

Book Review



Special Issue: Atheism, Secularity, and Science

The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy, and Polemic after 9/11, Arthur Bradley & Andrew Tate, London and New York, NY: Continuum Publishing, 2010, 136pp.

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As the story goes, on the morning of September 12, 2001, Sam Harris, a graduate student in neuroscience at the University of California – Los Angeles, woke up with an itch. He had been shaken to his core by the events of the previous day and found himself drawn to his computer, relating his thoughts on the 9/11 terrorist attacks' implications to a word processor. What started as an itch evolved into his first book, *The End of Faith*: a scathing indictment of religion, which in his opinion, was an impetus just as effective and real as the jet engines that propelled the terrorists' weapons of choice to their targets. *The End of Faith* was the first of four polemics that have come to symbolize what is now known as "The New Atheism," a term meant to encapsulate a 21st century religious skepticism characterized by its vitriolic and unapologetic stance toward religion and the moral relativism that the new atheists claim protects it. Following Harris's example, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins published his book, *The God Delusion*, cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett came out with *Breaking the Spell* and journalist and literary critic Christopher Hitchens concluded the movement's must-read canon with *God is Not Great*. While these four polemics are indicative of each author's expertise, they are united in their claim that organized religion is an affront to reason and that we ignore its potential to inspire destruction in this technological age at our peril.

Of course, such claims have polarized not only the general public but also leading figures in all arenas of

public life including academia, the arts, and politics. In their book, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy, and Polemic after 9/11*, Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate look to uncover what they see as a newly reinvigorated Enlightenment-era hubris among contemporary fiction writers in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They state outright in the introduction of their book that "it is not (their) aim to offer a philosophical assessment of the truth-claims of the New Atheism but something more modest and hopefully more original: an account of its *literary* reception (p. 2)." Using the New Atheism as their backdrop, Bradley and Tate perform short literary analyses on the work of four contemporary novelists they see as having jumped happily on the New Atheist bandwagon, leaving some of their humility and perhaps some of their credibility behind.

While Bradley and Tate do stay faithful to their promise not to delve too deeply into the guiding philosophies of the New Atheism, they do make it clear they believe those philosophies to be unsound and hypocritical in an eerie resemblance to the fundamentalism that made the terrorists that carried out the 9/11 attacks themselves incapable of calm and reasoned dialogue. This becomes a central claim of their book and the accusation at the center of all four literary analyses. The authors they single out to perform their study (Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Philip Pullman, and Salman Rushdie) are indicted as novelists who have abandoned the well-advised practice of literary objectivity and have resorted to including an atheist

agenda in their work, undermining any semblance of ambivalence or believable and relatable representations of reality.

Bradley and Tate's targets are well chosen not only for their personal relationships with the likes of Dawkins and Hitchens, but because they, like the four "original" new atheists, vary in their style of unbelief while remaining squarely inside the boundaries of what constitutes that unique breed of outspoken 21st century skeptic. This is one of the defining strengths of the book and helps grant Bradley and Tate some credibility to make their arguments. While their targets may resort to oversimplifications and unfair generalizations, Bradley and Tate offer four distinct and discriminating critiques that vary not only in their harshness but also remain within the appropriate frame of that author's particular brand of skepticism. McEwan and Amis, for example, are especially in line with the New Atheism's most extreme and debated claims due to their particular interest in the perceived dangers of Islam and their enthusiasm for enlightenment ideals. Bradley and Tate reserve their fiercest accusations for these two, pointing out their Eurocentric and one may even say neoconservative inclinations in propping up the west as the beacon of thought and rationalism and lumping much of the rest of the world with Al-Qaeda in a backward and medieval allegiance to, using a term the new atheists are especially fond of, "sky gods."

The nucleus of McEwan and Amis's bias, Bradley and Tate claim, is in their suspiciously self-promoting assertion that it is in literature and the novel itself that one should seek the transcendence more commonly found in religion: "Perhaps the greatest profession of faith in McEwan's fiction, though, is its faith in fiction itself: the novel is the only utopian space where believers of every persuasion – Christians, scientists, communists, poets, even the pathologically deluded – can exist together without violence (p. 16)." Amis echoes this idealized notion of literature in his essay, *The Voice of the Lonely Crowd*. In it, Amis contrasts the courageously independent and original spirit of the novelist against the tired and lazy clichés of the religious fundamentalist. To Amis and McEwan, 9/11 was not only the result of a lack of compassion on the part of the terrorists but also a failure of their imagination, literary or otherwise.

In accusing Amis and McEwan, and more lightly Pullman and Rushdie, of rejecting a certain mode of

transcendence while championing another, Bradley and Tate make their book more an exercise in relativism than anything else. They are put off by the idea of the new atheist practice of rejecting religious transcendence while covertly suggesting other avenues that just as romantically, and even perhaps unscientifically, appease that human inclination to believe in the immaterial. In this way, they accuse the new atheist novelists of not only self-promotion, but also of simple intellectual shortsightedness. As they say outright when discussing McEwan, "...belief in the saving power of art is potentially just as infantile, solipsistic and dangerous as any other belief (28)." It is in their chapters on Pullman and Rushdie, however, that Bradley and Tate reveal, rather convincingly, how varied these four authors really are in their views of the novel's transcendent power.

In their chapter on Philip Pullman's controversial young-adult trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, for example, Bradley and Tate depart from their conversation on new atheist hypocrisy and investigate the implications of new atheist ideology operating within a historically religious context. Specifically, they analyze *His Dark Materials* as influenced heavily by and taking part in the traditions of Judeo-Christian heresy characterized by Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the fantastical Christian allegories of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. They read Pullman as beholden to these traditions while paradoxically hostile to the beliefs and literature that gave them rise. The observation is accurate as no one would contest, not even Pullman, and is indeed worth an exploration of its implications as it is what sets Pullman apart from his predecessors. It isn't, however, something that would put Pullman in the same camp as Amis and McEwan according to Bradley and Tate, who do due diligence to the different breeds of atheism they encounter in their book.

After all, Pullman is allowed to put his own atheist spin on these traditions, is he not? This is why Bradley and Tate, in their final paragraph on Pullman, ask the question, "To what extent, then, can Pullman's New Atheist novel(s) be found guilty of putting atheist polemic before art (p. 80)?" In answering this question, Bradley and Tate quote C.S. Lewis, who was a proponent of *Paradise Lost*'s consistency with church doctrine as opposed to Blake's sympathetic reading of Milton's Satan. In holding such a contrary view to Pullman's on the tradition of which they're both part, who better to defend him? "Lewis, in his preface

to *Paradise Lost* reflects that, ‘when old poets made some virtue of their theme they were not teaching, but adoring, and that what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted’ (80).” Bradley and Tate go on to utilize this perspective in pointing out the moral ambivalence of Pullman’s universe in *His Dark Materials*, how he “confronts the problems of choice in a world without definitive guidance as to how moral choices might be made...(p. 80).” For Bradley and Tate, this aspect of Pullman’s work separates him from McEwan and Amis whom they see as having sacrificed artistic integrity to make secularism and literature the nearly theistic saving graces of their literary cosmos.

Bradley and Tate are similarly less scathing in their analysis of Salman Rushdie, not only because of his more personal clash with religious fundamentalism characterized by the famous *fatwa* declared against him by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, but also because his novels exhibit a more nuanced and sympathetic view of the religious than McEwan or Amis. This isn’t to say that they shy away from accusing Rushdie of holding the novel up on the same nearly sacred pedestal as the other New Atheists novelists. They do make the distinction, however, that Rushdie sees the novel not as the straight-forward alternative to religious transcendence as Amis and McEwan might, but as

the ideal forum in which to discuss and debate competing views on meaning, faith, and reality. Stories to Rushdie are sacred only to the extent that they do not silence conflicting perspectives. Bradley and Tate go on to articulate what they see as “(Rushdie’s) enthusiasm for the rag-bag of shared human stories as a kind of spiritual surrogate for orthodox (and authoritarian) religious practice (p. 92).” The novel itself then, according to Rushdie, *is* the manifestation of those conflicting perspectives to which literal and static interpretations of sacred texts are a deadly poison.

Bradley and Tate astutely tease out these differing strains in their reading of these four new atheist novelists but never waver from continuing to articulate the binding concerns that make these novelists, and their post-9/11 works, distinct from the other countless examples of religious skepticism in western literary history. *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* provides an incisive and detailed microcosm of this new breed of novel and novelist and is a fine starting point for a discussion about where ideas of the sacred and transcendent might have a place, not only in the literary works of the contemporary atheist author, but in an increasingly technological, well-connected, and diverse twenty-first century.