

A Soviet Heretic

Yevgeny Zamyatin

translated from the Russian by Mirra Ginsberg
Quartet Books 1991

On Literature and Art

Leon Trotsky

translated from the Russian
Pathfinder Press 1972

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1995 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Though he seems to have become almost trendy in recent years, Zamyatin is not as well known as later Soviet dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn, perhaps because he never renounced his Marxism and because his opposition to Stalinism was artistic rather than political (and perhaps because his greatest work was a science fiction novel). The critical work collected in *A Soviet Heretic*, however, shows him to be worthy of respect, both for his writing and for his personal fight for a free and open Soviet art. Zamyatin's revolutionary credentials were impeccable (he had joined the Bolsheviks before 1905) and it would have been easy for him to have toed the party line and accepted the rewards; instead he was lucky to be allowed to go into exile.

A Soviet Heretic begins with three short autobiographical sketches, followed by fifteen pieces on contemporary Russian literature (most from the decade immediately following the Revolution, with one from 1914 and one from 1933). These include general reflections on the state of Soviet literature, on the artistic differences between Moscow and St Petersburg, on Neo-Realism as the synthesis of Realism and Symbolism, and on the relationship between Revolution, Art and Science. The bulk of this work, however, consists of evaluations of particular journals, literary schools, and writers, based on critical analysis of their poems, novels and short stories. Zamyatin's criticism is forthright: mostly he is critical but constructive, but he is completely scathing when he thinks it is warranted, producing some wonderfully acerbic passages. In particular, he is not prepared to spare works simply because they are politically sound — the truly

execrable patriotic doggerel he satirises in "Paradise", for example — and is completely opposed to attempts to produce a "proletarian" art "by decree". Although I know very little about Soviet literature of that period, Zamyatin writes in such a way as to make even detailed, specific criticism of unknown works by unknown authors interesting.

Four pieces on writing — on theme and plot, on language, on the psychology of creativity, and on the "backstage" of Zamyatin's own unconscious — are among the most accessible in the collection. Though they contain references to contemporary authors and some of the language examples have been omitted as untranslatable, they retain their relevance. Of historical importance are a selection of portraits, obituaries, and critical studies of various writers (and one artist): Alexander Blok, Fyodor Sologub, Chekhov, Kustodiev, Andrey Bely, Maxim Gorky, H.G. Wells, O. Henry, and Anatole France. These also demonstrate Zamyatin's powers of description and characterisation: people I had never heard of before — Sologub, for example — come to life. (The collection is illustrated with a dozen simple but memorable portrait sketches by Yury Annenkov.)

A Soviet Heretic concludes with Zamyatin's letter of resignation from the Writers' Union (1929) and his letter to Stalin asking to be allowed to go into exile (1931). These make explicit what was already clear: Zamyatin was unwilling to make any compromises, prepared to face even Stalin in defence of his artistic freedom. (At Gorky's intercession, Zamyatin was allowed to leave Russia along with his wife; he died in Paris in 1937.)

If Zamyatin was a heretic, what words suffice to describe Trotsky, who played Satan to Stalin's God and upon whom total anathema was pronounced? As one of the titanic figures of 20th century history — as revolutionary and general, as administrator and political theorist — Trotsky needs no further claim to fame, but he was also a literary critic of note, well-regarded enough to have attracted the attention of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Siegel's introduction to *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art* opens with a vignette of him rushing from front to front in his famous armoured train, busy winning the civil war but still finding the time to read French novels.

The first half of this collection contains theoretical pieces, mostly concerned with the relationship between art and politics. In extracts from *Literature and Revolution* and *Culture and Socialism* Trotsky eschews the vulgar Marxist reduction of art to economics, writing "A work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art". He lambasts the excessive claims made on behalf of "proletarian art" and presents theoretical (Marxist) predictions of the future of art. Also included is the text of a speech defending artistic freedom before a communist party committee, complete with interjections. Written between 1923 and 1926, with references to then current literary controversies, these selections provide an interesting complement to Zamyatin's criticism from the same period. Later works, written in exile, attack the ruinous effects of totalitarianism on Soviet art and praise independent revolutionary artists such as Diego Rivera and Andre Breton.

The second part contains a selection of Trotsky's critical work: obituaries of Tolstoy, Gorky, Essenin and Mayakovsky; a broadside demolishing a book of Churchill's about Lenin and the Revolution; critical analyses of Marcel Martinet's *La Nuit*, Andre Malraux's *The Conquerors*, Silone's *Fontamara*, Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Jack London's *The Iron Heel* and Jean Malaquais' *Les Javanais*; and some miscellaneous critical jottings. These are powerful and incisive, and demonstrate Trotsky's own strengths as a writer. While his political stance is always apparent, he never comes across as tendentious; he has too great an intellect and too much appreciation for writing to be blinkered by his theoretical presuppositions.

What did Zamyatin and Trotsky think of one another? Did the two of them ever meet in Paris, where both were in exile between 1933 and 1937? Neither mentions the other anywhere in these selections, though they write about many of the same people and treat some of the same issues. They appear to have had a lot in common, not least healthy critical faculties and a willingness to speak out, and their criticism retains its freshness today. It also offers a unique insight into Soviet literature in its early, experimental period, before it was stifled by the heavy hand of Stalinist orthodoxy.

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