

The War Between Math and Imagination in Zamyatin's *We*

It's difficult to imagine a society like the one found in Zamyatin's *We*, a society in which everything is limited to numbers and straightforward answers. By placing an emphasis on the mathematical sciences and by eliminating the freedom behind the arts, OneState clearly believes that imagination and individual expression can only prove a danger to their way of life. Without an imagination or without a "soul," no one could possibly dream up of other possibilities, of other alternatives to this somewhat intimidating society.

For me, it was especially difficult to read D-503's words at the beginning of the novel, as his narrow logical brain was limited not only by the field he worked in, but also by the propaganda of OneState and of the Benefactor. He promotes this dystopian society because he honestly doesn't know any better. In a sense, he had been brainwashed to believe in certain ideas, such as the concept of oneness with everyone else.

D cannot live without his mathematical knowledge. He doesn't know how to. He only knows how to live like a Number, or, even more specifically, like a builder of the INTEGRAL. As a result, his thinking cannot stretch beyond the infinite. His philosophy is probably best summed up when he writes: "The highest thing in Man is his reason, and what the work of reason comes down to is the continual limitation of infinity, dividing infinity up into convenient, easily digestible portions: differentiation" (64). It seems as if the concept of infinity scares him. There's no way to determine where exactly infinity ends, so dividing it into something a little more manageable makes it easier for D to handle. He is able to turn to mathematics because in it, there is usually only one right answer. The idea that there could be an infinite number of solutions or an infinite number of revolutions does not appeal to a mathematician like D-503.

Then, of course, everything changes when D meets I-330, as she leads him to discover new possibilities in life. This woman, who clearly does not conform to the laws of OneState, is an enigma for him. As he attempts to describe her, D writes: “But I don’t know--something about her eyes or brows, some kind of odd irritating X that I couldn’t get at all, a thing I couldn’t express in numbers” (8). Again, he is seeing everything through a mathematical, logical lens. Since I-330 seems to possess a “soul,” she doesn’t fit in to the boxes that he has placed himself and everyone else around him in. She, unlike the rest of the Numbers, actually acts as an individual, as a human being, and this concept is a foreign idea for D.

Part of I’s humanity is evident in that she actively uses her imagination. Her mind is equipped to think outside of OneState’s walls, outside of the things that supposedly keep her and the other Numbers safe from the outside world. Because of this, I-330 has no trouble at all coming up with ways to rebel against this repressive society, as she is not afraid to consider “what if’s” and the concept of infinity.

I-330 led me to hope that she could influence D enough so that he could change and so that he could help lead this new revolution. I didn’t want him to stay a Number forever. Once he sees the possibilities of living his life as an actual human being and not as a machine, I had hoped that he would actively pursue this lifestyle. It did, after all, work after a while. D begins to dream and he performs little acts of rebellion like skipping out on work. His mind even strays from his precious logistical thinking: “My mathematics, up to now the only lasting and immovable island in my entire dislocated life, had also broken loose and floated whirling off” (98). Math had practically defined who D was as a person. To lose that part of himself means

that I-330 had made tremendous progress in transforming him before his reversion back to a machine in the end of the novel.

This is not to say that the mathematical sciences are necessarily bad, as they, too, have their place in society; however, it is clear that there should be more of a balance in people's lives, as the humanities and the imagination behind them help promote one's individuality and humaneness.