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Manuscripts should conform to the AAA style sheet or follow either MHRA or MLA style. (Copies of the MLA Style Sheet may be obtained from the Treasurer of the Modern Language Association of America, 62 Fifth Ave, New York, N. Y., 10011; copies of the MHRA Style Book from W.S. Maney & Son Ltd., Hudson Rd., Leeds LS9 7DL, England.) Documentation can be embodied either in footnotes or in an appended bibliography, with name and date reference enclosed in brackets in the text. Footnotes should be numbered consecutively and listed on a separate sheet of paper. The footnotes will appear on the bottom of the page where they are mentioned. They should be limited to a minimum. Languages of publication are German and English. Authors are requested to provide an English abstract of their contribution of about 15 lines on a separate sheet of paper. In the normal procedure first proofs will be sent to the authors and should be returned to the editor within one week. Authors receive one free copy of the issue containing their contribution. It is our policy to publish accepted contributions without delay.
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Anne Enderwitz

Discussing the work of a living author is never easy. Without death there is not even the illusion of closure – any text written in the future, any comment to be made, will alter the perception of the work as a whole. Yet there are some authors who are particularly ‘undead’: Ian McEwan is a public figure whose vocal support of New Atheism poses a challenge to literary critics. Familiarity with the author’s worldview may enable a better understanding of his oeuvre, but, at the same time, approaching a literary work as the unequivocal expression of a fixed set of beliefs is an unnecessary limitation. In this sense, the legacy of Barthes’s ‘death of the author’ – despite the author’s resurrection in literature departments all over the world – continues to have a lasting effect. Not even literary critics hostile to ‘theory’ would argue that a literary work is unequivocal and should be approached like a philosophical argument designed to make a single ‘claim’.

With his book on the development of Ian McEwan’s literary work, Wally discusses the writings of an author who has been called the “New Atheist novelist par excellence” (Bradley and Tate 2010: 16). He tackles the problem of McEwan’s beliefs and their influence on his work with “an analytic pincer movement”: he departs from the assumption that McEwan’s novels anticipate, or participate in, “the New Atheist discourse”, but then broadens the scope of his analysis by reading McEwan’s novels “against the grain”, namely “with a view to their religious subtexts” (40). This is a clever and pragmatic approach to a body of literature which appears over-determined by the author’s public stance but is, in fact, less unequivocal than one might expect. It is in this way that Wally introduces the dichotomy “atheism vs. religion” as “lens through which to discover the implied worldview of a text” (38). He thereby renders the author’s beliefs productive without letting them determine his reading.

Wally’s analytic curve as reflected in the chapter titles suggests an increasing attention to atheist concerns in McEwan’s fiction. He begins with a chapter entitled “On the Way to New Atheism”, moves on to “New Horizons and the Emergence of New Atheist Concerns”, follows this up with “Preparing and Supporting New Atheism”, and ends with “New Atheism reworked or the Rise of New Concerns”. While these captions suggest different stages of a journey towards the increasing preoccupation with atheist ideas, Wally’s actual readings offer a much more nuanced picture than can be inferred from these titles. Even *Saturday*, which “constitutes the most obvious discussion of New Atheist ideas in McEwan’s œuvre so far” (144), maintains in Wally’s view some distance to its hyper-rational and neo-conservative protagonist Henry Perowne, who advocates shopping as a “cure for religious fundamentalism” (142). Wally’s discussions of psychoanalytic concerns and religious images, of
varying representations of the two-cultures debate, and of postmodern meta-referentiality in McEwan’s work productively muddle the ground between the oppositional poles established by the New-Atheism-debate. His recognition of similarities between New Atheism and Protestantism – “appreciation for heterosexual love and capitalism” (180) – is indebted to Tina Beattie, who labels New Atheism a “puritanical brand of godless Protestantism” (Beattie 2007: 148; qtd. in Wally 180). His identification of conceptual similarities between New Atheist ideas and “poststructuralist views” (180) further complicates the status of New Atheism.

Wally’s laudable resistance to unequivocal readings has the distinctive advantage of refusing simplistic oppositions and of cooling a heated ideological debate. With their rhetoric of superiority – think of Richard Dawkins’ book title The God Delusion (2006) –, New Atheist books reach sky-rocketing sales numbers but threaten to alienate both believers and non-believers. In a Guardian article from November last year, Jeff Sparrow – himself an atheist – asked pointedly, “Why are the New Atheists such jerks?” (2015) As the unlikely association of God and cultural relativism in the enemy camp of New Atheism suggests, New Atheists believe not only in a natural origin of the human species but also in the defining power of human nature. Wally skilfully manages the discursive balancing act of rendering New Atheist ideas intelligible without concealing the downsides of this discourse: the alienating force of islamophobic rhetoric; the open hostility towards religious beliefs in general; the potential exclusionary power of a naturalised new humanism; its Neo-Darwinian investment in heterosexual love; the extent to which Darwinian theory acquires a mythical status in this heated debate; and the reluctance to openly discuss the sometimes controversial status of scientific findings. His discussion of the politics of New Atheist authors is illuminating and highlights differences between the individual authors.

Wally’s final explanation of the “complexity” of McEwan’s fiction (181) combines the New Atheist investment in art as a path to secular transcendence with the Neo-Darwinian understanding of empathy as “human instinct” (McEwan 2001): for McEwan, Wally suggests, the novel is a site “where our evolutionary capacity for empathy can flourish”, “a place where different mindsets or worldviews can meet and co-exist” (181). Also, I am tempted to add, a pinch of ambiguity makes for a much more interesting reading than a simple spelling out and reworking of New Atheist and Neo-Darwinian ideas.

Although Wally comes to the conclusion that “McEwan’s novels have increasingly engaged with New Atheist ideas” (179), the strength of this book derives from his readiness to relativise this claim: to discuss what “prevents McEwan’s novels from becoming straightforward vehicles of New Atheism” (181) and to respect the peculiarities of each individual work. Wally tracks connections that are easily overlooked in a heated debate. His methodological and theoretical discussions and his highly reflective readings are certainly worth engaging with. An index to the book is, however, sorely missed, precisely because Wally engages with complex scientific and philosophical ideas in the individual chapters and in various passages throughout the book. An even more detailed discussion of Neo-Darwinian ideas, which are quite di-
verse and do not always sit easily with the findings of cognitive studies, would have been very welcome. Yet it seems a little unfair to demand this from an author who expressly focuses on McEwan’s fiction with special regard to New Atheism and who has already made a very good job of opening up the epistemological, ethical, metaphysical, and political implications of this contemporary discourse. It is Wally’s great merit to have rendered McEwan’s work both more accessible and more complex by reviewing it through the lens of New Atheism and its relation to religion.

References


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