Science Fiction's Ethical Modes: Totality and Infinity in Isaac Asimov's Foundation Trilogy and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Mbl* (We)

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INTRODUCTION

Can genres have an intrinsic predisposition to a particular politics? Critics who ask this question of science fiction (SF) often arrive at different answers. Carl Freedman, for example, posits that SF is a “privileged and paradigmatic genre” for Marxism and critical theory, having “the deepest ... affinity with the rigors of dialectical thinking,” which would explain the genre’s attractiveness to Marxist critics such as Darko Suvin, Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson.¹ By contrast, Aaron Santesso claims the genre leans in a more regressive direction, replete with “fascist energies and ideas.”² In this chapter, I ask whether SF has a predisposition to a particular ethical outlook, exploring the dominant ethical modes of the SF genre. As with the question of politics, which resurfaces throughout this essay, how this question of ethics is answered depends on how SF is defined and, centrally, the significance given to the American SF pulp magazines, which are central to Santesso’s study but excised from Freedman’s. However, establishing a systematic definition of SF today—one that would include works generally considered SF, exclude (if desired) those of other genres, and navigate a growing body of “post-genre” or “slipstream” works that blend different conventions—would be impossible. It is thus more accurate to speak of SF’s multitude of literary traditions, which provide it with what Samuel R. Delany called SF’s “historical, theoretical, stylistic, and valiative plurality.”³ Rather than seek a single answer to this question of SF’s ethics, I will examine two classic SF works and the traditions they represent: Isaac Asimov’s original *Foundation* trilogy (1951-1953; serialised 1942-1950), one of the most

¹ Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, xv.

² Santesso, “Fascism and Science Fiction,” 156.

³ Delany, “Science Fiction and ‘Literature,’” 110.

iconic and well-loved series of the American pulps and SF's "golden age," and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Mb* (*We*, 1921), a highly influential dystopian novel from an Eastern European SF tradition. I argue that the genre SF that developed in the American pulps was dominated by themes and modes of representation best described as *totalising*, but that works such as *Mb* demonstrate the potential for SF to engage with a more ethical discourse.⁴

I thus begin by exploring Emmanuel Levinas's critique of totalisation, which he finds violent and reductive in its attempts to reduce the world and its inhabitants to finite and knowable concepts. I then turn to Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, focusing primarily on the series' representation of "psychohistory," for an example of this totalising project finding a utopian expression in pulp SF. Returning to Levinas, I then consider his writings on the idea of infinity and the disruption of totality in the face-to-face encounter, concepts integral to his understanding of ethics and responsibility. This leads into a Levinasian reading of Zamyatin's *Mb*, which demonstrates a philosophical orientation contrary of that of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, focusing on the power of the encounter with the unknowable other to break apart totalising ideologies. Finally, I will argue that the literary form of each text underpins their different ethical orientations, with Asimov's straightforwardly "pulpish" mode supporting his series' totalising approach, and Zamyatin's disruptive modernist form allowing him to present singular and unknowable characters.

TOTALITY AND ETHICS

Writing in the decades following World War II, Levinas saw the need to drastically rethink the foundations of a philosophical tradition that had been complicit in the rise of fascism. This resulted in his blistering critique of the concept of totality, which he associates with Western philosophy as a whole. He describes this philosophy as "une tentative de synthèse universelle, une réduction de toute l'expérience, de tout ce qui est sens, à une totalité où la conscience embrasse le monde, ne laisse rien d'autre hors d'elle" ("an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experiences, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaving nothing other outside of itself").⁵ Through integration into a comprehensible totality, what is *other* is stripped of its infinite alterity (its difference) in order to become *finite* and *known*—to be conquered, cognitively. Such an approach finds no resistance in objects, which can be integrated into the totality "sans jamais mettre en question la liberté du moi" ("without ever putting into question the freedom of the I").⁶ It is when this approach is extended to the other person, singular and unknowable, that its unethical orientation

⁴ I am using the term "genre SF" to refer to the Anglophone "hard" SF that originated in the American pulps in the late 1920s and crystallised in John W. Campbell Jr.'s *Astounding Science-Fiction* in the 1940s.

⁵ Levinas, *Éthique et infini*, 69; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 75.

⁶ Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence*, 168; Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 50.

is revealed. The totalisation of the Other necessitates the erasure of their alterity, dissolving them into a concept and subsuming them into a totality, making it an act of violence against the other's very otherness. Levinas thus identifies totalisation as a kind of imperialism, associating it with "toute la civilisation occidentale de propriété, d'exploitation, de tyrannie politique et de guerre" ("the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war").⁷ It is also foundational to fascism, which depends on reductive totalisation to create the neat and all-encompassing narratives and identities that would separate "us" from "them."

John Clute has argued that genre SF is governed by "two essential assumptions": first, that the world and its people "can be seen as wholly as required, and described accurately, in words;" and second, "that the 'world' ... does in the end have a story which can be told."⁸ This two-fold belief that the world is knowable and representable reflects genre SF's often dogmatic scientific positivism, which validates only empirical and conclusive scientific knowledge and would extend "hard" science approaches into areas of social science and philosophy. The result is a generic disposition to totalising themes, narratives, and literary forms. Recasting this in Levinasian terms, genre SF is committed to the idea that the universe, and the others who inhabit it, are ultimately totalisable, and that this totality can be adequately communicated in writing.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S *FOUNDATION* TRILOGY

The totalising tendency that dominated genre SF finds powerful expression in Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. Originally published as a series of short stories and novellas in *Astounding Science-Fiction* between 1942 and 1950, then re-worked into the novels *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952), and *Second Foundation* (1953), the *Foundation* trilogy remains one of the most influential series of the pulp SF era. Although it was awarded a one-off special Hugo Award for Best All-Time Series in 1966, critics have often questioned the reasons behind its enormous success.⁹ This question frames studies by James Gunn and Charles Elkins, but even Asimov asked the question when re-reading the original trilogy in preparation for *Foundation's Edge* (1982):

⁷ Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence*, 170–171; Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 53.

⁸ Clute, "Fabulation."

⁹ Asimov did not return to the *Foundation* series until the 1980s, first with the sequels *Foundation's Edge* (1982) and *Foundation and Earth* (1986), then with the prequels *Prelude to Foundation* (1988) and *Forward the Foundation* (1993). As I am most interested, here, in the generic dispositions of "golden age" SF, the scope of this study is limited to the original trilogy. Although there were minor alterations between the stories' original publications in *Astounding* and their novelised "fixups," including the addition of a new opening story ("The Psychohistorians") in *Foundation*, the novels nonetheless retain pulp SF aesthetics and remain the most influential forms of the stories.

I read [the stories] with mounting uneasiness. I kept waiting for something to happen, and nothing ever did. All three volumes, all the nearly quarter of a million words, consisted of thoughts and of conversations. No action. No physical suspense.

What was all the fuss about, then? Why did everyone want more of that stuff?¹⁰

Gunn posits that the series' success lies in its commitment to "rationalism," as evidenced in its posing, then solving, different problems.¹¹ Elkins attributes it to the deterministic "concept of history" that gives the stories an unstoppable momentum toward an apparently utopian future.¹² Although there is an element of truth in each of these conclusions, I wish to propose another, not unrelated, answer: the trilogy's success lies in its readers' attraction to the series' utopian vision of absolute totalisation—a vision of total cognitive domination over the Other and the systematic elimination of difference.

Set in the distant future, the *Foundation* trilogy chronicles the decline and fall of a galaxy-wide empire and the struggles for power and survival that follow. It focuses primarily on a Foundation of scientists, established on the galaxy's periphery by Hari Seldon, intended to survive the Galactic Empire's collapse and minimise the duration of the ensuing "dark ages." According to Seldon's plan, this First Foundation would eventually work with a Second Foundation—the nature and location of which is shrouded in mystery—to establish an even more powerful and far-reaching Second Empire. Seldon can predict and manipulate events on a galactic scale through his mastery of *psychohistory*, a discipline that transforms psychology and the social sciences into empirical sciences governed by mathematical laws. "The future isn't nebulous," we are told, "it's been calculated out by Seldon and charted."¹³ The *Foundation* stories are at pains to emphasise the concreteness and objectivity of psychohistory, "*that branch of mathematics which deals with the reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social and economic stimuli.*"¹⁴ The powers of psychohistory are demonstrated in the series' earlier stories: each time the Foundation faces a crisis, such as invasion by neighbouring kingdoms, we find that the threat was anticipated by Seldon, who orchestrated events such that the Foundation would be victorious. An apparent caveat to the powers of psychohistory is that it "cannot predict the future of a single man with any accuracy," but even this is undermined throughout the series, as Seldon and, later, the psychohistorians of the Second Foundation, prove capable of using psychohistory to manipulate specific individuals.¹⁵

¹⁰ Asimov, "Story behind the Foundation."

¹¹ Gunn, *Isaac Asimov*, 28, 44–45.

¹² Elkins, "Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' Novels," 28.

¹³ Asimov, *Foundation*, 80.

¹⁴ Asimov, *Foundation*, 16. Original emphasis.

¹⁵ Asimov, *Foundation*, 22.

In “The Mule,” however, Seldon’s plan seems to unravel when a mutant with psionic powers begins a campaign of galactic domination, eventually seizing control of the Foundation. A holographic recording of Seldon, played during the invasion, reveals that he had not predicted this turn of events. The nature of this tyrant—the Mule—is significant: as his powers are the result of a random genetic mutation, he is apparently “beyond calculation” in ways that ordinary people are not.¹⁶ In the trilogy’s final volume, however, the Mule is undone by the Second Foundation, which we find consists of psychohistorians operating in secret to re-work Seldon’s equations when new data comes to light. Even the most unique and unexpected individual, then, appears powerless against Seldon’s plan.

The deterministic nature of psychohistory has seen it likened to a vulgar form of Marxism. Early Marxism sought to expose the immutable laws governing socioeconomic development, often maintaining that the totality of social relations could be understood in terms of class relations. Georg Lukács articulated the importance of totalisation for Marxism thus: “Die Kategorie der Totalität, die allseitige, bestimmende Herrschaft des Ganzen über die Teile ist das Wesen der Methode, die Marx von Hegel übernommen und originell zur Grundlage einer ganz neuen Wissenschaft umgestaltet hat.” (“The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science.”)¹⁷ Whereas totalisation has unavoidably negative implications for Levinas and many poststructuralist thinkers, for certain strains of Marxism it is a utopian ambition, as it is throughout Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy. Donald Wollheim thus posits that “psychohistory is the science that Marxism never became,” while Andrew Milner and Robert Savage note that “Marx’s scientific socialism, yet another model for psychohistory, seems merely amateurish by comparison.”¹⁸ Although Marxists of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno, tended to be more critical of the notion of totality and the reductive aspects of “scientific socialism,” the Marxism that most widely circulated 1930s and 1940s America followed a more totalising and deterministic strain—what Elkins calls “the vulgar, mechanical, debased version of Marxism.”¹⁹ Elkins argues that Asimov “takes this brand of Marxism to its logical end,” resulting in both a “pervading fatalism” and a cynical resentment of the proletarian masses, who must always remain ignorant of Seldon’s plan.²⁰ This is demonstrated in the early story “The Encyclopedists,” where it is revealed that although Seldon established the First Foundation with the ostensible goal of creating a galactic encyclopedia that would record all human

¹⁶ Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 163.

¹⁷ Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, 55; Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, chap. 2. Original emphasis.

¹⁸ Wollheim, *Universe Makers*, 40–41; Milner and Savage, “Pulped Dreams,” 38.

¹⁹ Elkins, “Isaac Asimov’s ‘Foundation’ Novels,” 31.

²⁰ Elkins, “Isaac Asimov’s ‘Foundation’ Novels,” 34.

knowledge, this was only a ruse to facilitate his manipulation of multiple generations of scientists.²¹ This impulse—setting down in words all human knowledge—can in turn be recognised as another totalising endeavour, and one that eventually gets realised, as we know from reading excerpts from the *Encyclopedia Galactica* throughout the novels. If some form of Marxism is at play here, it would appear to be one that detests the working class and is resolutely authoritarian. And whereas the pre-determined end-point of history from certain Marxist perspectives is global communism, Seldon’s anticipated utopia is a new galaxy-wide empire.²²

Another strand of criticism sees a very different politics at work in the *Foundation* trilogy, finding within many of the tropes and dispositions of fascism and the far-right. Donald M. Hassler, for example, suggests that Asimov’s early work may have been unwittingly influenced by “fascist propaganda with its colorful art deco and its grand notions of the heroic and the large futurism of Empire and dominance.”²³ Likewise, when reviewing *Foundation’s Edge*, David Langford finds Asimov struggling with “certain implications of his original trilogy being slightly distasteful” and sounding “rather like fascism.”²⁴ Far from being intentional on Asimov’s part, I suggest that this underlying fascistic inflection is the result of a work philosophically committed to totalisation and written within the politically and socially regressive traditions of American pulp SF. Santesso argues that fascist politics underlie much genre SF, as “certain foundational tropes and traditions of the genre carry the DNA of fascism ... to the extent that even liberal, progressive authors working within the genre’s more refined strains often (inadvertently) employ fascistic tropes and strategies.”²⁵ Among the tropes identified are: the fear of alien invasion, which thinly veils nationalism and fear of the other; a militaristic inflection, coming through preoccupation with advanced weaponry and war; the presence of a heroic “strongman” leader, reflecting Nietzsche’s “Übermensch”; and a utopian technological optimism that suggests scientific progress will solve all our problems, rendering social change unnecessary.

A critical reading of Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy reveals the extent to which these tropes permeate the stories. The fear of the other, for example, is embodied in the Mule, who is dangerous *because* of his difference—his mutation. This theme of genetic purity is connected to the fascist trope of the master race, which also pervades the trilogy. Seldon is said to have selected the “youngest” and “strongest” individuals to populate his Foundations, and this rhetoric is intensified when the Second

²¹ Asimov, *Foundation*, 64.

²² As Bill Ashcroft explores in his chapter for this volume, “Postcolonial Science Fiction and the Ethics of Empire,” this imperialist drive develops out of the “colonialist orientation” of genre SF.

²³ Hassler, “Skepticism, Belief, and Asimov,” 3.

²⁴ Langford, “Mystic Star,” 540.

²⁵ Santesso, “Fascism and Science Fiction,” 139.

Foundation's psychohistorians are introduced as "a higher subdivision of Man" that is "inherently able" to master complex mathematics.²⁶ Although they are also referred to as "supermen," there is a greater and more powerful scientific "superman" at work throughout the series: the infallible Hari Seldon.²⁷ As the founder of the Foundations and perfecter of psychohistory, Seldon is worshipped across the galaxy, his name even coming to stand in for "God"—"for Seldon's sake," characters awkwardly proclaim.²⁸ Then there is the ultimate, utopian goal of Seldon and his Foundations: the establishment of a Second Empire that would achieve total galactic domination, with Second Foundation psychohistorians destined to rule as "a ready-made ruling class," and the leaders of the First Foundation providing a political infrastructure.²⁹ With the centrality of imperialism, authoritarianism, master races, and supermen, it is unsurprising that critics have long pointed to the trilogy's fascist overtones.

No doubt Asimov would be horrified by the suggestion that his work shares ideas and philosophical orientations with fascism, and I am certainly not suggesting that Asimov was himself fascist. He was, in fact, an ardent liberal, born into a Russian Jewish family that emigrated to the US when he was a boy, and his memoirs demonstrate his disdain for fascism. As a teenager in Brooklyn, he joined the New York Futurians, an anti-fascist fan organisation that wanted to recruit SF for a broader political movement. Counting among their members several high-profile SF authors, including Wollheim, Frederik Pohl, and Cyril Kornbluth, the Futurians wanted to rid pulp SF of its fascist dispositions, including its militarism, nationalism, heroic strongmen, and uncritical technological utopianism.³⁰ Asimov's early work was, however, heavily influenced by the editorial oversight of John W. Campbell Jr. and the genre SF conventions that crystallised in Campbell's *Astounding*. Asimov conceived of *Foundation* as a science-fictional retelling of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789), but Campbell played a major role in shaping the finished product. As Asimov noted in a 1979 interview:

psychohistory originated in a discussion between myself and Campbell, as so many of the things in my early science-fiction stories did. ... There is some reference to symbolic logic in the first story and that was more or less forced on me by John Campbell ... [who felt] that symbolic logic, further developed, would so clear up the mysteries of the human mind as to leave human actions predictable.³¹

²⁶ Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*, 14; Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 89.

²⁷ Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 167.

²⁸ Asimov, *Foundation*, 152.

²⁹ Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 89.

³⁰ Milner and Savage, "Pulped Dreams," 37–38; Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 244.

³¹ Asimov, "Interview," 40.

The idea of psychohistory was consistent with what Wollheim identified as Campbell's "mechanistic approach to psychology, sociology, and history," which contributed to his preoccupation with psionics and attraction to L. Ron Hubbard's dianetics.³² In Levinasian terms, this can be recognised as an overriding desire to overcome the other's unknowability. Campbell also influenced the *Foundation* stories in other ways—for example, his insistence that any representation of aliens establish human beings as superior was distasteful to Asimov, who avoided the issue by writing an all-human galaxy.³³ Asimov described Campbell as "an idiosyncratic conservative ... somewhere to the right of Attila the Hun in politics," but remained one of his most outspoken apologists.³⁴ Yet Campbell's far-right politics and racist tendencies were well known,³⁵ with Michael Moorcock calling him "an out-and-out fascist," under whose reign *Astounding* became "a crypto-fascist deeply philistine magazine."³⁶ Asimov acknowledged that his relationship with Campbell and eagerness to be published in *Astounding* meant he "caught the Campbell flavor," but failed to realise that this flavour, which infused much pulp SF, was often fascist in its orientation, and violent and totalising in its approach to the Other.³⁷

Becoming preoccupied with the trilogy's politics, however, can distract from the underlying philosophy that gives rise to its pseudo-Marxist determinism and fascist strains: commitment to the project of totalisation. Asimov did not set out to write communist or fascist propaganda, but he was writing strictly and unquestioningly within the West's totalising philosophical framework. This goes deeper than politics, right to the core of ethics—to the encounter with, and representation of, the Other. Seldon's psychohistory is totalisation *par excellence*. No human individual can stand in the way of this mathematical system in which "all is taken into account."³⁸ Thus Damien Broderick identifies Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy as "the most explicit instance" of genre SF's tendency toward "the bleakest mechanical determinism and ... the obliteration of the volitional subject."³⁹ This obliteration is presented in utopian terms, as the reader is invited to celebrate every success of Seldon's plan and behold the incredible power of psychohistory. But the ethical implications of a society based on totalisation are apparent: the individual's alterity is erased and they become only subservient proletarian

³² Wollheim, *The Universe Makers*, 77.

³³ Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 276.

³⁴ Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 196.

³⁵ Asimov, for example, was outraged when Campbell added racist passages to his story "Homo Sol" (1940) upon its publication in *Astounding*. Campbell's racist politics come to the fore in his editorials of the 1960s, which Wollheim describes as being "about how there really are superior and inferior people." Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 275; Wollheim, *The Universe Makers*, 78.

³⁶ Moorcock, Interview, 28; Moorcock, "Starship Storm Troopers," 42.

³⁷ Asimov, "Interview," 35.

³⁸ Asimov, *Foundation*, 19.

³⁹ Broderick, *Reading by Starlight*, 28.

workers; oppressive social hierarchies assert themselves; authoritarian control is handed to “strongman” leaders and master races; and imperialism and colonisation are glorified. Although such totalising themes dominated pulp SF, and indeed continued to influence the genre SF that followed, SF nonetheless has enormous potential to disrupt totalising approaches and explore ethical encounters with others—a potential that I will explore in relation to Zamyatin’s *Mb*.

INFINITY AND THE FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER

Let us briefly return to Levinas to consider how totalisation can be disrupted by infinity and the face-to-face encounter. In *Totalité et Infini (Totality and Infinity)* (1961), Levinas posits that the idea of infinity is engendered in me by the face of the other person, which “détruit à tout moment, et déborde l’image plastique qu’il me laisse” (“at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me”).⁴⁰ The face, here, is not reducible to what one can see and touch, but is every aspect the other’s countenance and speech, their very presence. In its expression, the face can break apart any image formed of it: “Le visage est présent dans son refus d’être contenu. Dans ce sens il ne saurait être compris, c’est-à-dire englobé.” (“The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed.”)⁴¹ The face-to-face encounter attests to the other’s radical separation from the self and their “dimension de l’intériorité” (“dimension of interiority”), which “refuse au concept et résiste à la totalisation” (“declines the concept and withstands totalization”).⁴² This refusal to be contained, wherein the Other always exceeds the idea I hold of them, gives rise to the idea of infinity—that which cannot be subsumed into the finite totality.

For Levinas, ethics originates in this calling into question of my totalising powers. The face-to-face encounter demands that we consider the Other in their irreducibility, acknowledging their “singularité absolue” (“absolute singularity”) as “irreprésentable” (“unrepresentable”).⁴³ As Diane Perpich notes, the face is beyond all representation: “*there is simply no way to do justice to the singularity of a face in a description.*”⁴⁴ This presents a problem for literature, for how can we write something that is necessarily beyond representation? For SF, which often deals with truly alien and out-of-this-world others, the problem is even greater. Too often, genre SF allowed its totalising orientation to extend to these unrepresentable Others, which were described in clear and unambiguous prose. Ursula K. Le Guin took pulp SF to task for its failure to develop complex characters, finding the genre replete with “captains and troopers, and aliens and maidens and scientists, and emperors and robots and

⁴⁰ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 43; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50–51.

⁴¹ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 211; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

⁴² Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 51; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 57.

⁴³ Levinas, *En découvrant l’existence*, 225; Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 116.

⁴⁴ Perpich, *Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 47, 49. Original emphasis.

monsters—all signs, all symbols, statements, effigies, allegories, everything between the Stereotype and the Archetype”—but never singular, unknowable characters.⁴⁵ Thus we find Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy filled with character types, but devoid of fully formed characters.

Other SF traditions, however, found ways to utilise the intellectual and theoretical resources of SF to undertake more ethical explorations of otherness. When examining the “unknowability thesis” in SF, Fredric Jameson points to the Polish author Stanisław Lem, whose *Solaris* (1961) offers a compelling study in “the impossibility of understanding the Other”—a position Jameson finds “implacably negative and skeptical,” albeit with a “concomitant ethical imperative.”⁴⁶ *Solaris* focuses on the unknowability of the alien other—the living ocean of Solaris, which scientists try and fail to comprehend—and reveals something of the radical alterity of the human other in the process. Zamyatin’s *MbI*, however, foregrounds the face-to-face encounter and its power to disrupt totalising philosophies and instil a sense of ethics and responsibility. So I turn now to Zamyatin, whose unknowable characters in *MbI* led Le Guin to proclaimed him “the author of the first science fiction novel.”⁴⁷

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN’S *MbI*

Whereas Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy envisages a utopian potential for the mathematically rigorous totalisation of all things, Zamyatin’s *MbI* offers a dire assessment of a society governed by reductive mathematical formulae and the erasure of otherness. Written in Russia between 1919 and 1921, *MbI* did not see publication in the Soviet Union until 1988, well after the author’s death in Paris in 1937. The novel was first published in English translation in 1924, with a full Russian-language version not appearing in print until 1952.⁴⁸ It now stands alongside Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as one of the most influential dystopian novels of the twentieth century. Although Huxley’s and Orwell’s novels each contain themes present in *MbI*—the question of happiness versus freedom, for example, and wariness of authoritarian politics—Zamyatin’s text offers a more concerted attack on scientific positivism and the totalising impulse. Indeed, Daniel Walker identifies *MbI* as one of the earliest SF novels to clearly oppose scientific positivism, as it presents “a dramatization of what happens when an entire population becomes ruled by scientism,

⁴⁵ Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown,” 20. This essay is a response to Virginia Woolf’s 1924 essay on character, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

⁴⁶ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 107, 108, 116.

⁴⁷ Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown,” 18. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Even then, this Russian edition was printed in New York by Chekhov Publishing House. Curtis, *Englishman from Lebedian*, 4.

when a state practices scientism as its religion, creed, and political philosophy.”⁴⁹ The rationalism that, according to Gunn, provided *Foundation* with its sense of wonder, here takes on purely negative connotations, with wonder instead being found in the *irrational*.

Mz is set in the One State, a totalitarian metropolis that formed after a devastating Two-Hundred Year War. The One State is separated from the outside world, including all plants and animals, by the Green Wall, a massive glass wall encompassing the city. Everything about life in the One State is strictly regulated and reduced to comprehensible formulae. Workers are referred to as “ciphers” (“нумера,” or “numbers”), having alphanumeric designators instead of proper names. The Table of Hours governs each cipher’s movements and activities, with every minute of the day accounted for, from eating, working, and resting, to their mandatory physical regimen at the Taylor Exercise Hall—only two Personal Hours each day remain. Even love, we are told, has been “побеждена, то есть организована, математизирована” (“conquered, i.e., organized and mathematicized”) as ciphers can acquire tickets for sexual encounters with any other cipher they choose.⁵⁰ Everything in the One State is designed to erase individuality. Even personal accommodations are not only uniform, but made entirely of glass, ensuring full transparency into others’ lives and aiming at the eradication of interiority.

Mz follows D-503, a senior mathematician and engineer for the One State, who sees his rigid, mechanised society as a utopia of efficiency and rationality. D-503 is the designer of the Integral, a spaceship intended to bring “математически безошибочное счастье” (“mathematically infallible happiness”) (One State ideology) to the universe.⁵¹ The novel begins with D-503 in loyal service to the One State, subscribing wholeheartedly to its ideals and looking forward to the day that Personal Hours are eradicated from the Table of Hours. He finds value in his work as a mathematician specifically for its totalising objectives, declaring that

работа высшего, что есть в человеке, — рассудка — сводится именно к непрерывному ограничению бесконечности, к раздроблению бесконечности на удобные, легко переваримые порции — дифференциалы. В этом именно божественная красота моей стихии — математики.

(the worthiest human efforts are those intellectual pursuits that specifically seek the uninterrupted delimiting of infinity, the reduction of infinity into convenient, easily digestible portions—into differentials. The divine beauty of my medium—mathematics—is exactly that.)⁵²

This attempted integration of the infinite into a finite totality provides the philosophical foundation of D-503’s dystopian society. As Natasha Randall notes, “mathematics travels through *We* almost as an

⁴⁹ Walker, “Going after Scientism,” 159.

⁵⁰ Замятин, *Мз*, chap. 6; Zamyatin, *We*, 21.

⁵¹ Замятин, *Мз*, chap. 1; Zamyatin, *We*, 3.

⁵² Замятин, *Мз*, chap. 12; Zamyatin, *We*, 58.

allegorical supertext.”⁵³ Unlike Asimov’s trilogy, which praises psychohistory for its mathematical rigour, Zamyatin’s novel offers a critique of the impulse toward finality and certainty that mathematics is taken to represent. The disruption to D-503’s totalising approach comes in his encounters with others, which ultimately lead him to betray the One State and join a resistance movement, the МЕРНИ.

The most consequential of these encounters is with I-330, a woman D-503 meets on a regulated walk with his occasional lover, O-90. Upon meeting I-330, D-503 is disturbed by his inability to quantify (and totalise) her the way he would anything or anyone else: “какой-то странный раздражающий икс, и я никак не могу его поймать, дать ему цифровое выражение” (“there was a kind of strange and irritating X to her, and I couldn’t pin it down, couldn’t give it numerical expression”).⁵⁴ True to the mathematical language that infuses *Мы*, I-330 is, to D-503, an “X,” an *unknown*, and his subsequent encounters with her leave him distressed at the *irrationality*, the “ $\sqrt{-1}$,” that has entered his life.⁵⁵ In one of these early encounters, D-503 is particularly troubled by I-330’s inaccessible interiority. He describes her eyes lowering “как шторы” (“like blinds”) and later laments: “Там, за шторами, в ней происходило что-то такое – не знаю что, что выводило меня из терпения” (“behind those blinds, inside her, something was going on—I don’t know what—and it exasperated me”).⁵⁶ These encounters mark the beginnings of the breakdown of D-503’s faith in the knowability of things and the validity of extending his scientific mode of thinking to the Other.

It is also through conversations with I-330 that D-503 finds his dependence on uniformity and finality drawn into question. Upon finding that МЕРНИ is planning a revolution—the hijacking of the Integral—D-503 is horrified. Having been taught the revolution that created the One State was final—the last revolution—D-503 finds the idea of another incomprehensible. I-330, however, appeals to his mathematical reasoning: “назови мне последнее число” (“What is the final number?”), she asks, to which he must concede, “число чисел – бесконечно” (“the number of numbers is infinite”). Likewise, I-330 explains, “Последней [революцию] – нет, революции – бесконечны. Последняя – это для детей: детей бесконечность пугает, а необходимо – чтобы дети спокойно спали по ночам” (“there isn’t a final [revolution]. Revolutions are infinite. Final things are for children because infinity scares children and it is important that children sleep peacefully at night”).⁵⁷ When D-503 objects, arguing that the One State will bring uniformity throughout the universe, I-330 emphasises the importance of *difference*: “равномерно, повсюду! ... Тебе, математику, – разве не ясно, что

⁵³ Randall, “Introduction,” xvi–xvii.

⁵⁴ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 2; Zamyatin, *We*, 8.

⁵⁵ As Randall notes, Zamyatin quite pointedly describes the square root of negative one as *иррациональных* (*irrational*), rather than imaginary, to set it at odds with One State’s emphasis on rationality. Randall, “Introduction,” xvii.

⁵⁶ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 6; Zamyatin, *We*, 25–26.

⁵⁷ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 30; Zamyatin, *We*, 153.

только разности – разности – температур, только тепловые контрасты – только в них жизнь” (“Uniform, all over! ... To you, a mathematician, isn’t it clear that it’s the differences—the differences—between temperatures, it’s in thermal contrast that life lies”).⁵⁸ As well as illustrating the importance of difference in bringing progressive social change, this also serves as a metaphor for the infinite difference between individuals, thwarted by the One State’s search for uniformity.

Soon after meeting I-330, D-503 finds himself facing similar disruptive encounters with those closest to him, including O-90 and his friend R-13. “Милая О... Милый R...” (“Sweet O... Dear R...”), D-503 laments, “в нем есть тоже что-то, не совсем мне ясное” (“there is something about them that is ... not totally clear to me”).⁵⁹ During a conversation in which R-13 begins to voice, obliquely, his dissatisfaction with the One State, D-503 imagines his head as an impenetrable, opaque suitcase: “Я смотрел на его крепко запертый чемоданчик и думал: что он сейчас там перебирает – у себя в чемоданчике?” (“I watched his tightly locked little suitcase and thought: what is he now mulling over in that little suitcase of his?”)⁶⁰ D-503, however, avoids engaging with R-13 further, opting to preserve his image of him as a loyal member of the Institute of State Poets and Writers. He then takes solace that he will later be visited by O-90: “Завтра придет ко мне милая О, все будет просто, правильно и ограничено, как круг” (“Tomorrow, sweet O will come to me and everything will be as simple, correct, and delimited as a circle”).⁶¹ But this kind of thinking cannot withstand the face-to-face encounter. When he finally sees O-90 again, D-503 is taken aback by what he perceives as her irrationality—her love of him, jealousy of I-330, and desire to bear an unsanctioned child. His assumptions about O-90 and R-13—the mental images he held of them—turn out to be wholly inadequate, revealing the limits of his totalising powers.

“La relation éthique” (“The ethical relationship”), states Levinas, “met en question le moi” (“puts the I in question”).⁶² Although Levinas’s writings on ethics and the face appear limited to encounters with humans, a clear example of this calling into question in *Мы* comes in D-503’s face-to-face encounter with an animal. In the One State, all animals have been exiled to the “диким зеленым океаном” (“wild, green ocean”) beyond the Green Wall—to the “неразумного, безобразного мира деревьев, птиц, животных” (“irrational, chaotic world of the trees, birds, animals”).⁶³ Later, as he walks alongside the Green Wall, trying to clear his mind of X’s and $\sqrt{-1}$ ’s, D-503 finds himself face-to-face with one of these wild animals:

⁵⁸ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 30; Zamyatin, *We*, 154.

⁵⁹ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 8; Zamyatin, *We*, 40.

⁶⁰ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 8; Zamyatin, *We*, 39.

⁶¹ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 12; Zamyatin, *We*, 58.

⁶² Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 213; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

⁶³ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 17; Zamyatin, *We*, 83.

Сквозь стекло на меня – туманно, тускло – тупая морда какого-то зверя, желтые глаза, упорно повторяющие одну и ту же непонятную мне мысль. Мы долго смотрели друг другу в глаза – в эти шахты из поверхностного мира в другой, заповерхностный. И во мне копошится: “А вдруг он, желтоглазый, – в своей нелепой, грязной куче листьев, в своей невычисленной жизни – счастливее нас?”

(Through the glass—foggy and dim—I saw the stupid muzzle of some kind of beast, his yellow eyes, obstinately repeating one and the same incomprehensible thought at me. We looked at each other for a long time, eye to eye, through the mineshaft from the surface world to that other world, beyond the surface. But a thought swarmed in me: what if he, this yellow-eyed being—in his ridiculous, dirty bundle of trees, in his uncalculated life—is happier than us?)⁶⁴

This encounter has D-503 immediately concerned with the animal’s inaccessible interiority, as he was with I-330, O-90 and R-13, even making him question the value of his own life. For Levinas, this drawing-into-question of the self is core to the face-to-face encounter, founding our responsibility to and for the Other.

These encounters all lead D-503 to a more ethical orientation toward the Other. According to Levinas, the face of the Other, in calling me into question, “me rappelle à mes obligations et me juge” (“summons me to my obligations and judges me”).⁶⁵ It is this summons to responsibility that establishes the other person as my neighbour and makes the face-to-face encounter distinctly *ethical*. Over the course of the novel, D-503 gradually aligns himself with МЕРФИ, a resistance movement seeking the liberation of ciphers from their restrictive, mechanised lives and a return to nature. An example of D-503’s sense of responsibility for the Other comes toward the end of the novel in his final encounter with O-90. Having previously avoided situations that would force him to empathise with others, here D-503 slows down and attempts to show compassion for the desperate O-90, despite his prevailing confusion, offering to help her find a way to escape the One State so she and her child can live together.

Such an ethical orientation means breaking with totalising modes of thinking and embracing the irreducible alterity of others and, therefore, the idea of infinity. At the end of the novel, with riots having broken out across the city, D-503 encounters an exasperated fellow mathematician who is desperate to find comfort in the finite in the tumult of revolution:

успокойтесь ... Все это вернется, неминуемо вернется. Важно только, чтобы все узнали о моем открытии. Я говорю об этом вам первому: я вычислил, что бесконечности нет! ... Да, да, говорю вам: бесконечности нет. Если мир бесконечен, то средняя плотность материи в нем должна быть равна нулю. А так как она не нуль – это мы знаем, – то, следовательно, Вселенная – конечна ...

⁶⁴ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 17; Zamyatin, *We*, 83.

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 237; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.

Вы понимаете: все конечно, все просто, все — вычислимо; и тогда мы победим философски, — понимаете?

(Be calm. ... Everything will return, inevitably return. The only important thing is that everyone finds out about my discovery. I am telling you this first: I have calculated that there is no infinity! ... If the world is infinite—then the average density of matter in it must be exactly zero. And since it is not zero—this we know—then, consequently, the universe is finite ... You understand: everything is finite, everything is simple, everything is calculable. Then we will conquer, in the philosophical sense—do you understand?)⁶⁶

Faced with the unthinkable—a mass uprising against the One State—this man seeks comfort in the idea that everything is finite and knowable. This prevents him from encountering the others around him in an ethical way, facing their infinite alterity and responsibility. Such totalising modes of thinking, however, no longer satisfy D-503, who asks: “а там, где кончается ваша конечная Вселенная? Что там — дальше?” (“Where does your finite universe end? What is there—and what comes next?”)⁶⁷ If finality is for children, D-503 has grown up.

Writing from within the increasingly mechanised social structures of post-revolutionary Russia, Zamyatin, unlike Asimov, was all too aware of the oppressive and authoritarian tendencies of a society governed by totalising approaches to the Other. As Randall notes, *Mb* responds quite directly to its context of War Communism, rapid industrialisation, and post-revolutionary utopianism. For example, Russia’s Proletarian Culture movement, established in 1917 “to engender a new proletarian cultural universal,” is an obvious source of the One State’s approach to art and the individual.⁶⁸ But *Mb* is not simply an attack on Zamyatin’s contemporary Russia and reading it as an anti-socialist allegory is overly reductive. Zamyatin was a socialist, after all, and an active Bolshevik during his student days, although he was deeply critical of what he saw as the brutal authoritarianism of the Bolshevik leadership after the 1917 October Revolution.⁶⁹ The totalising systems critiqued in *Mb* also extend far beyond Zamyatin’s Russian context. A clear progenitor of the One State’s mechanisation, for example, is Taylorism, the system of scientific management developed in the US by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the late-nineteenth century, directly referenced in *Mb*’s Taylor Exercise Hall. The One State’s glass structures reflect London’s Crystal Palace, an iron and glass megastructure created to host the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851. As Peter G. Stillman notes, by Zamyatin’s time the Crystal Palace had come to symbolise “Western rationalism’s clarity, transparency, and ability

⁶⁶ Замятин, *Mb*, chap. 39; Zamyatin, *We*, 201.

⁶⁷ Замятин, *Mb*, chap. 39; Zamyatin, *We*, 201.

⁶⁸ Randall, “Introduction,” xiii.

⁶⁹ Curtis, *Englishman from Lebedian*, 13.

to use modern technology to conquer nature and satisfy human needs.”⁷⁰ The One State thus reflects the trajectories of all modern cities, whether communist or capitalist, toward the destruction of individuality, mechanisation of society, and authoritarianisation of politics, making *Mbz* a timeless cautionary dystopia about the ethical implications of a society governed by totalisation and the cognitive conquering of the other.

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE UNENGLOBABLE LITERARY SPACE

In both Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy and Zamyatin’s *Mbz*, the text’s approach to totalisation and the Other is mirrored in its written form, highlighting the ethical significance of different modes of literary representation. Reflecting on his *Foundation* trilogy, Asimov boasted: “I generally manage to tie up all the loose ends into one neat little bow-knot at the end of my stories, no matter how complicated the plot might be.”⁷¹ This tendency toward closure is evident throughout the *Foundation* stories, with each developing a problem and then solving it (usually by invoking psychohistory), carefully explaining this solution to the reader in a comprehensive summation akin to a classic detective story’s parlour room scene. The trilogy ends, for example, with an extended (and somewhat contrived) conversation between the leader of the Second Foundation and his student, in which the true goings-on of earlier events are clearly laid out for the reader. Narrative comprehensibility is also reinforced by the trilogy’s seemingly omniscient and objective third-person narrator, one-dimensional characters, adherence to linear narrative structures, and clear and unambiguous writing. Much of this was required by Campbell, who controlled form as well as content.⁷² Gunn describes Asimov’s writing as “rarely more than adequate,” while Elkins calls it “a watered-down idiom of ... the banal, pseudo-factual style of the mass-circulation magazines.”⁷³ There is no literary experimentation here, no glimpse of what Roland Barthes might call “writerly” form—this was never Asimov’s goal: “I don’t want to write poetically,” he explained, “I only want to write clearly.”⁷⁴ In this, Asimov adheres to the conventions of genre SF, which typically opts for a realist literary form to communicate scientific ideas and deliver the closed narratives its readers expect.

Concern for narrative’s complicity in totalisation underlies Levinas’s antipathy toward popular literature. In “La réalité et son ombre” (“Reality and Its Shadow”) (1948), Levinas accuses art of being “d’inhumain et de monstrueux” (“inhuman and monstrous”) for its attempted reduction of the Other

⁷⁰ Stillman, “Rationalism,” 161.

⁷¹ Asimov, “Story behind the Foundation.”

⁷² See, for example: Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 197.

⁷³ Gunn, *Isaac Asimov*, ix; Elkins, “Isaac Asimov’s ‘Foundation’ Novels,” 26.

⁷⁴ Barthes, *S/Z*; Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 313.

to static, lifeless images.⁷⁵ Literature does not escape this condemnation, for Levinas is adamant that narrative “n’ébranle pas la fixité de l’image” (“does not shatter the fixity of images”), describing characters in a novel as “êtres enfermés, prisonniers” (“beings that are shut up, prisoners”), forever unable to escape their clearly delimited fates.⁷⁶ This critique has particular resonance for the deterministic *Foundation* stories, in which everything happens “by psycho-historical necessity.”⁷⁷ This fixity is the totalising dimension of narrative that does violence to the Others it represents—as Levinas writes in *Autrement qu’être* (*Otherwise than Being*) (1974): “L’inénarrable! – autrui perdant dans la narration son visage de prochain” (“The unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration”).⁷⁸ It is precisely this immobilisation of the face in representation that Levinas finds monstrous. Yet the kind of narrative Levinas critiques is distinctly a straightforward, realist narrative form—it is irreversible, settled, closed; its characters knowable; its language transparent. No other form would have worked in Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy, at least not without shaking the philosophical foundations that underpin psychohistory.

In Zamyatin’s *Мы*, however, an open and disruptive literary form complements the text’s focus on infinity, irrationality, and the face-to-face encounter. *Мы* is presented as the diary of D-503, written to be placed aboard the Integral and carry his description of the “математически совершенной жизни Единого Государства” (“mathematically perfect life of the One State”) to alien life.⁷⁹ Early records (chapters) are rigid and mechanised, but they become fragmentary and disordered as the narrator’s totalising worldview breaks down. The keywords (or *конспекта*, abstract) that open and organise each record start out clear and descriptive, but soon D-503 is unable to categorise his experiences—the keywords of record 27 read: “Никакого конспекта – нельзя” (“No Keywords of Any Kind are Possible”).⁸⁰ D-503’s intention is to record events with absolute clarity and certainty, and when he finds himself troubled by unknowns, he believes he is “обязанным” (“duty bound”) as a writer, to explain them:

вообще неизвестное органически враждебно человеку, и homo sapiens – только тогда человек в полном смысле этого слова, когда в его грамматике совершенно нет вопросительных знаков, но лишь одни восклицательные, запятые и точки.

⁷⁵ Levinas, “La réalité et son ombre,” 786; Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141.

⁷⁶ Levinas, “La réalité et son ombre,” 783–784; Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 139.

⁷⁷ Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*, 61.

⁷⁸ Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 211; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 166.

⁷⁹ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 1; Zamyatin, *We*, 4.

⁸⁰ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 27; Zamyatin, *We*, 134.

(all unknowns are ... man's natural enemy. *Homo sapiens* is only man, in the fullest sense of the word, when his grammar contains no question marks, only exclamation marks, commas, and periods.)⁸¹

This kind of unambiguous prose and narrative closure, however, proves impossible in a world of unknowable Others. At the end of the novel, D-503 is returned to the service of the One State having forcibly received the “Великой Операции” (“Great Operation”), a lobotomy-like procedure that removes an individual’s “фантазия” (“imagination”), or what D-503 calls his “душа” (“soul”). D-503 is thus confident that the МЕРНИ uprising will fail, but the One State is in retreat and the revolution seems to have popular support. Although D-503 provides the final record with the keywords “Факты” (“Facts”) and “Я уверен” (“I Am Certain”), this certainty is ultimately withheld from the reader.⁸² As Zamyatin wrote in 1923, “этого ограниченного, неподвижного мира нет, он — условность, абстракция, нереальность. И потому реализм — нереален” (the “finite, fixed world ... is a convention, an abstraction, an unreality. And therefore Realism—be it ‘socialist’ or ‘bourgeois’—is unreal”).⁸³ “Ах, если бы и в самом деле это был только роман” (“If only this was really some sort of novel”), D-503 laments, but such a realist form cannot be maintained when faced with infinity and the untotalisable Other.⁸⁴ Zamyatin made this dense writerly form feel essential: “Старых, медленных, дормезных описаний нет: лаконизм” (“The old, slow, creaking descriptions are a thing of the past”), he wrote soon after completing *Мы*, “но огромная заряженность, высоковольтность каждого слова ... и синтаксис -- эллиптичен, летуч” (“every word must be supercharged, high-voltage. ... And hence, syntax becomes elliptic, volatile”).⁸⁵ Indeed, *Мы* achieves an superfluity of meaning in its prose, providing the reader with a text open to myriad interpretive lenses.

The ambiguity and openness of *Мы* resonates strongly with the kind of writing Levinas values, and even attributes ethical qualities. “Reality and Its Shadow” ends with Levinas acknowledging the value of modern(ist) literature, which he notes achieves an awareness of the limitations of literary representation, and in an earlier essay on Proust he praises the openness and indeterminacy of *In Search of Lost Time*.⁸⁶ Levinas finds the clearest demonstration of literature’s potential to disrupt totalisation in the fragmentary and often opaque writing of Maurice Blanchot, which he claims opens up the “non-englobable espace littéraire” (“unenglobable literary space”) through its self-interruption and resistance to closure.⁸⁷ To use the language of Levinas’s later work, this is literature that strives to *unsay* its Said,

⁸¹ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 21; Zamyatin, *We*, 104.

⁸² Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40; Zamyatin, *We*, 202.

⁸³ Замятин, “О литературе”; Zamyatin, “On Literature,” 112.

⁸⁴ Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 18; Zamyatin, *We*, 91.

⁸⁵ Замятин, “О литературе”; Zamyatin, “On Literature,” 111.

⁸⁶ Levinas, *Proper Names*, 100.

⁸⁷ Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, 47; Levinas, *Proper Names*, 151.

returning discourse to the infinitely ambiguous—and infinitely meaningful—realm of the Saying. Similarly, when Zamyatin writes of disruptive face-to-face encounters, these are realised through a form that itself challenges totalising modes of thinking, with the literary form becoming commensurate to the ethical content it seeks to convey.

CONCLUSION

The drive to cognitively conquer the unknown, and the unknowable Other, is at the core of both Asimov's utopian vision in the *Foundation* trilogy and Zamyatin's dystopian One State in *Mb*. Asimov embraced the formal and thematic conventions of pulp SF, particularly those of Campbell's *Astounding*, and the *Foundation* trilogy illustrates how, when an author is working within a genre's narrow confines, a particular politics—and a particular *ethics*—can assert itself. The totalising imperative of Western philosophy is central to Asimov's trilogy and out of it arises an inflection toward oppressive, totalitarian politics, leading to accusations of vulgar Marxism on the one hand and outright fascism on the other. The unsettling presence of fascist tropes in the series reveals the ethical implications of accepting, uncritically, a genre's tropes, themes, and literary modes.

Responding to very different socio-historical circumstances, Zamyatin explores the breakdown of totalising approaches in *Mb*, actively avoiding the kind of generic obligations at play in Asimov's work to create a truly singular text about the irreducible singularity of the Other. The formula-driven and eminently rational philosophy of D-503 cannot withstand the face-to-face encounter with the Other (whether human or animal), which thus becomes the irrational *par excellence*. Realised through a complex and challenging literary form overflowing with interpretive possibilities, *Mb* achieves a more ethical mode of representation while exploring the violence of a society governed by the erasure of alterity. Unknowability has long been a theme of Eastern European SF and, since the 1960s and 1970s, the SF of the West, with today's broad SF field being much more open to writing that challenges the tropes and traditions of earlier, more restrictive notions of genre. Zamyatin's *Mb* thus demonstrates the enormous potential of SF to open up an unenglobable literary space and critique the totalising ideology of an unethical, dystopian future.

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