

Saturn vs. Hermes: The Battle of the Hemispheres in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

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Ian McEwan's Saturday explores the tension between fundamental human polarities, polarities the novel shares with many improvisations (texts that claim unmediated, spontaneous, careless, or inspired creation): immediacy vs. mediation; freedom vs. necessity; spontaneity vs. care and craft; Hermes vs. Saturn; right- vs. left-brain. McEwan's protagonist is both improviser and, as neurosurgeon, careful craftsman. His day provides him opportunities to confront and resolve these dualities. The novel exhibits improvisation's formal conventions and thematic features, demonstrating their synergy. Seen through the lens of improvisation, the novel dramatizes the right-brain's pushback in the life of a man almost wholly dedicated to the rationalistic, analytic left-brain.

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Not for a moment dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of. . . . The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress.

—C.G. JUNG

“That’s not writing, that’s typing.” So Truman Capote, with the hauteur of the urbane craftsman, famously censured Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, written in one sitting on a 120-foot scroll. Faced with texts that

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claim to be improvised, we often play Capote's Goldilocks game: too much? not enough? or just right? But if you forgo judging, you realize, first, that there are countless texts that claim improvised provenance. From Homer's sung epics to Milton's *Paradise Lost* ("this my unpremeditated verse," he calls it); from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" ("not a line of it was altered") to Coleridge's opium-fueled dream ode "Kubla Khan"; from Mark Twain's pseudo-naïf *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ("persons attempting to find a plot will be shot") to Ginsberg's drug-inspired rant, *Howl*—they are everywhere. Second, you see that they are largely of a piece. Improvisations—as I call them—are characterized first by claiming to be spontaneously created: inspired by the muses, in a dream, instinctively, off the top of one's head, when drunk, but in any case unmediated by thought, effort, plan, craft, or purpose. Almost an accident, they just happen. Next, through a number of stylistic and formal means they try to persuade us of this careless origin. Finally, thematically, they challenge the reigning rationality and craft of their day.¹

The mere claim of careless spontaneity, or the presence of any of its other persistent conventions do not make an improvisation, just as invoking the muse or cataloguing ships or devils—conventions of epic—do not an epic make. There are, after all, legions of such claims, and most are just that, merely "the topos of affected modesty" (63) as literary historian Ernst Curtius calls them following Quintilian. Or, *par contre*, they are boasts, like Kerouac's, of one's dazzling inventiveness. But there are instances where the claim informs all levels of a work—in the texture of style, form, and theme. In other words, other rhetorical and formal features join the improvisatory gesture, each affecting to convince the audience that this work proceeds not from the mind but from some non-rational faculty. Without support from other conventions of improvisation, the claim of spontaneity is just an empty gesture. *With* their synergistic support, the gesture becomes a clue we follow into the special world of improvisation where fundamental human polarities contend.

The cultural analysis that psychiatrist and neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist offers in *The Master and the Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* helps make sense of the polarities that roil on and beneath the surface of such texts. At the heart of human history McGilchrist finds a ceaseless conflict between left- and right-brain hemispheres. Quick to distance himself from the popularized, too-stark version of the hemisphere split, McGilchrist offers a sweeping account of cultural history since the Greeks of how the hemispheres, meant by evolution to work in coordination but inherently in conflict, have through "a succession of shifts of balance" come to dysfunction. The rationalistic, analytic left-brain has largely usurped the intuitive gestalt function of the right. For McGilchrist, rationalistic, positivistic science and technology have come increasingly to rule the roost in the last 200 years: "the balance has swung too far—perhaps irretrievably far—toward the Apollonian left hemisphere, which now appears to believe that it can do anything, make anything, on its own" (240).

Overall, the drive of Western civilization has been toward an increasing Apollonian commitment to knowing and mastering the world through reason, will, craft, and scientific objectivity. In other words, left-brain dominance. But appropriating Melville's words, we can add that civilization "spins *against* the way it drives" (55). The spin that runs counter to the dominant, rationalist drive is the suggestion at the heart of improvisation that we can know more of the world through non-rational means: intuition, inspiration, or the unconscious—right-brain activity. As the tide of positivistic, rationalist science has mounted, this strong riptide has run through it, no minor eddy, but a strong countercurrent articulated by some of the strongest minds of the Western tradition. Improvisations can be seen as granular versions—down to the textual level—of McGilchrist's sweeping history of human culture. Improvisation is the right hemisphere's periodic pushback against this dysfunctional trend.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* presents a skirmish in McGilchrist's battle of the hemispheres. To a surprising degree, the novel exhibits many of improvisation's formal conventions and thematic features, demonstrating their synergistic relationship. Seen through the lens of improvisation, the novel dramatizes the right-brain's pushback in the life of a man almost wholly dedicated to the rationalistic, analytic left-brain thinking.

Hardly associated with improvisation, McEwan has a well-deserved reputation as craftsman. For the *New York Times*, McEwan "is the master clockmaker of novelists, piecing together the cogs and wheels of his plots with unerring meticulousness" (Heller). Nonetheless, though not overtly claiming spontaneity, McEwan deploys a center-of-consciousness narrative method that offers an unmediated window into the life of the protagonist. We are inside the head of Henry Perowne from the moment he wakes till the moment he sleeps. While McEwan's narrative method may lack Joyce's pyrotechnics in *Ulysses*, in his choice of central consciousness McEwan does Joyce's failed medical student Stephen Dedalus one better. Perowne is not just, like Stephen, "An habitual observer of his own moods" (4) and thoughts. As a neurosurgeon up-to-date on current neuroscience, he also offers a running commentary on the brain and other bodily systems that make his machine tick. Unlike Leopold Bloom who shares Perowne's interest in how the body functions, the twenty-first century hero knows what he's talking, or thinking, about. His perceptions of how the world and body work are far sounder than Leopold Bloom's charming but often-mangled guesswork. In *Saturday* we witness a neurosurgeon's thoughts, well-informed by a century of scientific progress since Joyce, especially its crown jewel: neuroscience.

While the novel's claim of spontaneity is only implicit in its narrative method, McEwan nonetheless quickly situates *Saturday* in the tradition of improvisation with a cascade of tropes and figures of immediacy. From the start, the novel is framed in immediacies. First, McEwan's epigraph invokes the voice of the great wildman protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Herzog* who improvises unsent letters and who "Characteristically . . . was determined to act without clearly knowing what to do, and even recognizing that he had no power over his impulses" (n.p.). *Saturday*

then opens “Some hours before dawn,” when “Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, and then rising to his feet” (1). Perowne is awake and still in a liminal state: “It’s not clear to him when exactly he became conscious, nor does it seem relevant” (21). Perowne is an accomplished neurosurgeon, a “master clockmaker” (Heller) in his own right who likes to take charge of his usually quite regimented day. “It’s not possible to be an unassertive brain surgeon” (21), we will learn later, but at the outset everything is new, easy, naked, unmediated, and Perowne is a passive receptor of fleeting impressions:

He’s never done such a thing before, but he isn’t alarmed or even faintly surprised, for the movement is *easy*, and pleasurable in his limbs, and his back and legs feel unusually strong. He stands there, *naked* by the bed—*he always sleeps naked*—feeling his full height, aware of his wife’s patient breathing and of the wintry bedroom air on his skin. That too is a pleasurable sensation. His bedside clock shows three forty. He has *no idea* what he’s doing out of bed: he has no need to relieve himself, nor is he disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before, or even by the state of the world. It’s as if, standing there in the darkness, he’s *materialized out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered*. (1; emphases added)

Perowne seems not unlike Athena who burst from the forehead of Zeus, a birth midwived by Hermes who will figure importantly in the novel as he often does in improvisations in various Trickster guises. We hear that Perowne’s “vision—always good—seems to have sharpened.” This is a man with the alertness and the grace of newborn Hermes himself, of whom we learn in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*:

Born in the morning,
 he played the lyre
 by afternoon, and
 by evening had stolen the cattle
 of the Archer Apollo
 For after he jumped down from
 the immortal loins of his mother
 he couldn’t lie still very long
 in his sacred cradle,
 but leaped right up
 to search for the cattle of Apollo,
 climbing over the threshold
 of this high-roofed cave. (24).

Here’s Perowne:

In fact, he’s *alert* and *empty-headed* and *inexplicably elated*. With no decision made, *no motivation at all*, he begins to move towards the nearest of the three bedroom windows and experiences *such ease and lightness in his tread that he suspects at once he’s*

dreaming or sleepwalking. If it is the case, he'll be disappointed. *Dreams don't interest him; that this should be real is a richer possibility. And he's entirely himself, he is certain of it, and he knows that sleep is behind him: to know the difference between it and waking, to know the boundaries, is the essence of sanity.* (1–2; emphases added)

But while Hermes is always about liminality (“climbing over the threshold”), man of science Henry Perowne is a man almost wholly committed to consciousness and not a little uncomfortable with encroachments thereupon—“Dreams don't interest him.” Perowne likes control, but he has been attentive enough to the life of the mind to know there are limits, that control is ephemeral, a will-of-the-wisp. He knows that “the second-by-second wash of his thoughts is only partially his to control—the drift, the white noise of solitary thought is driven by his emotional state” (78). Perowne is a post-Freudian, post-Jungian, post-Bloomian man: he knows that unconscious forces determine much behavior.

Nonetheless committed to and shaped by a life in science, Perowne sometimes suffers from certain *déformations professionnelles* of vision. Like many surgeons, he cannot “deny the egotistical joy in his own skills, or the pleasure he still takes in the relief of the relatives when he comes down from the operating room like a god, an angel with the glad tidings—life, not death” (23). We hear his cold, Cartesian description of some nurses he sees from his godlike, early morning perch at the window:

with his advantage of height and in his curious mood, he not only watches them, but watches over them, supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god. In the lifeless cold, they pass through the night, hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching neural networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibers, warm filaments with their invisible glow of consciousness—these engines devise their own tracks. (12)

An engine endowed with free will: this Enlightenment image of the antinomy between determinism and free will is much in Perowne's thoughts and often at issue in improvisations. The heroes of Homer's improvised epic songs—the Western tradition's foundational texts—face this very conflict. Achilles is constrained by fate and free to choose (long life and no fame, or eternal fame and short life). Odysseus is ever-crafty, a man of many turns, that is *polytropos*, an epithet he shares in the ancient Greek canon only with wing-heeled Hermes, in legend his great grandfather who is often his guide. Odysseus improvises his way into and out of trouble, his men often paying the price for his clever solutions. In the final analysis, improvisations are not restricted to either side of the polarities of freedom vs. necessity, spontaneity vs. care and craft. What sets up improvisation's conceptual field, and what inhabits it, is the conflict between the opposing forces. Here Perowne's “lifeless cold” seems to be not only the night's but also his own. What he will learn in the course of the day is that another part of sanity is to know that boundaries aren't so easy to know and that, as Trickster teaches us, they can and should be porous.²

Perowne will spend a lot of his Saturday—Saturn’s day—fending off both his coldness and the volatile heat that the day has in store for him. For alchemists, “*prima materia* is ‘saturnine,’ and the malefic Saturn is the abode of the devil, or again it is the most despised and rejected thing, ‘thrown out into the street,’ ‘cast on the dung-hill,’ ‘found in filth’” (Jung 13:10). Perowne will, as the day progresses, experience the shadowy Trickster throwing a spanner wrench in his clockworks, nearly casting him upon the dunghill of loss. *Saturday* is about a partisan of Saturn—in astrology associated with limitation, restriction, boundaries, structures, and practicality—forced to accommodate ever-fluid, impractical Hermes. Like Italo Calvino, Perowne is “a Saturn who dreams of being a Mercury” (52). The arc of the novel challenges Perowne to transmute Saturn—lead—by a confrontation with Trickster/Mercury/Hermes into the gold of well-being for himself and his family.

The Trickster will have far worse matters in store for Perowne, but he intrudes even as Perowne’s day begins. In his just-awakened, liminal state, Perowne witnesses a crippled airliner limping into Heathrow. First, Trickster messes with perspective. Perowne initially “assumes proportions on a planetary scale: it’s a meteor burning out in the London sky, traversing left to right, low on the horizon, though well clear of the taller buildings” (12). But no, it moves too slowly: “It’s a comet, tinged with yellow, with the familiar bright core trailing its fiery envelope. Then he hears “a low rumbling sound, gentle thunder gathering in volume” (13). Now that he knows it’s a plane with an engine afire, the hermeneutic problem emerges. What caused it? This is post 9/11. Could this be jihadists on their way to attack London?

This is not the only troubling thought Trickster introduces. Perowne is tempted to read his waking just in time to see the crippled airliner as a Jungian synchronicity, an acausal but meaningful connection that would put him at the center of events:

If Perowne were inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations, he could play with the idea that he’s been summoned; that having woken in an unusual state of mind, and gone to the window for no reason, he should acknowledge a hidden order, an external intelligence which wants to show or tell him something of significance. (16)

Perceptions of synchronicities, according to Jung, are often triggered by a certain openness to the liminal, “*un abaissement du niveau mental*” (qtd. in Stein 211). This is just the state Perowne is in. But, ever the man of reason, he rejects such a notion. There are causal explanations; he deploys Occam’s razor to shred the occult, supernatural explanation:

But a city of its nature cultivates insomniacs; [. . .] That it should be him and not someone else is an arbitrary matter. A simple anthropic principle is involved. The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what his psychiatric colleagues call a problem, or an idea, of reference. An excess of the subjective, the

ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance. In Henry's view such reasoning belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis. (16–17)

For Perowne such thinking is not just crazy, it's dangerous. Imagining the plane the victim of 9/11 style jihadists, Perowne associates synchronicity with the magical thinking of ideologues: "And such reasoning may have caused the fire on the plane. A man of sound faith with a bomb in the heel of his shoe" (17). Such a man, Perowne might add, is driven by "an excess of the subjective" to believe that he knows God's wishes through unmediated experience. Like many improvisations, *Saturday* lures us into a high valuation of immediacy, then reminds us that there, sometimes, be dragons.

Unlike the terrorist he imagines, Perowne is an exquisitely trained scientist who needs causal explanations for things. He seems to have matters conceptually squared away. But life won't let him off so easy. Later that day, he goes to hear his son Theo in rehearsal. Theo is a blues guitarist who, while his name means god, "plays like an angel" and represents to Perowne an artistic freedom and grace that go beyond Perowne's professional *techné*: "There's nothing in his own life that contains this inventiveness, this style of being free. The music speaks to unexpressed longing or frustration, a sense that he's denied himself an open road, the life of the heart celebrated in the songs" (28). If Theo is a god as his name suggests, then he is Hermes: inventor of the lyre, lord of freedom and the "open road." Perowne knows "He ought to learn from Theo how to let go" (56).

When Perowne recounts his morning witnessing the crippled airliner, Theo, coming at things as an artist, is prepared to accept synchronicity's appeal to read meaning into coincidence:

"But uh, so what were you doing at the window?"

"I told you. I couldn't sleep."

"Some coincidence."

"Exactly that."

Their eyes meet—a moment of potential challenge—then Theo looks away and shrugs. . . . As Henry understands it, Theo's world-view accommodates a hunch that somehow everything is connected, interestingly connected, and that certain authorities, notably the U.S. government, with privileged access to extra-terrestrial intelligence, is excluding the rest of the world from such wondrous knowledge as contemporary science, dull and strait-laced, cannot begin to comprehend. (30)

Perowne thus manages to wedge synchronicity momentarily back into its comfortable cubbyhole: the notion is a little nuts and he hopes his artsy son will grow out of it. Facts are facts. Unlike Bellow's Herzog who is troubled because "In ancient days, the genius of man went largely into metaphors. But now into facts" (258), Perowne is uncomfortable with metaphor. When he ventures the metaphor that "The quality of silence in the house is thickened . . . by the fact of Theo deeply asleep on the third floor," he has to back off parenthetically: "Perowne

can't help unscientifically thinking" (64). For his poet daughter Daisy, who is trying to school him in the arts, Perowne is a "Gradgrind" who should "Look at your Mme Bovary again. . . . [Flaubert] was warning the world against people *just like you*" (67; emphasis in original).

But Perowne is no Philistine. He wonders with awe at human achievement and thinks science offers a better record of those wonders than fiction does: "Daisy's reading lists have persuaded him that fiction is too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzlingly achieved" (67). Embracing one of improvisation's highest values, for Perowne "the impossible [is] dazzlingly achieved" through alertness. As in Joyce's *Ulysses*, McEwan uses center-of-consciousness narration to make readers front-and-center witnesses to Perowne's alertness. This is a man who can explain his pre-verbal, image-based thoughts as he responds to a demonstration in the London streets against the impending first Gulf War:

A second can be a long time in introspection. Long enough for Henry to make a start on the negative features, certainly enough time for him to think, or sense, without unwrapping the thought into syntax and words, that it is in fact the state of the world that troubles him most, and the marchers [in the demonstration] are there to remind him of it. . . . The assertions and the questions don't spell themselves out. *He experiences them more as a mental sbrug followed by an interrogative pulse. This is the pre-verbal language that linguists call mentalese. Hardly a language, more a matrix of shifting patterns, consolidating and compressing meaning in fractions of a second, and blending it inseparably with its distinctive emotional hue, which itself is rather like a color. A sickly yellow. Even with a poet's gift of compression, it could take hundreds of words and many minutes to describe.* (80–81; emphasis added)

Perowne's "mentalese" seems to describe the mind's output somewhere between primal phenomenological thoughts and the emergence of verbal figures. Wherever these half-thoughts stem from, Perowne has them, "driving with unconscious expertise," just as a key plot point is about to burst in upon his complacent life, a car accident: "So that when a flash of red streaks in across his left peripheral vision, like a shape on his retina in a bout of insomnia, it already has the quality of an idea, a new idea, unexpected and dangerous, but entirely his, and not of the world beyond himself" (81). Just like the events at dawn when he awoke, this event is saturated in immediacy:

He's driving with unconscious expertise into the narrow column of space framed on the right by a curb-flanked cycle path, and on the left by a line of parked cars. It's from this line that the rings, and with it, the snap of a wing mirror cleanly sheared and the whine of sheet-steel surfaces sliding under pressure as two cars pour into a gap wide enough for one. Perowne's instant decision at the moment of impact is to accelerate as he swerves right. (81)

The Shadow/Trickster at the wheel of the red car is more akin to Joyce's malignant Buck Mulligan than to his benign Leopold Bloom: it is a thug, Baxter, accompanied by his goons, Nark and Nigel. Baxter has a neurological condition that makes him subject to wild mood swings: an emotional improviser. He exemplifies the dark side of improv, improv gone wrong: "Here is the signature of so many neurodegenerative diseases—the swift transition from one mood to another, without awareness or memory, or understanding of how it seems to others" (96). Perowne's mother, suffering from Alzheimer's, offers another image of misplaced immediacy: for her "Everything belongs in the present" (168).

Perowne, confronted by these thugs, deploys what cognitive psychologists call "thin-slicing," the rapid and often accurate cognition by "the adaptive unconscious . . . a kind of giant computer that quickly and quietly processes a lot of the data we need in order to keep functioning as human beings" (Gladwell 11). Perowne uses "thin-slicing"—honed by a career in diagnostics—as leverage against his dangerous adversaries, first to escape from the accident scene where they threaten to bloody him badly, and later when they invade his elegant, eighteenth-century, central-London townhouse to menace his family.

Perowne's quick thinking can be understood not only in terms of the latest cognitive psychology, but also in light of the Greek concept of *mētis*. Odysseus is known not only as *polytropos*, of many turns, but also *polymētis*, the man of many tricks. *Mētis* is the classical Greek word for cunning intelligence "which operates," Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant note,

in the world of becoming, in circumstances of conflict—[it] takes the form of an ability to deal with whatever comes up, drawing on certain intellectual qualities: forethought[,] perspicacity, quickness and acuteness of understanding, trickery, and even deceit. . . . A being of *mētis* slips through its adversary's fingers like running water. It is so supple as to be polymorphic; like a trap, it is the opposite of what it seems to be. (44)

It should thus surprise us little that spontaneity should prove so slippery. The symbol of medicine, the rod of Asclepius, which has one coiled snake, is often confused with Hermes's two-snaked caduceus, perhaps not without reason. Medicine is both *technē* and *ars*, both Apollo's realm and Hermes's.

Perowne is a master technician, but, in watching him formulate his diagnosis of Baxter, we experience the polytropic hermetic *mētis* of the *art*, not *craft*, of medicine:

Baxter's fixed regard is on [the crowd] as it passes, his features faintly distorted, strained by pity. A textbook phrase comes to Henry in much the same way as the cantata melody—a modest rise in his adrenaline level is making him unusually associative. Or the pressures of the past week won't release him from the habits, the intellectual game of diagnosis. The phrase is, a false sense of superiority. Yes, it can be down to a slight alteration in character, preceding the first tremors, somewhat

short of, a little less disabling than, those other neurological conditions—grandiosity, delusions of grandeur. But he may be mis-remembering. Neurology is not his field. As Baxter stares at the marchers, he makes tiny movements with his head, little nods and shakes. Watching him unobserved for a few seconds, Perowne suddenly understands—Baxter is unable to initiate or make saccades, those flickering changes of eye position from one fixation to another. To scan the crowd, he is having to move his head. (91)

There is an element here of the ratiocinative, the deductive, of concepts being applied to shape evidence. But the “modest rise in [Perowne’s] adrenaline level” that makes “him unusually associative” suggests that a Jungian *abaissement du niveau mental* is involved. Conceptual categories emerge from empirical induction: “the textbook phrase comes to Henry in much the same way as the cantata melody”—which a trumpet among the marchers has just evoked in him. We don’t hear Perowne’s conceptual diagnosis—Huntington’s disease—for several pages. As usual with improv, what is promoted is alertness: this is Perowne at his most alert, D.H. Lawrence’s *Man Alive*.

The car accident throws Perowne into the turbulent world of Chaotics, a world overseen by Hermes/Trickster where events are both unpredictable and determined, a paradox Perowne is alert to. Perowne thinks about the “pure artifice” of “the urban drama” their confrontation over the car accident becomes:

Someone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other is going to give way. Popular culture has worn this matter smooth with reiteration, this ancient genetic patrimony that also oils the machinations of bullfrogs and cockerels and stags. And despite the varied and casual dress code, there are rules as elaborate as the politesse of the Versailles court that no set of genes can express. For a start, it is not permitted as they stand there to acknowledge the self-consciousness of the event, or its overbearing irony: from just up the street, they can hear the tramping and tribal drums of the peace mongers. Furthermore, nothing can be predicted, but everything, as soon as it happens, will seem to fit.

“Cigarette?”

Exactly so. This is how it’s bound to start. (87)

Understanding that events are both fractally fated and subject to free will prepares Perowne to ride the crest of the present moment: he knows the pattern, but knows he doesn’t know how the pattern will manifest. Like the spontaneity of spontaneous texts, the *randomness* or disorder of chaos is real: we can never know what the next point in a solution to a non-linear equation will be. But like the formal system of conventions employed by improvisations, chaos is a *deterministic* system: each point in the universe of solutions will be on a predetermined, self-similar structure. Each point, randomly chosen, will be part of an order. Think of improvised jazz: each note fits the system of chromatic changes but we listeners do not know what the next note will be. Once it comes, however, it feels inevitable: “Exactly so.”

Perowne's alertness to the present moment commends him. So do his broad sympathies. Though he manipulates Baxter with his diagnosis to get himself out of a street fight in which he will surely be the loser, he feels guilty for doing so, taking the Hippocratic Oath further than most of his readers would feel the need to. He does not condescend to Baxter and has a sincere interest in helping him deal with his inevitable diminishment in mental function. After Baxter invades the Perowne townhouse and holds a knife to Perowne's wife's throat and forces daughter Daisy to undress, and after Theo throws Baxter down the stairs breaking his neck, Perowne performs the needed neurosurgery.

In an earlier passage, we see Perowne shopping for the ingredients for a fish stew he will serve that evening and finding sympathy for the fish he is about to cook in a way that recalls Bloom's generous sympathy for the horse in the "Hades" chapter of *Ulysses* (101):

Naturally, Perowne the fly-fisherman has seen the recent literature: scores of polymodal nociceptor sites just like ours in the head and neck of rainbow trout. It was once convenient to think biblically, to believe we're surrounded for our benefit by edible automata on land and sea. Now it turns out that even fish feel pain. This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. (127–28)

No tree- (or fish-) hugger, Perowne here admirably embraces mankind's inexorable shadow—that we must kill to survive.

Perowne's sympathy for fish is an act less of the heart than of active consciousness, his ego's attempt to inhabit the world with a good conscience. But the novel also provides the darkest possible portraits of "inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present." Chance may be the fount of modernist art, but it can be the source of much modern misery. Chance is a crucial issue in a novel hinging on car accidents and in which the protagonist is reading a biography of the man who brought chance genetic mutation to the center of the nineteenth century conversation. For Perowne, chance can mean freedom: "Even as a child, and especially after Aberfan, [a 1966 Welsh mining disaster that killed many adults and many more children] he never believed in fate or providence, or the future being made by someone in the sky. Instead, at every instant, a trillion trillion possible futures; the pickiness of pure chance and physical laws seemed like freedom" (128–29).

But Perowne is also aware that chance can lead to constraint and determinism. Baxter's Huntington's disease was brought on by a chance, spontaneous genetic mutation: "The misfortune lies within a single gene, in an excessive repeat of a single sequence—CAG. Here's biological determinism in its purest form. More than forty repeats of that one little codon, and you're doomed. Your future is fixed and easily foretold" (94). Baxter is "that unpickable knot of affliction" (282). *Saturday* may not cut through the Gordian knot of affliction, but it offers images and figures that with Keatsian Negative Capability hold knotted antinomies in suspension.

* * *

As with most improvisations, *Saturday* privileges immediacy—first through its narrative method—even as it figures an overabundance of examples of both immediacy and careful craftsmanship that complicate that privileging and invite us to see and experience spontaneity and immediacy from different angles. That narrative method—moment-by-moment interior monologue/center of consciousness—is set implicitly in contrast (and dialogue) with traditionally crafted biography, the received notion of how to know a life, an example of which Perowne is reading: “At times this biography [of Darwin] made him comfortably nostalgic for a verdant, horse-drawn, affectionate England; at others he was faintly depressed by the way a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages—bottled, like homemade chutney” (5). Like *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Saturday*’s moment-by-moment account will capture “a whole life” not by offering more than “a few hundred pages—bottled, like homemade chutney” but instead by being alert to just one day’s lived life.

The novel’s cityscape contrasts to the immediacies that will play out there. Perowne’s townhouse is situated on elegant eighteenth-century Fitzroy Square “enclosing a perfect circle of garden—an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity” (3). Yet their square is situated in a London that Perowne sees as a masterpiece of self-emergent order: “Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work” (3). That’s how spontaneity can work positively at a macrocosmic level, inviting a rich and vital order to emerge.

The novel also offers a number of positive figurations of spontaneous behavior on a microcosmic level. On the squash court, Perowne experiences the “gracious freedom” Paul Ricoeur celebrates, “bodily spontaneity allied with the initiative which moves it without resistance” (485). Just so, for Perowne, “It’s possible in a long rally to become a virtually unconscious being, inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present, merely reacting, taking one shot at a time, existing only to keep going” (111).

On the other hand, as neurosurgeon Perowne is the professional embodiment of thoughtful craft with a taste for order. In the operating room, he experiences,

the pleasure of knowing precisely what he’s doing, of seeing the instruments arrayed on the trolley, of being with his firm [operating team] in the muffled quiet of the theater [OR], the murmur of the air filtration, the sharper hiss of oxygen passing into the mask taped to Baxter’s face out of sight under the drapes, the clarity of the overhead lights. It’s a reminder from childhood of the closed fascination of a board game. (258)

He is aware that he stands on the shoulders of craftsmen/scientists/technicians who carefully developed the procedures he employs: “Almost a century of failure

and partial success lay behind this one procedure, of other routes tried and rejected, and decades of fresh invention to make it possible, including this microscope and the fiber-optic lighting" (46). This is the progress the Enlightenment promised.

But Perowne is a man of many parts. Doing his Friday paperwork the day before, Perowne displays his own chops as improviser: "long after his secretary went home he typed in his overheated box of an office on the hospital's third floor. . . . He prides himself on speed and a sleek, wry style. It never needs much forethought—typing and composing are one" (10). And though we hear a lot in the course of his day about the craft of surgery and the careful trial-and-error history behind every procedure, even surgery offers blissed-out immediacy when he, as on the squash court, "inhabit[s] the narrowest slice of the present":

For the past two hours he's been in a dream of absorption that has dissolved all sense of time, and all awareness of the other parts of his life. Even his awareness of his own existence has vanished. He's been delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future. In retrospect, though never at the time, it feels like profound happiness. It's a little like sex, in that he feels himself in another medium, but it's less obviously pleasurable, and clearly not sensual. This state of mind brings a contentment he never finds with any passive form of entertainment. Books, cinema, even music can't bring him to this. . . . He feels calm, and spacious, fully qualified to exist. It's a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy. (266)

The Chinese idea of *wu-wei*—effortless doing, embodied mindfulness—perhaps best explains the "state of mind" that brings Perowne such contentment.³ Music may not usually bring him this joy, but his son Theo's blues guitar brings Perowne an experience of "aesthetic arrest" worthy of Stephen Dedalus:

He lets ["the great engine of sound"] engulf him. There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself. Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever—mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state. But only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalizingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes. . . .

And here it is now, a coherent world, everything fitting at last. (175–6; 178)

Free from adulterations, unmediated experience can produce this sense of community. It can "fetch the age of gold," in Milton's words in *The Nativity Ode*, as the poet imagines hearing the celestial improvisation would do, bringing on apocalypse:

For if such holy Song
 Enwrap our fancy long,
 Time will run back and fetch the age of gold,
 And speckl'd vanity
 Will sicken soon and die,
 And leprous sin will melt from earthly mold,
 And Hell itself will pass away,
 And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day. (ll. 13–20)

At the center of Milton's vision Mercy holds sway:

Yea Truth, and Justice then
 Will down return to men,
 Th'enamell'd Arras of the Rainbow wearing,
 And Mercy sit between,
 Thron'd in Celestial sheen,
 With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering,
 And Heav'n as at some festival
 Will open wide the Gates of her high Palace Hall. (ll. 141–48)

Improvisation's central human paradox is that if we forgo the comforting but quite limited hierarchical order that systematic reason can win from experience, and if we instead loosen up—to the chaotic primacy of our emotions, instincts, impulses, and even our frailties—we can regain a lost, richer egalitarian order. Improvisation is shot through with the spirit of democracy, especially the shared sense that we will get to what's right by allowing what's flawed to play itself out. Improvisation's ultimate message is that the results of our fall from grace offer our way back: passion and the instinctual life that feeds it, knowledge of good and evil, alertness to the fallen world itself. The inspiration of spontaneity and the conventions that express it together try kinetically and performatively to get us there. Perowne's alertness to the spontaneous unfolding of life lends him an egalitarian spirit well beyond his upper-middle-class means.

At some point, Theo's lyric "fetches" "a coherent world, everything fitting at last" by lovingly invoking the family home on Fitzroy Square:

Baby, you can choose despair,
 Or you can be happy if you dare.
 So let me take you there,
 My city square, city square. (175)

Fitzroy Square, a constant touchstone of the narrative—*Saturday* begins and ends with Perowne's contemplating it—figures a circle within a square or squared circle, the mathematical impossibility long the dream of rationalists, like the square's Enlightenment-era architect: "And the Perownes' own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden—an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced

by modernity . . ." (3). All that Enlightenment perfection is now troubled in the light of day and dark of night by the druggies and ticket scalpers who use it to transact illicit business, and by Nark and Nigel who use it as a staging area to invade the Perowne's elegant townhouse. Theo's embrace of the square as *locus amoenus* is at once an act of will and consciousness—"you can *choose* despair, / Or you can be happy *if you dare*. / So let me take you there." As mandala image, figure, and symbol, Theo's squared circle is an act of Jung's "transcendent imagination," which reconciles opposites that can't rationally be reconciled and results in life's goal, individuation.

Something must be working because Theo's visionary, musical utopia isn't merely airy poetry. The Perowne family gives the lie to Tolstoy's chestnut that "happy families are all alike." The Perowne family's happiness is ample and its members are individuated to a striking degree. All have room to pursue their way and boundaries are respected. The Perowne family may not inhabit the age of gold and the Fitzroy Square may be no *locus amoenus*, but they do seem to have created a high functioning little commonwealth, a little nugget of transmuted gold.

McEwan's squared circle echoes Jung's own interest in mandala. Jung records the dream set in Liverpool that confirmed for him the existence of archetypes:

When we reached the plateau, we found a broad square dimly illuminated by street lights, into which many streets converged. The various quarters of the city were arranged radially around the square. In the center was a round pool, and in the middle of it a small island. . . . On it stood a single tree, a magnolia, in a shower of reddish blossoms. It was as though the tree stood in the sunlight and were [sic] at the same time the source of light. (*Memories* 198)

"Through this dream," Jung comments, "I understood that the self is the principle and archetype of orientation and meaning. . . . For me, this insight signified an approach to the center and therefore to the goal. Out of it emerged the first inkling of my personal myth. . . . It was the *prima materia*," he adds, "for a lifetime's work" (*Memories* 199).

Unlike Jung but like many heirs to the Enlightenment, Perowne operates under the myth of mythlessness, the idea that we can know the real and know ourselves without the mediation of story and figure. He doesn't have or need a personal myth. He reflects, "This notion of Daisy's, that people can't 'live' without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof" (67). Perowne thinks he doesn't need story but brain surgeon that he is, he knows the real point is not brain but mind, the central mystery of how a bunch of cells and its neural network can produce mind, consciousness, and spirit. He wishes "that penetrating the skull [brought] into view not the brain but the mind" (249). He responds to Daisy's attempt to educate him to the findings of literature that,

A man who attempts to ease the miseries of failing minds by repairing brains is bound to respect the material world, its limits, and what it can sustain—consciousness, no

less. It isn't an article of faith with him, he knows it for a quotidian fact, the mind is what the brain, mere matter, performs. If that's worthy of awe, it also deserves curiosity; the actual, not the magical, should be the challenge. This reading list persuaded Perowne that the supernatural was the recourse of an insufficient imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding re-enactment of the plausible.

When anything can happen, nothing much matters. It's all kitsch to me. (66)

For Perowne, the fantasy imagination will not get you anywhere. Reason can. To this assertion Daisy responds, "You ninny . . . you Gradgrind. It's literature, not physics!" (67).

Perowne's problem — and McEwan's challenge to the reader — is that he isn't in fact the kind of scientific ninny C.P. Snow described in *The Two Cultures*, able to restrict himself to physics and the merely material. In response to lines from his daughter's favorite poet Philip Larkin, "If I were called in / To construct a religion / I should make use of water," Perowne imagines substituting "evolution":

if he ever got the call, he'd make use of evolution. What better creation myth? An unimaginable sweep of time, numberless generations spawning by infinitesimal steps complex living beauty out of inert matter, driven on by the blind furies of random mutation, natural selection and environmental change, with the tragedy of forms continually dying, and lately the wonder of minds emerging and with them morality, love, art, cities — and the unprecedented bonus of this story happening to be demonstrably true. (54)

No wonder Daisy hasn't given up on this Gradgrind.

Larkin's image is congruent with Jung's pool at the center of the mandala. The poem's last stanza suggests Jung's antinomies which the Self contains:

I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

Perowne's thoughts imply, like Larkin's poem, the suggestion of rebirth ("I should raise in the east . . ."). His embrace of evolution alludes to the Darwin biography Daisy put in his hands. He wakes (for the second time) on Saturday with a memory of Darwin's peroration at the end of *Origin of Species* that haunts him intermittently throughout the day: "*There is grandeur in this view of life*" (53; emphasis in original). For Perowne,

To soften the message, [Darwin] also summoned up the Creator, but his heart wasn't in it and he ditched Him in later editions. Those five hundred pages deserved only one conclusion: endless and beautiful forms of life, such as you see in a common hedgerow, including exalted beings like ourselves, arose from physical laws, from war of nature, famine and death. This is the grandeur. And a bracing kind of consolation in the brief privilege of consciousness. (54)

The source of both freedom and determinism, the laws of chance and mutation are Perowne's (and Darwin's) God. For Perowne, who draws upon a century of study of the brain and exciting new developments in neuroscience, those laws are ultimately knowable, but the mystery will remain:

For all the recent advances, it's still not known how this well-protected one kilogram or so of cells actually encodes information, how it holds experiences, memories, dreams and intentions. He doesn't doubt that in years to come, the coding mechanism will be known, though it might not be in his lifetime. Just like the digital codes of replicating life held within DNA, the brain's fundamental secret will be laid open one day. But even when it has, the wonder will remain, that mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous present, with a self, another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost at its center. Could it ever be explained, how matter becomes conscious? He can't begin to imagine a satisfactory account, but he knows it will come, the secret will be revealed—over decades, as long as the scientists and the institutions remain in place, the explanations will refine themselves into an irrefutable truth about consciousness. It's already happening, the work is being done in laboratories not far from this theatre, and the journey will be completed, Henry's certain of it. That's the only kind of faith he has. There's grandeur in this view of life. (262–63)

Perowne thinks he doesn't need story, but the teeming brain with its “ghost at its center” is one of his stories, the irreconcilable consubstantial, simultaneous presence of matter and spirit. His lifetime of exploring that story is the “open road” he thought his professional life had denied him.

Fitzroy Square and the teeming city of which it is the center also images Perowne's personal story and myth: the irreconcilable impulses in him to rationality and to an openness to experience that rationality neither allows nor explains. Above the square looms the London Post Office Tower with its garish 60s optimism:

It rises above the plane trees in the central gardens, behind the reconstructed façade on the southern side; set high on the glass-paned stalk, six stacked circular terraces bearing their giant dishes, and above them, a set of fat wheels or sleeves within which is bound the geometry of fluorescent lights. At night, the dancing Mercury is a playful touch. (202)

British Telecom's logo, “dancing Mercury,” rightful symbol of communications and commerce, may be dancing with ironic joy as the Trickster often does at the pretense of rationalism the square was meant to figure. Perhaps the Post Office Tower with its “dancing Mercury” is a stand-in for Jung's dream's tree of life at the pond's center with its “a shower of reddish blossoms” which at once “stood in the sunlight and [was] the source of light.” Perowne's Fitzroy Square as mandala balances his love of order and his love of teeming chaos. British Telecom's “dancing Mercury” holds his caduceus out and above him in such a manner as to offer a

second reading: it figures not Mercury but Pan with his flute (another of Hermes' inventions). Perowne's myth combines those two aspects of Shadow—Hermes and Pan—that counter his conscious embrace of Apollonian order.

In this, Perowne's mandala points to the mandala that Joyce uses to end the "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*. As Bloom drifts off to sleep he thinks of Sinbad the Sailor: "Going to a dark bed there was a square round Sinbad the Sailor roc's auk's eggs in the night of the bed of all the auks of the rocs of Darkinbad the Bright-dayler" (737). The roc's egg is the circle within the square, envisioning a wholeness that synchronistically repeats Jung's vision of "the hypothetical summation of an indescribable totality . . . bright and dark and yet neither" (14:107n). So too Fitzroy Square and Perowne's vision of it is "bright and dark and yet neither." McEwan offers us not a choice of Hermes *or* Saturn but rather an image that holds them together in suspension.

This image is a product of intuition. In his TED talk, Iain McGilchrist quotes Einstein: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." Ian McEwan's *Saturday* portrays a man setting gift and servant, master and emissary, back in balance. If the battle between the hemispheres, between intuition and the rational mind, will inevitably continue, that doesn't mean Ian McEwan and Henry Perowne can't create a separate peace. *Saturday* ends just as does *Ulysses*. After a last glimpse of Fitzroy Square, Perowne drifts off to sleep, embracing his wife and thinking, "There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day's over" (289).

Notes

1. I offer a taxonomy of improvisation's persistent conventions and themes in Fertel, *A Taste For Chaos: The Art of Literary Improvisation*.
2. See Lewis Hyde on the Trickster's opportunism, a word that stems from *porta*, entrance, passageway, in *Trickster Makes This World*, 46 *et passim*.
3. Edward Slingerland explores *wu-wei* with great clarity in *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity*.

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