

Johannes Wally

Secular Falls from Grace

Religion and (New) Atheism in the Implied Worldview
of Ian McEwan's Fiction

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
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Graz, November 2014

Johannes Wally

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Register of Abbreviations

<i>A Move Abroad</i>	MA
<i>Amsterdam</i>	A
<i>Atonement</i>	At
<i>Black Dogs</i>	BD
<i>Enduring Love</i>	EL
<i>First Love, Last Rites</i>	FL
<i>In Between the Sheets</i>	IBS
<i>On Chesil Beach</i>	OCB
<i>Saturday</i>	S
<i>Solar</i>	So
<i>Sweet Tooth</i>	ST
<i>The Cement Garden</i>	CG
<i>The Child in Time</i>	CT
<i>The Comfort of Strangers</i>	CS
<i>The Imitation Game</i>	IG
<i>The Innocent</i>	I

1 INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

“His first god was Freud. Now it is Darwin”. This is how Daniel Zalewski (2009: on-line) summarizes the intellectual development of the British author Ian McEwan. This summary is in some ways a simplification, as it does not hint, for instance, at the deep interest in physics and mathematics McEwan has repeatedly voiced and which some of his novels display (e.g. *The Child in Time*, *Solar* and *Sweet Tooth*). Nevertheless, the statement’s paradoxical nature, which we will look at in a moment, captures much of the ideological content of McEwan’s novels accurately. Whereas McEwan’s early work drew strongly on Freudian breakings of taboos, such as incestuous desires (e.g. *The Cement Garden*) and sadomasochism (e.g. *The Comfort of Strangers*), much of McEwan’s later work incorporates Neo-Darwinist ideas, such as evolutionary reasons for altruism (e.g. *Enduring Love*) and the relationship between the brain and the mind (e.g. *Saturday*). McEwan’s development can thus be considered typical of changes which have taken place in the Western intellectual climate. Whereas psychoanalysis, though always controversial, certainly was an influential factor in the 1960s and 1970s, it has since come under heavy criticism (cf. e.g. Gottschall and Wilson 2005). This has to do with the progress in brain research and the renaissance of Darwinism, which had begun with “the discovery and then ‘breaking’ of the code of DNA in the 1950s” and gained new momentum in the run-up to “the completion of the genome report” towards the end of the 1990s (Waugh 2005: 59). For many, the explanatory power of psychoanalysis has thus migrated to more recent fields of study such as cognitive science or evolutionary psychology. This development is capable of blurring the fact that there are some stable ideological links between Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. Freud was a great admirer of Darwin, among others referring to Darwin’s concept of a primal horde in *Totem and Tabu*, and shared with him an understanding of human nature that can do without a god. Hence, both were atheists.¹ So is Ian McEwan.

However, does McEwan’s atheism automatically imply that his novels are atheist, too? In other words, is the popular ‘man-behind-the-book-approach’, which looks to the author rather than to his or her text as the source of meaning, really the most feasible there is when one wants to extract a text’s ideology? These questions summarise the main interest of this study, which sets out to explore the implied worldview – a concept which we can, for the time being, define as the many tacit presuppositions upon which a given texts rests – of two of McEwan’s short stories and all his adult novels² with a particular focus on their respective take on religion and/or atheism. This

¹ The situation is more complex with Darwin than with Freud. Darwin lost his faith as a result of his discoveries and his theory and seems to have suffered from this loss (cf. Darwin 1887/2007a: 93-96).

² McEwan has also written two children’s books, *Rose Blanche* (1985) and *The Daydreamer* (1994). A worldview analysis of these two books would certainly be rewarding, given that

investigation can be seen in the context of a renewed interest in religion which has shaped the humanities over the last twenty years or so (cf. Fish 2005: C1) and which is sometimes referred to as the ‘religious turn’ in literary and cultural studies (cf. Nehring and Valentin 2008). Critical interest in religion has been boosted to a new level as a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7. In particular 9/11 is considered to have caused the formation of a meanwhile much discussed public atheism: the so called New Atheism.

New Atheism refers to an early twenty-first-century discourse carried out over a diversity of media and committed to advancing atheism as a social and political force. The term was coined by the journalist Gary Wolf and more narrowly refers to four best-selling books published by four authors between 2004 and 2007 (cf. Wolf 2006: online). These authors are Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. New Atheism understands itself as ‘scientific’ and ‘pro-active’. This means that (i) (empirical) science, particularly Neo-Darwinism, is granted an eminent position in the New Atheist campaign and (ii) that the authors mentioned above actively advertise their atheism. Their argumentation is openly hostile towards religion, which is viewed as harbouring outdated and essentially harmful ideas, and construes an irreconcilable dichotomy between a scientific or rational worldview and a religious or irrational worldview. The flipside of this rejection of religion is a quasi-Arnoldian appreciation of art, especially literature, which is seen as a suitable platform for human self-reflection (cf. Hitchens 2007a: xxiv). In return, several artists have expressed their support for New Atheist ideas, including novelists such as Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Rebecca Goldstein and Ian McEwan, the comedian and writer Ricky Gervais and the politician, filmmaker and author Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Of these cultural celebrities, Ian McEwan, who has close personal links with some of the New Atheists, has come to be most closely associated with promoting New Atheist ideas (cf. Eagleton 2009b: 34). Particularly his novel *Saturday* has been read as a vehicle of New Atheist thought (cf. Beattie 2007: 157-159; Bradley 2009; Impasto 2009) and a similar conclusion has also been drawn with regard to the novel *Enduring Love* (cf. Puschmann-Nalenz 2013: 128). The most profound, though somewhat polemical study on the links between New Atheism and contemporary literature to date is Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate’s *The New Atheist Novel* (2010), which investigates the work of Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Philipp Pullman and Salman Rushdie. To each of these authors one chapter is devoted. The chapter on Ian McEwan discusses the novels *Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love*, *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach*. A similar focus also characterises Margret Martin’s MA thesis (2012), which investigates Neo-Darwinism and New Atheism in the novels *Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*. However, a comprehensive analysis of how religion and (New) atheism fea-

the concept of childhood is particularly loaded with ideological implications, despite the common notion of childhood being an ‘ideology-free zone’. However, such an analysis would require a different, or at least strongly adapted methodological framework. This is why the analysis has not been included in this study.