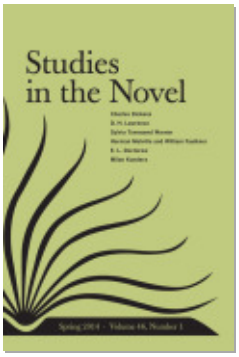
After the End

Mark Osteen



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ESSAY-REVIEW:

AFTER THE END

MARK OSTEEN

BENNETT, ALICE. *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 228 pp. Cloth. $85.00.

BRADLEY, ARTHUR, and ANDREW TATE. *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*. London and New York: Continuum, 2010. 136 pp. Paper. $27.95.

GRAUSAM, DANIEL. *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War.* Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 196 pp. Paper. $22.50.

What happens after the end? This question underlies all three books reviewed here, each of which deals with the relations among eschatology, trauma, and the contemporary novel. Whereas Bradley and Tate critique atheist novelists who have written after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, Bennett analyzes stories told by fictional dead people. Grausam's stakes are the highest: he asks how the threat of nuclear war and human extinction during the Cold War affected US novelists' work.

Bradley and Tate give away their bias on their first page, in the phrase "New Atheist cult." In writing anti-religious manifestoes, they argue, atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have, ironically, founded a religion. But the loaded word "cult" hints at this book's major weakness: although hard-hitting and lively, it is frequently tendentious and hyperbolic, often succumbing to the same reductivism of which they accuse their targets. This flaw is especially true of the chapters on Ian McEwan and Martin Amis,

both written by Bradley; Tate's contributions—on Philip Pullman and Salman Rushdie—are more temperate. Both authors, however, tend to treat novels not as narratives but as arguments.

The authors score some definite hits. The most telling is their charge that Dawkins and writers like him caricature Christian and Islamic fundamentalisms and respond by erecting their own brand of Atheist fundamentalism (4-5). While attacking unverified beliefs, Dawkins's cohorts present a creed "overflowing with...unverified pieties": a Neo-Lucretian reverence for nature, a Comtean positivism, a Hegelian historical teleology, and a Judaeo-Christian belief in the significance of humans (7).

The authors also charge that the New Atheists don't question their own belief in the transcendent value of art, especially the novel. Hence, Bradley and Tate argue, what fills the place of religion in McEwan's recent novels is "belief in family, love, scientific progress and, most importantly, art" (16). In an interview, McEwan stated that novel-reading generates empathy—the basis of morality—because we learn from them "what it's like to be someone else" (23). Yet in *Atonement* he traces budding novelist Briony's *inability* to imagine being someone else; if Bradley and Tate wanted a fictional example to show the dangers of the novelistic imagination, they needed to look no further. However, in this way *Atonement* rebuts their claim that McEwan's novels are little more than manifestoes for art's humanizing power.

Yet Bradley and Tate are right to raise eyebrows at the rather ridiculous climax of *Saturday*, in which a would-be murderer is pacified by listening to Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." The authors pass over the fact that McEwan's faith in art is itself Arnoldian; far from radical, it is nineteenth century through and through. It's difficult, then, to see how McEwan's faith in his own art form constitutes a threat, and even more difficult to discern why it prompts such vituperation.

If in their discussion of McEwan the authors focus on novels, in their excoriation of Martin Amis they concentrate on his recent nonfiction. They write, "For Amis...the cult of the literary represents the acceptable face of religion because...it worships a transcendental deity that actually exists" (37). Bradley and Tate are right to take Amis to task for his claims that Muslims and terrorists are impervious to reason, and for responding to stereotypes with more stereotypes. They are also correct to criticize Amis's blurring of the line between aesthetics and politics, as when he paints Islamists as nothing more than sexually repressed lovers of cliché. Yet the authors acknowledge that Amis's New Atheist novel "has yet to be written" (49), which prompts one to ask why this chapter exists in a book purportedly about novels, as well as why the authors don't discuss Amis's substantial body of fiction.

Tate's chapters are more nuanced even though they produce less provocative conclusions, such as that Pullman's Dark Materials trilogy is "part of a recognizably Judaeo-Christian tradition of heresy and theological

rewriting" (57). Since a line from *Paradise Lost* is invoked in the trilogy's title, this claim is scarcely news. Judaeo-Christian beliefs and tropes have so colonized the Western literary tradition that it is impossible to write *against* Christianity without resorting to them. That's what Nietzsche did, and it's one reason why his call for the transvaluation of values is so compelling. The idea that one can authentically criticize the Judaeo-Christian tradition only through non-Christian tropes and discourses is a straw man. What Tate and Bradley really object to, it seems, is that the ostensibly anti-authoritarian Pullman replaces old religions with "yet more religion, albeit an ostensibly godless piety" (79). Is a belief without a supernatural element a religion or an ideology? Either way, their major charge ends up being that Pullman is a humanist.

Rushdie's single subject, the authors argue, is "the quarrel over God": note, not a "quarrel with God" (82), but a "career-long wrestling bout with fiction and its capacity to represent theological discourse" (94). Rushdie comes off better than the other novelists, partly because his works are too rich and many-layered to have a "single subject," and partly because, as Tate admits, he "invites" rather than closes down the "possibility that faith might have a voice in contemporary narrative" (95). In short, Rushdie is not really an Atheist Novelist; he's a skeptical novelist who "remains intrigued by the persistence of belief" (99).

The authors claim that New Atheist authors have merely "traded in one god for another" (107), but that charge relies on a fuzzy definition of the word "god." This problem resembles another here: a conflation of two meanings of "belief." A reader's "belief" in a fictional world is not the same as a belief in a religion or deity. In the first, the reader knows full well that what she reads isn't true, and, as Coleridge reminded us two hundred years ago, suspends disbelief to gain aesthetic pleasure. A religious person believes the stories and doctrines of her religion; they are not fictions. Bradley and Tate's careless use of key terms—"god," "belief," "religion"—undermines their arguments.

Is narratology dead? If you answered "yes," you're wrong: it is undead, and it is still talking about itself. I came to understand this fact only after reading Alice Bennett's study, which uses narratological theory to generate arguments about the prevalence and value of novels with dead narrators. She proposes that afterlife tales challenge several conventions of fiction: the representation of time, personhood, plot, reader empathy, and fictional space.

While Bennett takes us in some unexpected and enlightening directions, the journey often becomes an ordeal because of the guide's plodding prose, which frequently occludes the sharp observations buried within. One of the latter is this: "in order for retrospection of a completed life to be anticipated we have to posit the existence of an afterlife" (36). In other words, afterlife narratives provide a sense of retrospective "finish" to their characters.

The early chapters employ heavy doses of narratology to distinguish between concepts that aren't truly essential to Bennett's argument. For example, chapter two painstakingly distinguishes between afterlife and apocalypse, but barely returns to apocalypse later, and after completing this discussion, acknowledges that the whole exercise was "artificial" (31).

The book improves when Bennett turns to readings. In the third chapter, for example, she shows how four afterlife narratives upset fictional time. Golding's *Pincher Martin* discloses the difference between physical and phenomenological time, as Martin's extensive afterlife transpires in the moment when he expires; Wyndham Lewis's *Childermass* makes subjective time seem absurd (57). In contrast, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* "works as an enormous time loop" that exemplifies Genette's "iterative narrative" (60). Bennett insightfully notes that in *The Third Policeman*, a "constant present is still sliding into the past through grammar and sentence structure, indicating the basic incompatibility of language and eternity" (62). Martin Amis's tour de force, *Time's Arrow*, in which a Nazi doctor's life is narrated in reverse by a doppelganger living within him, shows time and the universe righting or rebalancing themselves (67).

Chapter four continues the discussion of temporality and eternity. But before we reach eternity, we take a trip to purgatory; here Bennett cites Jacques Le Goff's argument that the creation of purgatory coincided with a change in the understanding of debt and contract. The "place" emerged concurrently with the invention of double-entry bookkeeping, and "purgatorial time came to be understood as calculable and redeemable" by forms of "payment" such as masses or prayers (76). Using Derrida's *Given Time I*, Bennett explores questions of the gift with regard to Ali Smith's *Hotel World*, but too quickly accepts Derrida's argument that the gift is "impossible" and picks at the gift's paradoxes without really unpacking them. Had she brought to bear some of the large library of anthropological and economic work on the gift, her analysis would have been richer.

Still, the discussions of D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* are enlightening. Like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Atwood's novel depends upon the reader's knowledge of previous texts that narrate events occurring later in the characters' lives. Atwood uses prolepsis to place the narrative present "alongside" the events she recounts—another kind of time loop (92). Afterlife narratives, Bennett concludes, "examine the conventions of narrative tense" as they depict "worlds where time does not operate in the ways that realist narrative techniques were developed to represent" (96).

When, in chapter five, Bennett turns to genre fictions—detective and popular crime novels—her prose becomes more lucid and relaxed, her insights clearer. Because dead narrators in mystery stories "expand[ ] the beginning of the story back in time" (107)—the tale doesn't begin with a corpse, but with a witness, *the* witness—they disturb the genre's treatment of temporality. In

both detective novels and ghost stories, "dead narrators not only suggest that the end is not really the end,...[but] they are also constantly aware of their own fictiveness...so that their own endings are exposed as provisional and arbitrary" (116).

The next two chapters deal with omniscience and personhood. In texts such as Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Muriel Spark's *The Comforters*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, dead narrators assault "virtually every critical model for...narratorial omniscience" and question the "status of narrators as people" (117). Dead narrators allow for a divisible concept of omniscience (119)—they can know everything, but lie about it—and enable us to see all narrators as simply textual functions (126). Contemporary fiction's deceased narrators thus "represent the desire for narrators for whom...'all hearts are open'...but they are also a receptacle for anxieties about what this kind of communication does for the parties involved" (141). In short, dead narrators can be both mirror and telescope (145).

In regard to fictional personhood, novels such as Neil Jordan's *Shade* suggest that the storytelling power of the dead is "at the heart of their potential to disrupt the living." The second-person narrative of Iain Banks's *Complicity* adds a further twist. Who is the addressee? The reader? A version of the narrator? It's difficult to say, since "you" are not merely fictional—you are dead! Second-person narration thus includes "the possibility of merging and blending of the boundaries between persons" (161).

The final chapter concentrates on places in afterlife tales. Not surprisingly, Bennett argues that fictional afterlives' "reference worlds" disturb realist conventions (168). Her helpful discussion of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* demonstrates that afterlife fictions permit readers to consider "the status of the fictional" (182).

Bennett concludes that afterlife fictions "throw off-kilter categories relating to narrative temporality, plot, deixis of person, omniscience, the descriptive labels for narrators, and the models we have for identifying the source of fictional statements and fictional worlds" (192). She ends by proposing that what afterlife fictions are really "after" is "narratology itself" (196). Ultimately, to her argument that afterlife narratives are "profoundly at odds" with realism (197), one is prompted to ask: who ever said otherwise?

Unlike Bradley and Tate, who write with the subtlety of a meat cleaver, Bennett's concepts and argumentation are complex and penetrating, but hamstrung by her prose. Although one wishes for readings less burdened by theoretical lumber, her study provokes a good deal of thought and successfully proves its thesis.

Daniel Grausam's monograph is crisply written and pungently argued, adducing well-chosen examples and addressing an important topic. He

examines several novels from the (former?) canon of US postmodern fiction to argue that their experimentation "is an effect of, and, increasingly, an attempt to understand, life lived under the threat of total nuclear war" (4). Postmodernist devices are not just tricks, but a "symptom of new understandings of space and time produced by the nuclear age" (4). Grausam offers an illuminating discussion of how the Nuclear Age transformed Americans' attitudes toward and production of fictionality itself.

His major question is this: "What does narrative look like when the possibility of an expansive future has been called into question?" (5). His answer: "any fiction that tries to think seriously about the possibility of narrative in the thermonuclear age *must* be a form of metanarrative that reflects on the very possibility of narrating an event that would leave no narrator" (16). Grausam's core premise is that the possibility of a nuclear war in which human civilization would be wiped out changes everything, for there would be no one left to read, comment, or understand anything about what happened. There is no narrative means to engage with this potential: that is the paradox with which these writers attempted to cope.

While I think this claim is overstated—even an all-out nuclear war wouldn't immediately exterminate all human beings, and many "post-apocalyptic" novels engaged quite well with such aftermaths, Grausam's dismissive remarks about them notwithstanding—it enables us to link these novelists' work to their historical period. Such a connection is important, given that postmodernist fiction has been criticized for its focus on aesthetic experimentation at the cost of cultural engagement. To the contrary, according to Grausam, fictions by John Barth, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Richard Powers "actively participate[ ] in the largest policy questions raised by the nuclear age" (19).

This promising beginning to a book about endings gives way to a chapter on Barth's *The Floating Opera* that scarcely discusses the nuclear age. Grausam hypothesizes that 1937 is a key cut-off point in both Barth's novel and in the real world: before that date, writers' major concern was with epistemology; afterward, ontology (30). Why not 1946? 1939? 1918? The evidence is not persuasive. For example, Grausam imagines *The Floating Opera*'s protagonist Todd Andrews, before 1937, asking questions such as: "Is the mask or persona I've crafted adequate?...What are the terms on which I can achieve some distance on myself" (34). But these questions concern being as much as they do knowledge—ontology as much as epistemology. Thus does the distinction collapse.

Turning to *The Crying of Lot 49*, Grausam argues that Pynchon's famously inconclusive ending is part and parcel of its engagement with nuclear reality, because "the war that the novel prefigures is one that no reader could ever live through, and the novel's failure to provide its own meaning marks the impossibility of that meaning ever arriving for a surviving audience" (45-46).

Ultimately, "[f]or Pynchon as for Derrida, nuclear war is...less something to be represented than a challenge to representation itself" (57).

For Grausam, Coover's *The Public Burning* dramatizes "what happens when national myth and Cold War reality collide: the collapse of any possible distinction between imaginary ideals of the nation and the actuality of state power" (61). Grausam focuses on an outrageous scene in which Uncle Sam—a symbol come to life—rapes Richard Nixon. A more conventional political critique might award Nixon the rapist's role (65). A brief detour to Fred Zinnemann's film *High Noon* helps to explain this inversion. The year of that film's release, 1952, is also the year when Coover's novel is set, and, as the year when the H-bomb was first tested, it was the moment when Americans first grasped the potential for widespread nuclear destruction (67). The film's famous clock, then, may represent the nuclear clock, as both film and country were obsessed with deadlines. *The Public Burning*, then, tries to depict an America "without a future tense" (71), one in which high noon has already been reached. Coover's metafiction seeks to "render the paradox of a nation that depends upon a now-nonexistent notion of temporality" (72). In other words, the future that The Bomb would create would annihilate the past; its looming presence thus destroys America's sense of destiny and identity.

The remaining chapters treat novels that more directly engage Grausam's thesis. Chapter four compellingly connects experimental fiction writers and war-game scenarists such as Herman Kahn: both share "a discourse of simulation and of the need to create" parallel worlds (79). This chapter will be enlightening to anyone who has read Kahn's coldly imaginative war-fighting scenarios, which read like nothing so much as stark outlines for nuclear disaster novels.

Grausam's study illuminatingly traces the evolution of nuclear war strategy in the 1960s from the doctrine of "massive retaliation" to that of "counterforce" (the belief that one could limit nuclear weapons to the battlefield) to the culminating MAD—"mutual assured destruction." He shows how, by the late '60s, a paradox had emerged: a limited nuclear war relied upon an enemy who would be rational and wish to limit damage—an enemy just like us—even as we vowed to destroy the same enemy for being totally unlike us. Even more vexingly, the defensive measures intended to limit damage would ultimately do the opposite—appear overwhelming to the enemy due to the sheer number of warheads needed to ensure a credible threat. A counterforce would thus inevitably become an all-out exchange (83-84; 88).

Fictions such as Barthelme's story "Game" and Coover's *Universal Baseball Association* portray the perils of such thinking. Revealing that the only way to create and execute a perfectly controlled game is to be the only player, they suggest that war games are useless to predict how nations might behave in an actual nuclear conflict. Such games dangerously reduce the carnage to numbers, thereby making the unthinkable seem manageable. But metafiction

is "particularly suitable" for critiquing the illusion of mastery falsely offered in such gamesmanship (96). Indeed, these fictions mount an "attack on the ethical, political, and destructive implications of simulation" (103).

DeLillo's *End Zone* similarly criticizes the use of games (in this case, football) to represent nuclear war. In the novel's fixation on "the untellable," Grausam sees an effort to come to terms with the paradoxes of representation in the nuclear age. More significantly, Grausam discovers a key historical connection between the novel's date of publication (1972) and the contemporary SALT talks. In *End Zone*'s emphasis on offense at the expense of defense Grausam finds an allusion to the destabilizing consequences of anti-missile defenses—the subject of those SALT talks. To wit: anti-missile missiles would require that any attack be all-out to ensure that enough warheads got through to do significant damage. Paradoxically, banning defensive weapons made the world safer.

In Grausam's analysis of Richard Powers's 1988 novel *Prisoner's Dilemma* we see how the nuclear age fissions the nuclear family—specifically, the Hobsons, the patriarch of which, Eddie Sr., witnessed the Trinity test. Like *The Universal Baseball Association*'s J. Henry Waugh, Eddie invents an alternate history that, according to Grausam, reflects the redemptive powers of storytelling itself, allowing us to imagine a way out of the nuclear predicament. And so, as if in one of Bennett's time loops, we land back at McEwan's humanist defense of the novel—except that Grausam shares McEwan's belief. In preserving the possibility of a future, he suggests, novels such as *Prisoner's Dilemma* can make good things happen (144).

The afterword, which seems to have been appended to preempt the criticism that the book discusses only white males, is dispensable. But even if Grausam's major argument—that writing in the nuclear age requires innovative aesthetic strategies, because "representation fails in the face of the 'reality' of the bomb, and so to write about it is always to approach the subject indirectly" (151)—is overstated, lucid writing and incisive analysis make this study persuasive.

What do these books share? A concern with death and trauma, with novelistic attempts to portray what cannot be known, whether it be God, the afterlife, or nuclear destruction. All three address the value of narrative in light of what may occur after the end.