

Pynchon's "Entropy":
A Russian Connection

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In 1923, Russian naval engineer Yevgeny Zamyatin published an essay which antagonized the Soviet government, an annoyance that increased greatly when Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We*, a satire on the Russian Revolution never yet published in the Soviet Union, appeared in Russian in Prague. The 1923 essay is titled "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters." In it, Zamyatin argues against complacency in government and art and for a continuing revolution, for a continual changing of forms and for a continuous receptivity to new ideas, however distasteful. I think that Thomas Pynchon was aware of Zamyatin's essay when he wrote his own story "Entropy" in 1958-59, but I must create a Kekulean chain to establish the connection.

Zamyatin, during the twenties, before he was denied access to publishing in Russia, worked for a number of Russian journals; he also taught writing and literature and continued his own literary work. In 1921, he mentioned three poems of Vladimir Nabokov's, presumably written at Cambridge, in his review of a new Russian journal in exile, *Gryadushchaya Rossiya*, published in Paris by A. N. Tolstoy.¹ In 1926, he favorably reviewed Nabokov's first novel, *Maschenko (Mary)*.² In the winter of 1931, when he was allowed to leave Russia after having written a letter to Stalin which Gorky delivered, Zamyatin met several times with Nabokov in Berlin before leaving to visit Prague and then moving to Paris.³ In April of 1937, Nabokov, who had himself moved to Paris to escape Nazi persecution in Germany, participated in a memorial service for Zamyatin after the latter's death.⁴ In 1944, corresponding with Edmund Wilson about a proposed Pocket Book anthology of Russian stories, Nabokov mentioned Zamyatin for inclusion.⁵ And now, to make the human chain complete, one of Nabokov's students at Cornell between fall 1957 and spring 1959 was Thomas Pynchon.⁶

Pynchon says in his introduction to *Slow Learner*, his collection of short stories, that his early works

were highly derivative of a variety of sources, literary and other.⁷ Mentioned by name or allusion in "Entropy" are Henry Miller, Djuna Barnes, William Faulkner, the Marquis de Sade, Henry Adams, and such scientists as Rudolf Clausius, Willard Gibbs, Ludwig Boltzmann, and Norbert Wiener. Zamyatin is not mentioned, but then, not all of Pynchon's sources are.⁸ Zamyatin had written a biography of German physicist Julius Robert von Mayer, important for his thermodynamic theories--like Clausius, Gibbs, and Boltzmann. In May of 1923, Frank C. Eve published an essay on solar energy in the Atlantic Monthly; the Russian translation appeared later in 1923 in Sovremennyy zapad, a journal which Zamyatin edited.⁹

Zamyatin's interest in entropy was rooted in his scientific background but concentrated primarily on the metaphoric. He saw in physical entropy, as Pynchon later would, a figure for social and cultural entropy, for stagnation of ideas and people, and so he cried for new forms, revolutionary literature, even if anathema to the government: "But harmful literature is more useful than useful literature, for it is antientropic, it is a means of combating calcification, sclerosis, crust, moss, quiescence" (Soviet Heretic, 109). Pynchon, as he says in the introduction to Slow Learner, had no virtuous motive in writing of entropy as Zamyatin did in urging a freer, less restricted literature, but rather a "somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline. . . . Given my undergraduate mood, Adams's sense of power out of control, coupled with Wiener's spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket" (Slow Learner, xxiii). And although several critics have seen Meatball Mulligan's efforts in the story as successfully anti-entropic or negentropic,¹⁰ Pynchon's clues in the story are decidedly pessimistic: Callisto tries to prevent the death of a bird from the hothouse aviary of his apartment by sharing his body heat with it, not realizing that all birds have higher body temperatures than humans and that rather than giving his warmth to the bird, he is draining its; in the apartment below, Meatball's refrigerator is broken, and refrigerators work by extracting heat from within the insulated box and dissipating it outside, a dis-

sipation that cannot occur if all things are the same temperature, that is, in an entropic state¹¹--and in "Entropy," the temperature is a constant 37 degrees.

The human chain and the mere word "entropy" alone could just be coincidence; what makes that very much less likely is the image of violently opening a sealed and scented apartment which concludes both works. Callisto and Aubade live in a "hot-house jungle" of "philodendrons and small fan palms: patches of scarlet, yellow, and blue laced through this Rousseau-like fantasy."

Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder. . . . He and the girl could no longer, of course, be omitted from that sanctuary. . . . What they needed from outside was delivered. They did not go out. (Slow Learner, 68; my emphasis)

At story's end, Aubade violates the apartment's hermetic seal. Her action is ambiguous: she may be trying to stir Callisto out of his lethargy; or, given Pynchon's pessimistic pose, she is more likely trying to hasten the stasis of absolute entropy.

Suddenly then, as if seeing the single and unavoidable conclusion to all this she moved swiftly to the window before Callisto could speak; tore away the drapes and smashed out the glass with two exquisite hands which came away bleeding and glistening with splinters. . . . (Slow Learner, 85)

Zamyatin, urging the need for continuing revolution, argues for violating comfortable, hermetically sealed positions:

No revolution, no heresy is comfortable or easy. For it is a leap, it is a break in the smooth evolutionary curve, a break is a wound, a pain. But the wound is necessary: most of mankind suffers from hereditary sleeping sickness, and victims of this sickness (entropy) must not be allowed to sleep, or it will be their final sleep, death.

The same disease often afflicts artists and writers: they sink into satiated slumbers. . . . And they lack the strength to wound themselves, . . . to leave their old familiar apartments filled with the scent of laurel leaves. . . . (Soviet Heretic, 112)

Both revolutionary writers see entropy in social terms, and both write of it as an enclosing apartment, sealed to the outside, which only violence will open.

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Notes

¹ Yevgeny Zamyatin. A Soviet Heretic: Essays, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg, intro. by Alex M. Shane (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), 73.

² David Packman, Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1982), 74. Cf. Simon Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Chekov: The Lesser Russian Tradition," in Nabokov, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), 8: "Zamyatin and Khodasevitch were quick to acclaim Nabokov as the most significant and stimulating of the younger Russian writers of the day."

³ Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Part (New York: Viking, 1977), 196.

⁴ Alex M. Shane, The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamiatin (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), 93-94.

⁵ Simon Karlinsky, The Nabokov-Wilson Letters (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 122. The proposed book seems never to have been published; at least, it does not appear in Andrew Field's Nabokov: A Bibliography (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), nor in other bibliographical sources I have consulted.

⁶ Joseph W. Slade, Thomas Pynchon (New York: Warner, 1974), 13; Mathew Winston, "The Quest for Pynchon," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 257.

At Cornell, Nabokov taught Slavic Literature, but also Lit 311-312, Masters of European Fiction, and Lit 325-326, Russian Literature in Translation. Which of the two courses Pynchon took is not known. Nabokov's lectures for these two courses have been published,

but I have not found Zamyatin's name in them; it is impossible to determine with what oral comments Nabokov may have embroidered these written lectures. The published texts are:

Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Bruccoli Clark, 1980).

Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures on Russian Literature, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Bruccoli Clark, 1981).

⁷ Thomas Pynchon. Slow Learner (1984; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1985), ix-xxxiv.

⁸ See Peter L. Hays and Robert Redfield, "Pynchon's Spanish Source for 'Entropy,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 16:4 (1979), 327-34.

⁹ Shane, 218, n. 81.

¹⁰ E.g., Hays and Redfield, cited above, 334, and Stephen P. Schuber, "Rereading Pynchon: Negative Entropy and 'Entropy,'" Pynchon Notes, 13 (1983), 47-60.

¹¹ I am indebted to Robert Redfield for this mechanical knowledge.