

FICTION

# Agnostic tests

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36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE  
EXISTENCE OF GOD

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As both a professor of philosophy and the wife of the renowned psychologist, Steven Pinker, Rebecca Goldstein is no stranger to the world of academic celebrity. In her latest novel, she takes as her hero a new recruit to the gilded ranks of media intellectuals. Cass Seltzer, a hitherto unknown academic at a provincial US college, finds himself famous overnight with the surprise success of his religious polemic, *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*. His book is an attempt not to ridicule religion, but to understand it from the sympathetic standpoint of “the regretfully disillusioned”. Cass’s sudden fame has sprung less from the book itself than its appendix: a catalogue of “thirty-six arguments for the existence of God”, complete with formal rebuttals. Almost by accident, this “afterthought” appendix has propelled him into the A-list of atheists-for-hire, alongside Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

The frame narrative of the novel unfolds over the course of a single week, leading up to a public debate between Cass and a Nobel Prize-winning religious apologist, Felix Fidelity. Goldstein steers us through a series of flashbacks that invite us to draw parallels between Cass’s philosophical work and the ruffled contours of his personal life. A chapter in which he wrangles over whether to tell his girlfriend that he loves her, for example, is titled “The Argument from Insoluble Solitude”; other chapters have similarly suggestive titles, including “The Argument from Reversal of Fortune” and “The Argument from the Eternity of Irony”. The

cumulative effect of this narrative strategy is to imply a paradox: even as Cass prepares his arguments for the debate, reflection on the emotional facts of his life attests to the stubborn appeal of the spiritual.

Part of Cass’s atheism seems rooted in the same impulse that attracts him to women who possess an aggressive brand of extreme rationality. His ex-wife, Pascale, is a celebrated French poet who reminds Cass of a “starved wolf”, going “after statements with ferocity, ripping them into phonetic shreds”. His current girlfriend, Lucinda Mandelbaum, is a world-renowned game theorist whose favourite pastime is “fanging”, i.e. “posing a question from which the questioned can’t recover”.

A spiritual element is introduced in the person of Cass’s former mentor, Jonas Elijah Klapper, a literature professor “who had once reigned unopposed over vast stretches of the humanities”. Revolted by the “talismanic attachment of certain philosophers to logic”, Klapper leads seminars that are a combination of a Harold Bloom lecture and an evangelical mass. The study of literature for Klapper is nothing less than an engagement with the sublime.

The relationship between Klapper and Cass is put under strain after a visit to Cass’s ancestral home, a secluded community of strict Hasidic Jews, where the two men meet Azarya, a six-year-old prodigy who shows signs of being a mathematical genius. While Klapper is entranced by the kabbalistic teaching of Azarya’s rabbi teachers, Cass fears that the child’s intellect will suffer under the superstitious tuition of “a sect that thinks it reveres education”, but whose mystical teaching “has nothing to do with real knowledge”.

The zigzagging structure of the novel means that the full richness of these conflicting impulses is never quite played out in



narrative terms. Nonetheless, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* is an enjoyable feast of ideas that also serves as a very funny satire on the politics of campus life. While Cass's triumphant performance in the climactic debate leaves us in no doubt as to his atheistic convictions, his final engagement with Azarya's choice to remain within the Hasidic community hints at a strained accommodation with the beliefs that he himself has chosen to reject. The sight of Azarya willingly laying aside his genius for the religious life both grieves Cass and moves him; it is proof that "even the most gifted among us is feeble in mind against the brutality of incomprehension that assaults us from all sides".

