foundation Pit*. In questioning the accuracy of the categorisation of these two novels, I raise the larger question of whether it is even possible to divide dystopian literature as a genre into two broad temporal categories.

Because of the limitations of time, the thesis has been primarily concerned with the study of themes and characterisation in *We* and *The Foundation Pit*. This leaves room for future analysis of such aspects of narrative structure and style. Because of time and space limitations as well, I have focused only on two Soviet novels from Gottlieb's study, a scope that does not allow for the formulation of firm conclusions about her overall system of temporal categorisation. However, as I show in the following section, my findings on *We* and *The Foundation Pit* raise the possibility of a different approach to the study of Eastern and Central European (ECE) dystopian literature written under communist systems.

3.2 Questioning Gottlieb's Categorisation of Dystopias

In his analysis of the factors that influenced the earliest known literary manifestations of utopian ideals, Chad Walsh begins by stating: "Plato, like the Hebrew prophets, lived at a particular place and time" (37). Simple though this statement may seem, it echoes M. Keith Booker's definition of dystopian fiction set out in the introduction to this thesis: "dystopian literature generally...constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems" (3). In other words, authors are concerned primarily with the issues facing their own particular society at their own particular time. As Walsh goes on to state, Plato – an Athenian – was greatly motivated by the recent rise of Sparta to military predominance in Ancient Greece. *The Republic* served as a call to discipline and collective obligation (37-38). As I have shown, Evgenii Zamiatin in 1920 was concerned primarily with critiquing both the current state of affairs in Soviet Russia

and the overall concept of Marxism-Leninism. Ten years later, Andrei Platonov was concerned with the Stalinist regime's new programme of building a socialist future through an emphasis on the first of the Five-Year Plans.

I question whether Gottlieb was truly familiar with the times and places in which Zamiatin and Platonov wrote their novels or whether she classified them primarily on the basis of a general timeframe in which each was written – *We* before the complete solidification of Bolshevik power and *The Foundation Pit* after the rise of the Stalinist totalitarian regime. Within her eastern branch of dystopia, Gottlieb includes works within a temporal spectrum spanning more than seventy-five years from Vladimir Zazubrin's novella "The Chip" (1923) to Tadeusz Konwicki's novel *A Minor Apocalypse* (1979). This branch of the dystopian genre also encompasses a broad geographic area: from the republics of the Soviet Union to the post-World War II communist states of ECE. Can it really be possible that each of these authors wrote with the same temporal orientation in mind?

In addition to questioning the plausibility of including such a broad spectrum of literature within her Eastern, present-oriented category, I question whether her classification of *We* as being future oriented is not due in large measure to the benefit of hindsight. I have demonstrated that the Leninist period of post-revolutionary Russia was deeply troubled and repressive; I wonder whether Gottlieb would have classified the novel as a work of forewarning had she not the benefit of knowledge of future Stalinist atrocities such as the Great Terror (1936-38). My inquiry into the role of hindsight in her categorisation of *We* leads to a larger question regarding the influence of retrospective knowledge in her overall system of classification.

Walsh and Booker have each contended that dystopian fiction is primarily oriented solely toward critiquing the present, while Gottlieb's study allows for the possibility of a future concern. These differences in definition point to the existence of a disagreement in the conceptualisation of the dystopian genre. This thesis has lent more weight to Walsh's and Booker's definition of a focus on the present. In addition to questioning Gottlieb's hindsight analysis of *We*, I query as to whether Gottlieb's overall conception of future-oriented dystopian fiction is not principally a product of retrospective knowledge of Soviet and Iron Curtain state policies and actions. Such knowledge perhaps led her to see more of an orientation toward the future than there really is.

I take further issue with Gottlieb's framework for the classification of ECE dystopian literature because of its reliance on references to major works of English literature. Given the circumstances in which communist-era ECE works were written, in contrast to their Western European and North American counterparts, I believe that it would be of greater benefit to examine ECE works in their own right before they are related to English-language ones.

My suggestion for a future classificatory framework for ECE dystopian literature would be to examine these works in order to ascertain whether their authors are satirising the present government, the concept of communism as a philosophy, or both. I have shown that Zamiatin and Platonov both satirise the present government, while only Zamiatin takes issue with the very notion of communism. Such a framework would do fuller justice to the complex position in which ECE writers found themselves under communist systems of government without having to utilise English-language dystopian

fiction as a point of reference. At the same time, this proposed framework would also allow for the formulation of ideas and insights into individual authors and works in their own right.

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