THE PORTABLE

Twentieth-Century RUSSIAN READER

Edited, with an
Introduction and Notes, by
Clarence Brown

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Evgeni Zamyatin

(1884–1937)

The fact that Zamyatin remains to this day only grudgingly rehabilitated in his native country is testimony to the pain that he must cause tyrants and bureaucrats of any persuasion, left or right. In his theoretical as well as in his imaginative works, Zamyatin promulgated with monomaniacal passion his *idée maîtresse:* life, energy, heresy versus death, entropy, dogma. The notion of never-ending revolution, the duty to dissent, the primacy of messy, awkward, natural human inclinations over the neatness of sanitary government regulations—these are the positions not of an economic, military, or political enemy, but of an ideological enemy, the most dangerous of all.

Zamyatin was that rarest of creatures, a practical man of the world, a qualified engineer and scientist, and at the same time one of Russia's most gifted theoreticians and practitioners of the art of writing. The comparison with Vladimir Nabokov (see p. 363) is irresistible. Zamyatin's original passion for the opposition at the base of much of his thought (energy versus entropy) seems to have grown out of his biography of Julius Robert von Mayer, the father of thermodynamic theory. His ideas appear with his customary succinct force in the most famous of his essays, "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and So On." *We,* his masterpiece and the inspiration for Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World,* depicts a facet of the antiutopia where entropy (in social if not in physical terms) has reached perfection. The short story

"The Cave" reveals Zamyatin's human sympathy for two helpless and decent old people whose lack of that form of thermal energy supplied by a small iron stove drives them to crime and suicide. As in much of his work, two historical eras are depicted with meaningful simultaneity: The desolate capital of Russia in the starved aftermath of revolution and civil war is painted as though it were the Ice Age habitat of prehuman troglodytes.

THE CAVE

Glaciers, mammoths, wastes. Black, nocturnal cliffs, vaguely like houses; in the cliffs—caves. And there is no telling what creature trumpets at night on the rocky path among the cliffs and, sniffing the path, raises clouds of powdered snow. It may be a gray-trunked mammoth, it may be the wind, and it may be the wind is nothing but the glacial roar of some supermammoth. One thing is clear: it is winter. And you must clench your teeth tightly to keep them from chattering, and you must split wood with a stone ax, and each night carry your fire from cave to cave, deeper and deeper, and huddle closer in more of those shaggy hides.

At night among the cliffs where ages ago stood Petersburg, a gray-trunked mammoth was roaming. And muffled up in hides and coats and blankets and rags, the cave dwellers were constantly retreating from cave to cave. On the feast of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin Martin Martinych and Masha shut up the study; three weeks later they moved out of the dining room and entrenched themselves in the bedroom. They could retreat no farther: there they must withstand the siege or die.

In the troglodytic Petersburg bedroom all was as it had been in Noah's ark not long ago—the clean and the unclean in diluvial promiscuity: Martin Martinych's desk, books, stone-age cakes of ceramic appearance, Scriabin opus 74, a flatiron, five potatoes lovingly scrubbed white, nickel-plated bedsprings, an ax, a chiffonier, firewood. And in the center of this universe was its god, a short-legged, rusty-red, squat, greedy cave god: the iron stove.

The god roared mightily. In the dark cave the great miracle of fire was wrought. The humans, Martin Martinych and Masha, silently, gratefully, piously stretched out their arms to him. For one hour it was spring in the cave; for one hour hides, claws, tusks were shed, and through the frozen brain-crust sprang green shoots—thoughts:

"Mart, you have forgotten that tomorrow . . . Yes, I see you *have* forgotten."

In October, when the leaves are already yellowed, withered, wilted, blue-eyed days may occur. If you tilt your head on such a day so as not to see the earth, you may believe that there is still joy, it is still summer. And it was the same with Masha: if you shut your eyes and only listened to her, you could believe that she was the same, that in a moment she was going to laugh, get up from her bed, hug you; and only an hour ago her voice had sounded like a knife on glass—not her voice at all, not she. . . .

"Oh, Mart, Mart! How everything . . . You didn't used to forget. The twenty-ninth: St. Mary's Day . . ."*

The iron god was still roaring. There was no light: it wouldn't come until ten. The shaggy dark reaches of the cave were swaying. Martin Martinych, squatting (tie yourself in a knot, tightly—still more tightly!), his head tilted, kept looking at the October sky, so as not to see the withered, wilted lips. And Masha——

"You see, Mart, if we could start the stove in the morning tomorrow, so that all day it would be the way it is

* Masha is a familiar form of Maria. Russians were usually named for saints, and the name day was celebrated, rather than the birthday.

now! What do you say? How much is left? About a cord in the study?"

It was ages since Masha had been strong enough to make her way to the Polar study, and she did not know that . . . Tighten the knot, tighter!

"A cord? I think . . ."

Suddenly it was light: it was exactly ten o'clock. And without saying any more, Martin Martinych screwed up his eyes and turned away: when it was light it was more difficult. You could see now that his face was crumpled and earthy. Many people have earthy faces now: reverting to Adam.

But Masha went on:

"And you know, Mart, perhaps I'll try and get up . . . if you start the stove early."

"Of course, Masha, of course. . . . On a day like that . . . Of course, I'll start it early."

The cave god was quieting down, shrinking into himself. And now he was quite still, just crackling faintly. One could hear that downstairs at the Obertyshevs' someone was using a stone ax to split knotty logs, the remains of a barge—hewing Martin Martinych into pieces with a stone ax. One piece of Martin Martinych was smiling in a clayey way and grinding dried potato peelings in a coffee mill to make cakes with. Another piece of Martin Martinych was stupidly, blindly knocking against the ceiling, the windowpanes, the walls, like a bird that had flown into a room from outdoors: "Where find wood—where find wood—where find wood?"

Martin Martinych put on his coat and fastened it with a leather belt (the cave dwellers have a myth that this keeps you warmer). In the corner by the chiffonier he lifted the pail noisily.

"Where are you going, Mart?"

"I'll be back directly. To get water downstairs."

On the dark stairway, crusted with ice because of the water splashed on it, Martin Martinych stood awhile, swaying, sighed, and clanking the pail as if it were a pris-

oner's chain, went downstairs to the Obertyshevs': the water in their flat was still running. The door was opened by Obertyshev himself; he wore a coat belted with a rope and was unshaven. His face was a waste overgrown with reddish dusty weeds. Through the weeds were visible yellow stone teeth and among the stones a lizard's instantaneous tail: a smile.

"Ah, Martin Martinych! Come to fetch water? Please, please, please."

The tiny cubicle between the outer and inner door was so narrow that one could scarcely turn around in it with a pail. Here Obertyshev kept his stack of wood. Clayey Martin Martinych knocked against the logs, and this made a deep dent in the clay. And there was even a deeper dent when he knocked against the corner of the chest of drawers in the dark passage. He made his way through the dining room; here were the Obertyshev dam and her three cubs. The dam hurriedly hid a dish under a napkin: a human had come from another cave, and—who knows?—he might fly at her and seize it.

In the kitchen, as he turned on the faucet, Obertyshev smiled a stone-toothed smile:

"Well, how's your wife? How's your wife? How's your wife?"

"What's there to say, Alexey Ivanych? Just the same. It's a bad business. Tomorrow is her name day, and I haven't . . ."

"No one has, Martin Martinych, no one has, no one . . ."

The bird that had flown into the kitchen was rustling its wings and fluttering right, left, and suddenly dashed its breast in despair against the wall:

"Alexey Ivanych, I wanted . . . Alexey Ivanych, couldn't I borrow at least five or six pieces of wood from you?"

Yellow stone teeth showed through the weeds, the eyes grew yellow teeth, all of Obertyshev sprouted teeth which grew longer and longer.

"Good heavens, Martin Martinych! Good heavens! Good heavens! We ourselves are . . . You know very well how it is nowadays, you know very well, you know very well . . ."

Tighten the knot, tighter, still tighter! Martin Martinych gave himself a final twist, lifted the pail and made his way through the kitchen, the dark passage, the dining room. In the doorway of the dining room Obertyshev stuck out his lizard-nimble instantaneous hand:

"Well, so long . . . Only don't forget to slam the door, Martin Martinych, don't forget. Both doors, both, both—there is no keeping warm."

On the dark, ice-crusted landing Martin Martinych set down the pail, turned around, and shut the inner door tight. He listened, but heard only his own dry bony shivering and his jerking breaths forming a dotted line. In the narrow cubicle between the two doors he put out a hand and touched one log, and another, and another . . . No! Quickly he shoved himself back onto the landing and closed the outer door, but not tightly. He only needed to slam it so that the lock would click.

But he could not bring himself to do it. He could not slam the door on Masha's tomorrow. And upon the dotted line made by Martin Martinych breathing two Martin Martinyches engaged in a duel to the death: the old one, the Scriabin one, who knew "I may not," and the new one, the caveman, who knew "I must." The caveman, gnashing his teeth, knocked the other Martin Martinych down and throttled him, and Martin Martinych, breaking his nails, opened the door, plunged his hand into the stack of wood—one billet, another, the fourth, the fifth, thrust under his coat, stuck into his belt, dropped into the pail. Then he slammed the door and rushed upstairs with huge animal leaps. Halfway up the staircase, on one of the ice-coated steps, he suddenly stiffened and squeezed himself into the wall: downstairs the door clicked again and he heard Obertyshev's dust-clogged voice:

"Who's there? Who's there? Who's there?"

"It's me, Alexey Ivanych. I forgot to slam the door. . . . I wanted . . . I went back—to slam it hard. . . ."

"You? Hm . . . How could you? One must be more

careful, more careful. Everything gets stolen now, you know yourself, you know yourself. How could you?"

The twenty-ninth. All day long a low, cotton-batting sky, with holes which let icy air through. But the cave god, his belly stuffed since morning, roared benevolently—and suppose there are holes, suppose Obertyshev, bristling with teeth all over, counts his billets—let him, it doesn't matter: only today matters; "tomorrow" makes no sense in a cave; centuries will pass before the words "tomorrow," "the day after tomorrow," will again assume meaning.

Masha got up, and swaying in an impalpable wind, did her hair in the old way: over the ears and parted in the middle. It was like a last dry leaf fluttering on a naked tree. From the middle drawer of his desk Martin Martinych took out papers, letters, a thermometer, a small blue medicine bottle (this he hurriedly thrust back, so that Masha should not see it); and finally from the furthest corner he drew a little black lacquered box. At the very bottom of it there was still some real—yes, yes, quite real—tea! They had real tea. Martin Martinych, his head tilted, listened to a voice which was almost as it used to be:

"Mart, do you remember, my blue room, and the piano with a cover on it, and on the piano an ash tray in the shape of a wooden horse, and I was playing, and you came up to me from behind . . ."

Yes, that evening the universe was created, and the moon with its wonderful wise snout, and the nightingale trill of the bells in the hall.

"And do you remember, Mart: the window was open, a green sky—and below, from another world, an organ-grinder?"

Organ-grinder, wonderful organ-grinder, where are you?

"And on the embankment . . . the branches still bare, the water pink, and the last blue block of ice floating past, and looking like a coffin. And it was only funny, the coffin; because of course, we would never die. Remember?"

Downstairs they had started chopping wood. Suddenly, this stopped and there was the sound of running and shouting. Split in two, one half of Martin Martinych saw the immortal organ-grinder, the immortal wooden horse, the immortal block of ice, while the other half, breathing in a dotted line, counted the chunks of wood with Obertyshev. And now Obertyshev has finished counting: he is putting on his coat and, bristling with teeth, slams the door ferociously, and——

"Wait, Masha, I think, I think someone is knocking at the door."

No. No one. No one yet. One can still breathe; with head tilted one can still listen to that voice so like what it used to be.

Twilight. The twenty-ninth had grown old. Staring, dim, old woman's eyes, and everything shrinking, hunching under that fixed stare. The ceiling is caving in, the armchair, the desk, the beds, Martin Martinych himself—are all flattening out, and on the bed—Masha, perfectly flat, like paper.

It was evening when Selikhov came, the chairman of the house committee. He used to weigh some 250 pounds, but now half of him was gone and he rattled in his jacket like a nut in a gourd. But he had kept his rumbling laugh.

"Well, Martin Martinych, in the first place, in the second place, allow me to congratulate your spouse on her name day. Of course, of course! Obertyshev told me . . ."

Martin Martinych was shot out of the armchair, and he jerked about, hurrying to speak, to say something, anything.

"Tea . . . right away, this very minute. We have real tea today. Real! Let me just . . ."

"Tea? I'd prefer champagne, you know. You haven't any? You don't say. Haw-haw-haw! And the other day my friends and I made home-brew out of Hoffmann drops.* It was a circus! Didn't we get soused. 'I am Zino-

* A sedative.

viev,'* one fellow said; 'on your knees!' A circus! And when I was crossing the Field of Mars on my way home I met a man in nothing but a vest, I swear! 'What's wrong?' I asked. 'It's all right,' says he. 'I've just been robbed, I'm walking home, to Vasilyevsky Island.' A circus!"

Masha, a flattened, papery Masha, laughed in her bed. Tying himself in a tight knot, Martin Martinych laughed more and more loudly, in order to refuel Selikhov so that he might go on talking, only go on, and when he was finished with this, talk of something else. . . .

But Selikhov was petering out, and at last he was silent except for gentle snorts. He rolled to right and to left in the shell of his jacket and then got up.

"Well, let me kiss your little hand, birthday girl! AFF! What, you don't get it? A fond farewell—AFF as *they* say.† A circus!"

He was rumbling away in the passage, in the foyer. In a moment he would be gone, or . . .

The floor was gently swaying and tossing under Martin Martinych. With a clayey smile he held onto the doorpost. Selikhov was panting with the effort of getting his feet into huge overshoes.

Mammothlike in overshoes and overcoat, he straightened out and recovered his breath. Then he silently took Martin Martinych's arm, silently opened the door leading into the Polar study, and silently sat down on the sofa.

The floor of the study was an ice floe, the ice floe cracked gently, broke off from the shore and floated Martin Martinych, spinning him around so that Selikhov's voice, coming from the farther shore, where the sofa stood, was scarcely audible.

"In the first place, in the second place, my dear sir, I must tell you: I would gladly squash this Obertyshev like

* Grigory Zinoviev, a leading Bolshevik, who was head of the Petrograd Soviet. In 1936 he was executed for "confessedly" plotting against Stalin and the Soviet regime.

† Poking fun at the Bolsheviks' weakness for abbreviations, which were a novelty at the time.

a louse, by God. . . . But you understand, since he has made a formal declaration, since he says he'll go to the police . . . What a louse! I can only give you this advice: go to him this very minute and stop his mouth with that wood."

The ice floe was spinning faster and faster. Tiny, flattened, hardly visible, a mere splinter, Martin Martinych replied—replied to himself, speaking not of the wood, but of something quite different:

"All right. Today. This very minute . . ."

"Excellent, excellent. He is such a louse, such a louse, I tell you . . ."

It was still dark in the cave. Clayey, cold, blind, Martin Martinych awkwardly stumbled against all the things that lay about there promiscuously. He started: a voice like Masha's, like what it used to be:

"What are you and Selikhov talking about? What? Ration books? And I was lying and thinking, Mart: if we could only pull ourselves together and go somewhere, South perhaps. . . . How noisy you are! Are you doing it on purpose? You know I can't stand it, I can't, I can't!"

A knife scratching glass. But now it didn't matter any more. His arms and legs were mechanical contrivances. To lift and lower them chains were required, a crane, a windlass, and to work the windlass one man was not enough: three were needed.

Working the windlass with an effort, Martin Martinych placed the teakettle and the pan on the stove and threw in the last of Obertyshev's billets.

"Do you hear me? Why don't you answer? Don't you hear?"

Of course, this wasn't Masha, no, it wasn't her voice. Martin Martinych moved more and more slowly, his feet stuck in the sand, it was getting increasingly difficult to work the crane. Suddenly a chain slid off a pulley, his arm dropped and stupidly knocked against the teakettle and the pan so that they went crashing down on the floor, while the cave god hissed like a snake.

And from over yonder, from the distant shore, from the bed, came a stranger's shrill voice:

"You are doing it on purpose! Go away! This minute! I don't want anyone, I want nothing, nothing! Go away!"

The twenty-ninth was dead, and dead the immortal organ-grinder and the block of ice in the water, pink with sunset, and Masha. And this was well. And there must be no incredible tomorrow, no Obertyshev, no Selikhov, no Martin Martinych; everything should die.

Mechanical, remote, Martin Martinych was still going through the motions of handling things. Perhaps he started that stove again and picked up the pan from the floor and set the teakettle to boil, and perhaps Masha was speaking. He did not hear: there were only the dully aching dents in the clay made by words and by the corners of the chiffonier, the chairs, the desk.

Martin Martinych was slowly extracting from the desk bundles of letters, a thermometer, sealing wax, the box of tea, more letters. And at last from the furthest recess came the little blue medicine bottle.

Ten o'clock: the light was on. Electric light, naked, hard, simple, cold, like cave life and death. And next to the flatiron, opus 74, the cakes—quite simply, the little blue medicine bottle.

The iron god roared benevolently, devouring the parchment-yellow, the bluish, the white paper of the letters. The teakettle gently called attention to itself—making a noise with its lid. Masha turned around:

"Is the tea boiling? Mart, darling, give me . . ."

She saw. A moment shot through and through with clear, naked, cruel electric light; Martin Martinych squatting before the stove, a pink reflection, as on water at sunset, on the letters, and over yonder the little blue medicine bottle.

"Mart . . . should we already . . ?"

Silence. Indifferently devouring the immortal words, bitter, tender, yellow, white, blue, the iron god was purring gently. And Masha, as simply as if she were asking for tea:

"Mart, darling! Give it to me!"

Martin Martinych smiled distantly.

"But you know, Masha, there's only enough for one."

"Mart, but as it is, I'm not living any more. This isn't me any more, anyhow, I'm going to . . . Mart, you understand, don't you? Mart, have pity on me! Mart!"

Oh, that voice, the old voice . . . And if you tilted your head . . .

"Masha, I have deceived you: there isn't a single piece of wood in the study. And I went to the Obertyshevs' and there in the entry . . . I stole, and Selikhov came to . . . I must take it back at once, and I have burnt it all, every bit. . . ."

The iron god was unconcernedly dozing off. Dying down, the walls of the cave flickered gently and so did the houses, the cliffs, the mammoths. Masha.

"Mart, if you still love me . . . Please, Mart, just remember."

The immortal wooden horse, the organ-grinder, the block of ice . . . Martin Martinych slowly rose from a kneeling position. Slowly working the crane with an effort, he took the blue little bottle from the desk and handed it to Masha.

She threw off the blanket, sat up in bed, pink, swift, immortal—like the water at sunset, then seized the little bottle, laughed:

"There, you see: not for nothing did I lie here and think of going away somewhere. Light another lamp—right here, on the table. So. Now throw something more into the stove."

Without looking, Martin Martinych fished some papers out of the drawer and tossed them into the stove.

"Now . . . Go and take a little walk. I think the moon is out, *my* moon: remember? Don't forget to take the key. You'll slam the door to, and without a key . . . Who will let you in . . . ?"

No, there was no moon. Low, dark, thick clouds, like a vaulted ceiling, and the world one enormous silent cave. Narrow, endless passages between walls; and dark ice-

coated cliffs resembling houses; in the cliffs—deep purple hollows; in the hollows, around the fire, humans, crouching. A light icy draught blows the powdery snow from under your feet, and over the white powder, the massive cliffs, the caves, the crouching humans, moves with inaudible, measured steps, some supermammoth.

(*1922*)

Velimir Khlebnikov

(*1885–1922*)

One wonders at times whether Khlebnikov actually existed or was merely the subject of a legend that has now become frozen by many retellings. His origins and early life belong to the remote Asiatic periphery of Russia, and though he was later to be a familiar figure on the streets of the capital, his inspiration, as in "Nikolai," appears always to have derived from the circumference. Mayakovsky and others lovingly acknowledged Khlebnikov as a master whose tireless experiments with the verbal material of poetry pointed the way for their own discoveries. To his fellow Futurists (and not only Futurists) he was a saint who sacrificed literally everything in life to poetry; to others he was certifiably mad; and to still others he was a fraud. This conjunction of opinions is scarcely novel: It is the fate of all who, like Khlebnikov, disassemble the foundations of an art—in this case, the very words of which poetry consists—and put them back together in unheard-of combinations. Labels never fit any great creative artist, of course, but *Futurist* seems perversely inappropriate to Khlebnikov, whose life was spent burrowing in the past among the root systems in the subsoil of ancient Slavic culture.

The one work of his that must be quoted is a short tour de force entitled "Incantation by Laughter," which consists for the most part of the root *smekh* (laugh) extended by every conceivable affix. Translators love to test their ingenuity and the resources of their own language against it: