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Liberalism in the New Millennium: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

Andrew Foley

Summary

This article focuses on Ian McEwan's recent novel, *Saturday* (2005), in which he explores a number of the dilemmas facing the contemporary liberal, such as how to accept one's involvement in the world without compromising one's individual autonomy; how to balance personal freedom and personal responsibility; and how to manage one's private life in the context of urgent global issues. *Saturday* returns to the fundamental liberal concern of the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but it does so in the altered circumstances of a globalised world in which those very values of life, liberty and happiness are seen to be under threat from a number of new hostile forces, ranging from radical Islamic terrorism to casual violence on city streets. Written in the shadow of 9/11, and set on Saturday 15 February 2003 – the day of international protest against the proposed invasion of Iraq – the novel takes the form of a day-in-the-life narrative, following surgeon Henry Perowne around London as he considers the peculiarly modern burden of life in the new millennium. *Saturday* has been described as one of the most serious contributions to post-9/11 literature, most notably for the skill and careful ambiguity with which the evidence and arguments are distributed throughout the text.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op Ian McEwan se onlangse roman *Saturday* (2005), waarin hy 'n aantal dilemmas verken waarmee die hedendaagse liberalis te kampe het, soos hoe om 'n mens se betrokkenheid by die wêreld te aanvaar sonder om jou individuele outonomie in gevaar te stel; hoe om persoonlike vryheid en persoonlike verantwoordelikheid te balanseer; en hoe om jou privaatlewe in die konteks van dwingende globale vraagstukke te bestuur. *Saturday* keer terug na die fundamentele liberale kwelpunt van die individu se reg op lewe, vryheid en die navolging van geluk. Dit word egter ondersoek in die veranderde omstandighede van 'n geglobaliseerde wêreld waarin die persepsie bestaan dat juis hierdie waardes van lewe, vryheid en geluk bedreig word deur 'n aantal nuwe vyandige magte wat wissel van radikale Islamitiese terrorisme tot lukrake geweld op straat. Geskryf in die skadu van 9/11, speel die verhaal af op Saterdag 15 Februarie 2003 – die dag van internasionale protes teen die voorgenome inval in Irak. Die roman neem die vorm van 'n dag-in-die-lewe-vertelling aan, en volg die chirurg Henry Perowne in sy bewegings in Londen en terwyl hy die vreemde moderne lewenslas van die nuwe millennium

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oordink. *Saturday* word beskryf as een van die ernstigste bydraes tot post-9/11-letterkunde, veral weens die vaardigheid en sorgvuldige dubbelsinnigheid waarmee die getuienis en argumente deur die hele teks heen verweef is.

Introduction

In the last decade and a half of the twentieth century, a profound and widespread change occurred in world politics as countries across the globe transformed themselves into liberal democracies. Conservative dictatorships, Communist Party regimes and ethnic oligarchies rapidly disintegrated, and although exact quantification is difficult, it is estimated that almost thirty countries became democratised during this period (see Kenney 2009). This process did not take place through violent conflict or military intervention; for the most part it was achieved through the overwhelming will of the people at grassroots level to create societies of freedom and openness. Naturally there were exceptions to this trend, and in some instances the political changes were little more than cosmetic, giving rise to what Fareed Zakaria (1997) has termed “illiberal democracies”. Nevertheless, as a number of commentators at the time observed, there seemed to have been a fundamental change not only in the world order but in the way politics was conceptualised in global thinking. Francis Fukuyama (1989), Samuel Huntington (1991), Richard Bellamy (1992) and others argued persuasively that liberal democracy – the doctrine of individual liberty and popular sovereignty – had emerged from being one ideological alternative among many to being the sole ideology of potentially universal validity, embraced across the world by peoples of widely divergent histories, cultures and creeds.

In the first years of the new millennium, however, the hope for a peaceful new world order received a severe blow. Francis Fukuyama, at the conclusion to his essay “The End of History?” (1989) predicted that liberal democracy would have to contend with an increasingly powerful adversary, fundamentalist Islam. At one level, Islam as an ordinary political ideology poses little threat to the global phenomenon of liberalism. While Islam, like liberalism or socialism, can generate a coherent social system, and while about a fifth of the world’s population is nominally Islamic, it is true that no countries which were not culturally Islamic before have become so in the last few decades. It is also true that many Islamic countries, while not liberal or democratic, could nevertheless be classified under what John Rawls (1999) described as well-ordered hierarchical regimes whose citizens are not ill-treated and whose governments seek no military conflict with the democratic world. The real threat, however, emanates from the religious fundamentalism of radical Islam and its fanatical desire to spread its utopianist ideas throughout the world. This fervent sense of a divinely sanctioned mission – in short, a jihad or holy war – has been directed most





pointedly against the liberal countries of the West, and, in the absence of a conventional military force, has increasingly taken the form of a systematic campaign of terror. Nowhere was this more appallingly manifested than in the events of September 11, 2001, in New York City.

The attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, and the global media coverage which it received, shook the Western world out of whatever complacency it might have enjoyed in the 1990s and changed fundamentally how people thought of themselves and their countries, especially as this was followed in the next few years by the bombings in Bali, London, Madrid and most recently the attack on Mumbai in December 2008. These events have ushered in what some commentators have regarded as “a traumalogical culture” (Tew 2007: 199), in which trauma on a global scale has become part of the modern collective consciousness.

The American retaliation, first in Afghanistan and then pre-emptively in Iraq, signalled yet another dimension to this new world situation in the form of a call for a collective war on terror. Suddenly, as Ian McEwan's protagonist puts it in *Saturday* (2005: 32),¹ “the nineties are looking like an innocent decade”. It is precisely this peculiarly modern condition which McEwan examines in *Saturday*, the question, as Peter Childs (2006: 146) suggests, of “the ways in which the liberal Western citizen can engage with the contemporary world”. In so doing, the novel explores at a number of levels the various threats posed to liberalism in the new millennium as well as the hope and promise of freedom and human happiness which liberalism continues to offer. McEwan has come to be seen as arguably the “foremost” (Childs 2006: 199) or “pre-eminent” (Head 2008: 1) contemporary writer in English, and *Saturday* is undoubtedly one of the most vitally important political novels of the new century.

Saturday

Ian McEwan achieved international acclaim with *Atonement* (2001), a novel in which he moved away from the macabre hyper-realism of his earlier fiction and revealed a more mature and humane vision. Despite its World War II setting and its involvement with class issues, however, the novel is only tangentially concerned with politics. In the same year as *Atonement* was published, 9/11 occurred, and while still in the shadow of these horrific events, McEwan found himself caught up in the controversy surrounding the proposed invasion of Iraq in early 2003, being drawn into public debates and witnessing the huge anti-war demonstration near his central London home. The result was that he was inspired to respond to this uniquely

1. All subsequent references to *Saturday* will be indicated by page number(s) only.





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modern set of circumstances through *Saturday* (2005), his most overtly political and specifically liberal novel to date. In his personal life, McEwan has always subscribed to the values and principles of liberalism and humanism. He is, for instance, a long-standing supporter of the British Humanist Association (BHA),² an organisation committed to “human rights, democracy, equality and mutual respect” and which “works for an open and inclusive society with freedom of belief and speech”. It is also a member organisation of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) whose “minimum statement” declares that

humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry.

(<http://www.humanism.org.uk>)

Although McEwan has admitted that he had long sensed the “possibilities” of dealing with “political” issues in his work (in Weich 2004: 4), he had largely avoided such issues in his earlier fiction. With *Saturday*, however, he confronts the political problems of his day directly and candidly.

As McEwan observed in an interview with Dave Weich in 2004 while completing *Saturday*, the initial motivation for writing the novel as well as some of the fundamental thematic preoccupations of the text derived from Saul Bellow’s novel *Herzog* (1964), from which a key passage is used as the epigraph for *Saturday* (1964: 201). In the passage, the questions are raised of “what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass”. On the one hand, it means to live “in a society that was no community and devalued the person”, rendering the self “negligible”; and it means living in a country that spends “military billions against foreign enemies” but which permits “savagery and barbarism in its own great cities”. On the other hand, however, it also means being part of the unprecedented democratic liberalisation of humankind, where the “human millions” as never before have claimed “the right to exist” and to be free, and whose lives have been vastly improved by the “beautiful supermachinery” of scientific progress. It also means, importantly, that it is the responsibility of the modern individual to recognise that he is “a child of the mass” who must act as “brother to all the rest”.

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2. The quotations which follow are taken from the official website of the British Humanist Association (BHA). Other members of the association listed on the site include the writer Salman Rushdie, the scientists Bernard Crick and Richard Dawkins, and the liberal political philosophers Anthony Flew and Brian Barry.





It is the distinctively modern burden of these problems and of these rights and responsibilities that occupies the minds of the protagonists of both Bellow's and McEwan's novels. In a sentence preceding the extract from *Herzog* which McEwan quotes, the eponymous character feels daunted "because he let the whole world press upon him" (1964: 201). Similarly, Henry Perowne, the main character of *Saturday*, is vexed by the relentless intrusion of public events through the ubiquitous media of contemporary life. He wonders whether it is possible

to enjoy an hour's recreation without this invasion, this infection from the public domain He has a right now and then – everyone has it – not to be disturbed by world events, or even street events It seems to Perowne that to forget, to obliterate a whole universe of public phenomena in order to concentrate is a fundamental liberty. Freedom of thought.

(p. 108)

And yet, living under the cloud of such events as 9/11 and the prospect of a potential world disaster such as the Iraq war, as well as the constant threat more locally of violent crime, means that to live "in a city" in this new century makes it impossible simply to "obliterate ... the public domain" (p. 108). As *Saturday* makes clear, the attempt to isolate oneself from the world, whether on a global or a personal level, is not only irresponsible, it is dangerous.

More particularly, McEwan is interested in the dilemmas facing the contemporary liberal: how to accept one's involvement in the world without compromising one's individual autonomy; how to balance personal freedom and personal responsibility; how to manage one's private life in the context of urgent global issues. If *Saturday* returns to the fundamental liberal concern of the individual's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" proclaimed in the American Declaration of Independence, it does so in the altered circumstances of a globalised world in which those very values of life, liberty and happiness are seen to be under threat from a number of new hostile forces.

Consciousness

Though it takes its impetus from Bellow's *Herzog*, and the device of a life-altering car accident might owe something to Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, the structure of *Saturday* as a day-in-the-life narrative places it more properly alongside such novels as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Bellow's *Seize the Day*, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and most particularly in terms of style and tone, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Like this latter novel, *Saturday* follows a middle-class character around London, involved in mundane activities like shopping for a dinner party, while musing on time, age





and death, and the passing of the era in which this character grew up. Like Woolf's novel as well, these everyday events are shattered by a moment of crisis involving insanity and violence: in *Mrs Dalloway* a World War I veteran commits suicide; in *Saturday*, the young man who confronted the main character after a minor motor accident earlier in the day returns to break in to his house and threaten his family with rape and murder. Unlike *Mrs Dalloway*, however, McEwan's novel is set on a specific day, 15 February 2003, the day of international protest against the Iraq war and the largest demonstration in the history of the British Isles, so that *Saturday* is charged with a very definite geopolitical significance. Moreover, although Henry Perowne lives near Woolf's suburb of Bloomsbury, McEwan has revealed (in Weich 2004: 2) that his protagonist's Fitzroy Square townhouse in Fitzrovia is in fact based on his own, and that he has given his protagonist "all sorts of bits and pieces of [his own] life" (in Deveney 2005: 4), including aspects of his liberal political outlook.

McEwan has commented that the central thread linking all of his very disparate novels is "an involvement in a long-term investigation of human nature" (in Weich 2004: 2). In *Saturday*, however, he concerns himself much more specifically with the very basis of that nature, "consciousness" and, by extension, moral "conscience". Significantly, these words occur on the first and the last pages of the novel and permeate the text as a whole.

Henry Perowne is a successful, forty-eight-year-old neurosurgeon who, despite his years of training and accumulated professional experience, can still marvel at the wonder of human consciousness. He knows that one day, though probably not in his lifetime, it is possible that the "fundamental secret" of how the brain works will become known, but even then, he thinks to himself,

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 centre. Could it ever be explained, how matter becomes conscious?

(pp. 254-255)

At the same time, Perowne is able to appreciate the fragility of consciousness, the vulnerability of this gift of a healthy "mental existence" (p. 279). He sees it every day in the patients he treats who frequently present with incurable neurological diseases, catastrophic brain injuries, the mental degeneration of old age. He has experienced it also in his personal life. He met his wife, for instance, when he assisted on an operation to remove a brain tumour which threatened her sight. He is pained by the fact that his mother is suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease, unable to recognise anyone or remember anything, so that going to see her in the nursing home is "an empty visit ... like taking flowers to a graveside – the true business is





with the past" (p. 125). And Perowne is even able eventually to feel sympathy for the man who threatened his family because he knows he has been diagnosed with Huntington's disease, a rare and incurable genetic disorder, which will lead rapidly and inevitably to a horrible death:

from the first small alterations of character, tremors in the hands and face, emotional disturbance, including – most notably – sudden, uncontrollable alterations of mood, to the helpless jerky dance-like movements, intellectual dilapidation, memory failure, agnosia, apraxia, dementia, total loss of muscular control, rigidity sometimes, nightmarish hallucinations and a meaningless end. This is how the brilliant machinery of being is undone by the tiniest of faulty cogs, the insidious whisper of ruin, a single bad idea lodged in every cell, on every chromosome four.

(pp. 93-94)

In the light of his acute awareness of the physical fragility of human life, then, Perowne's underlying purpose and motivation, as revealed in his thoughts in the course of the day, is how to make the most out of what he calls "the brief privilege of consciousness" (p. 56). Indeed, the novel is not merely concerned with consciousness as a medical or physiological phenomenon, but with the actual employment of consciousness, as presented through Perowne's thoughts, feelings, intentions, dreams, fears and hopes as he goes about his business: waking early on Saturday morning; making love with his wife; playing squash with his anaesthetist colleague; shopping for dinner; visiting his mother; stopping in on his son's band practice; hosting a dinner for his returning daughter and father-in-law; dealing with the crisis of the break-in; operating on the stricken intruder; and finally falling asleep after making love once more to his wife in the early hours of Sunday morning. Despite the seemingly circular structure of these events, there is a discernible trajectory to Perowne's thinking in the course of the day. He moves from an initial state of contentment and reasonable complacency to a far more sombre and complex mood at the end, as he has been forced to confront the frailty of happiness, whether at the level of the personal or the global. What the novel charts is the attempt of a person – in this case Perowne – to pursue an idea of happiness, and the multiple ways in which that attempt may be limited or threatened or even thwarted.

Happiness

In an important sense, McEwan in *Saturday* has reclaimed the idea of happiness, both personal and communal, as a proper subject for serious literature. He explores the nature and significance of happiness neither dismissively nor cynically but rather as a fundamental goal of human life. As his character, Perowne, rather wryly notes, "for the professors in the





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Academy, in the humanities generally, misery is more amenable to analysis: happiness is a harder nut to crack” (p. 78). *Saturday* functions as a portrait of a man who has genuinely attained a great deal of happiness in his life, and who is deeply appreciative of his good fortune, but who is also constantly aware of the precarious, ephemeral nature of his contentment.

In the first place, Perowne enjoys a very happy family life. He is married to Rosalind, a successful newspaper lawyer and the two remain passionately in love. In his children too Perowne finds himself deeply contented, for while they are very different from each other they are both intelligent, talented, likeable young people. Eighteen-year-old Theo is a gifted professional blues guitarist, while his twenty-three-year-old sister, Daisy, is a Newdigate Prize-winning poet, who is about to have her first collection of poems published. The entire family is endangered by the attack in their home, but even apart from this specific incident, Perowne is mindful that Theo will shortly be leaving for the United States where his band has secured a permanent gig, and Daisy will return to Italy and the life of the family as such will be over.

A similar transience applies also to the other great source of happiness in Perowne’s life, his work. For him, his work is not a matter of daily drudgery but rather a cause of deep personal satisfaction. At this time of his life he is clearly at the height of his powers, a skilled surgeon whose efforts make a real difference to the lives of his patients. Working in almost musical harmony with his team, his “firm” (often with Bach’s intricate “Goldberg” Variations as an appropriate accompaniment), on complex operations delivers him into a state of “benevolent dissociation” in which he feels “calm, and spacious, fully qualified to exist. It’s a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy”, of “profound happiness” (p. 258). Yet he knows that in a few years “the time will come when he does less operating, and more administration – another kind of life” (p. 276), and then only the prospect of retirement, and old age, and perhaps senility.

The novel explores the question of happiness, and its fragility, not only at the level of the personal, but also at the level of the social, and does so particularly through considering the relationship between Perowne and his city. For McEwan, London is not merely the setting for the action of the novel, nor is it simply the locus of a particular cultural identity; rather it is a central character in the novel, with which Perowne and the other figures in the story constantly interact and which gives shape and substance to their lives. It is palpably and manifestly present, an exemplification of Western, twenty-first-century existence, with all the problems and dangers of modern living, but also with all the excitement and potential of advanced progress.

Of course he is aware of urban problems – “the junkies and the traffic din and dust” (p. 276) – and he sees many examples of human sadness in the people who come to the square which his house overlooks. “But there’s no shortage of happiness either” (p. 61), he objectively notes. Later, as he





drives to his squash game, his thoughts are drawn to the city through which he moves, and to the notion of progress. He reflects on his city and the existence that it embodies, the general amelioration of lives that it promotes:

The street is fine, and the city, grand achievement of the living and all the dead who've ever lived here, is fine too, and robust. It won't easily allow itself to be destroyed. It's too good to let go. Life in it has steadily improved over the centuries for most people, despite the junkies and beggars now. The air is better, and salmon are leaping in the Thames, and otters are returning. At every level, material, medical, intellectual, sensual, for most people it has improved.

(p. 77)

He is cognisant of the current trend, particularly among young academics, to consider "the idea of progress old-fashioned and ridiculous" and "to dramatise modern life as a sequence of calamities" (p. 77). "In indignation", he recalls the words of Peter Medawar, a surgeon like he is, who went on to become an incisive social commentator: "To deride the hopes of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind" (p. 77).³ Perowne sardonically remarks that for many trendy lecturers "it wouldn't be cool or professional to count the eradication of smallpox as part of the modern condition. Or the recent spread of democracies". And he proceeds to imagine how future generations might view his own: "[i]f the present dispensation is wiped out now, the future will look back on us as gods, certainly in this city, lucky gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended life-spans, wondrous machines" (p. 77). These wondrous machines include not just all the multifaceted forms of "digitalised entertainment" (p. 78) but also the spectacular progress in medical technology which allows surgeons like Perowne to perform procedures, and to save lives, which would have seemed to be "miracles of human ingenuity" (p. 44) just a few years previously.

Generally, then, Perowne regards himself and the majority of his fellow Londoners as reasonable content and even capable at times of true bliss. When he goes to hear his son's band rehearse their new song that afternoon, he experiences such a moment. The chorus of the song resonates appositely with his own thoughts about his life and his home and his city:

3. There is a sad irony in McEwan's use of Medawar's words here. They were uttered by the Nobel Laureate for Medicine as part of the Presidential Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Exeter on 3 September 1969 (later included in his 1972 book of essays, *The Hope of Progress*). But within a few days of the address, while reading the lesson at Exeter Cathedral, Medawar suffered a stroke which greatly incapacitated him for the rest of his life. It is thus a dramatic example of the fragility of happiness.





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

(p. 170)

Letting the music engulf him, he encounters one of those “rare moments” when musicians

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 tantalisingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes.

(pp. 171-172)

Even in this moment of supreme happiness, however, the novel sounds an ominous note of warning that there exist “in the real world” multiple threats to the happiness of Perowne and those like him. Such threats exist at the level of the global all the way down to the very local, in the very streets through which Perowne has so contentedly been driving.

9/11

Henry Perowne wakes unexpectedly at three-forty on the Saturday morning of the novel and finds himself looking out of the window at the night sky when a bright object catches his eye. At first he thinks it is a meteor or a comet, but even though he is mistaken the sight carries with it a similar sense of disastrous foreboding as in classical tragedy. In fact, it is a burning aeroplane, crossing the sky behind the Post Office tower which overtops Perowne’s house, and although it turns out not to be a terrorist attack but merely a stricken Russian cargo plane which manages to land safely at Heathrow Airport, it is impossible for Perowne (or anyone else for that matter) not to make an association with the events of September 11. As Perowne observes,

It’s already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.

(p. 16)





For many people, like the Perownes, the events of 9/11 brought home to them that world affairs had a potentially direct and destructive bearing on their private lives. McEwan himself responded immediately to the September attacks, the first of his articles being published the following day on the front page of *The Guardian* newspaper. The article, entitled "Beyond Belief", concludes: "Like millions, perhaps billions around the world, we knew that we were living through a time that we would never be able to forget. We also knew, though it was too soon to wonder how or why, that the world would never be the same. We knew only that it would be worse (McEwan 2001b: 1).

In *Saturday*, through the figure of Perowne, McEwan revisits this issue. On the one hand, there is the view that the world "has changed fundamentally" (p. 80) and that, quoting directly from Fred Halliday's book, *Two Hours That Shook the World*, "the New York attacks precipitated a global crisis that would, if we were lucky, take a hundred years to resolve" (pp. 32-33; Halliday 2002: 24). Some critics have interpreted *Saturday* from this perspective. Philip Tew, for instance, regards the novel as representing "an edgy, conflicted, fearful world" (2007: 202). Similarly, John MacLeod sees it as "a novel about living in London in the aftermath of September 11 and the new forms of consciousness which have been created in the new world order" (2005: 45). Other commentators, however, including Roger Luckhurst (2003: 36), regard 9/11 as part of a more objective "traumatic exceptionality" rather than a global "traumatological culture" unprecedented in human history. Perowne can see the cogency of this view as well, that the current crisis is in actuality "an aberration" and

that the world would surely calm down and soon be otherwise, that solutions were possible, that reason, being a powerful tool, was irresistible, the only way out; or that like any other crisis, this one would fade soon There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate change, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger, poverty and the rest.

(pp. 32, 77)

And yet, Perowne is unable to quite shake the feeling that the world *has* undergone some profound change and that the threat of Islamic terror is somehow different from and more dangerous than other world crises. The very use of the word "jihadists" (p. 33) suggests the religious underpinnings of what amounts to an ongoing, fervent war "on our whole way of life" (p. 35), a clichéd phrase which nonetheless contains the substance of truth. As Perowne angrily tells his daughter in an argument they have later in the novel, with reference to the Bali bombings, "radical Islam hates your freedom" (p. 191), and it is an enemy that is "well-organised, tentacular, full of hatred and focused zeal" (p. 76). For these reasons, Radical Islamists are more dangerous than mere nihilists, because





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they want the perfect society on earth, which is Islam. They belong in a doomed tradition about which Perowne takes the conventional view – the pursuit of utopia ends up licensing every form of excess, all ruthless means of its realisation. If everyone is sure to end up happy for ever, what crime can it be to slaughter a million or two now?

(p. 34)

Indeed, in an eerie premonition of the bombings which took place in London on 7 July 2005 (a few months after the publication of *Saturday*), Perowne considers the possibility of “a bomb in the cause of jihad” right in his own neighbourhood: “London, his small part of it, lies wide open, impossible to defend, waiting for its bomb, like a hundred other cities” (p. 276).⁴ It is at least partly this that John Gray (2003: 15) meant when he referred to “the fragility of liberal societies”; and it is this kind of threat that forces liberal societies, in spite of Benjamin Franklin’s injunction, to trade “liberty” for “security”. As McEwan himself has simply put it, “if you want more security you have less liberty” (in Caminada 2004: 2). It is thus not simply the immorality of such terrorist tactics that liberals such as McEwan and his character Perowne so resent, but the fact that it leads to a curtailment of personal freedom in everyday life.

It is, in fact, not just Islam as a particular religion that Perowne finds “distasteful” (p. 124), it is any form of religion. McEwan himself, as noted earlier, belongs to the British Humanist Association (BHA), which among other things stands for “secularism ... and for an end to the privileged position of religion in law, education, broadcasting and wherever else it occurs”.⁵ Like the author, Perowne is not “inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations” (p. 17). Despite this, he can muster up little more than “a queasy agnosticism” when it comes to such “big ideas” as the reasons for ongoing injustice, inequality and human suffering in the world (p. 74). The “existential view” (p. 74), echoed in his son’s credo to “think small” (p. 35), to concentrate on the little things in life, is perhaps the one defence against tragedy, whether individual or collective. Acts of kindness and love, as the older Briony Tallis remarks at the end of *Atonement*, constitute “a stand against oblivion and despair” (2001a: 372). And it is precisely this sentiment that pervades all of McEwan’s mature work, including *Saturday*. In his second article about 9/11, appropriately entitled “Only Love and Then Oblivion”, McEwan recalls a few days after the attacks the stories about people phoning their loved ones to express final

4. In fact, two of the four bomb blasts took place very near McEwan’s home: one on the subway between King’s Cross and Russell Square stations and one on a bus in Tavistock Square in Bloomsbury. The other two were near Edgware Road and Aldgate stations (see Elliott 2005: 15-23).

5. Again, this quotation is taken from the association’s official website.





words of love before perishing, so that “a new technology has shown us an ancient, human universal” (2001c: 1). And he goes on to remark that for the victims at the mercy of these “holy fools”, such “snatched and anguished assertions of love were their defiance” (2001c: 1).

Iraq

As noted earlier, the Saturday of the novel's title is no ordinary day, but is the day of protest in London and throughout Europe against the planned invasion of Iraq led by the United States and the United Kingdom, and it turns out to be “the largest gathering of humanity in the history of the islands” (p. 126).⁶ The event compelled morally concerned people everywhere to think carefully about their position with regard to the war, as Ian McEwan himself had been doing. The influential website <<http://openDemocracy.net>> had sought to create “a truly global debate” in the months prior to the war by inviting “writers, artists and civic leaders” to answer the question: “What is your view of the crisis, where, briefly, do you stand?”. The invitation drew hundreds of responses, and opinions ranged from those like the conservative political philosopher, Roger Scruton, who expressed outright support for the war, to those like the left-wing novelist, Günter Grass, who utterly condemned it. McEwan (2003), by contrast, candidly admitted his “ambivalence” towards the war, level-headedly outlining the strengths and weaknesses of both positions, as well as revealing the often illogical and empty arguments advanced by those on either side of the debate. In this context, it is clear that such ambivalence should not be interpreted as weak-minded confusion but rather as an informed and reasoned stance in the face of very real dilemmas. And in terms of the novel's exploration of these dilemmas, it is useful to recall W.H. Auden's dictum that “great art is clear thinking about mixed feelings”.

In all these regards, McEwan's protagonist in *Saturday*, Henry Perowne, seems to share his creator's position very closely, to the point of virtually acting as a mouthpiece for the author's views. Like McEwan, Perowne has been forced to consider where he stands in relation to these geopolitical crises, and like McEwan he too feels “ambivalence” which he experiences “as a form of vertigo, of dizzy indecision” (p. 141). As a liberal, Perowne would normally be opposed to war, but he has been influenced by a patient of his, an Iraqi professor of archaeology, Miri Taleb, who has been a victim of Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship. As Taleb argues, “it's only terror that holds the nation together, the whole system runs on fear, and no one knows how to stop it. Now the Americans are coming, perhaps for bad reasons. But Saddam and the Ba'athists will go (p. 64).

6. It has been estimated that two million people participated in the event.





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Having seen the professor's torture scars and listened to his stories of Saddam's atrocities, Perowne has been motivated to read further about Iraq – including "Makiya's famous book" (p. 73)⁷ – and has concluded that Iraq was indeed "a republic of fear" and that Saddam's regime was responsible for "the massacres in Kurdish Iraq, and in the Shi'ite south" (p. 73). As a result, he has come to see "the humanitarian reasons for war" (p. 69). From another perspective, however, Perowne "worries that the invasion or the occupation will be a mess" (p. 73) and that "the matter is being clumsily handled, particularly by the Americans" (pp. 80-81). He is also concerned that an invasion of Iraq will provoke al-Qaeda "into revenge on the soft cities of the West" (p. 73).

What Perowne cannot come to terms with is the brash certainty of the marchers. As he bluntly but not altogether inaccurately puts it, "all across Europe, and throughout the world, people are gathering to express their preference for peace and torture" (p. 126). He also finds the cheerful camaraderie of the marchers rather distasteful:

All this happiness on display is suspect. Everyone is thrilled to be together out on the streets – people are hugging themselves, it seems, as well as each other. If they think – and they could be right – that continued torture and summary executions, ethnic cleansing and occasional genocide are preferable to an invasion, they should be sombre in their view.

(pp. 69-70)

At the very least, the point is that Perowne "can't feel, as the marchers themselves probably can, that they have an exclusive hold on moral discernment" (p. 73).

In contrast to Perowne's ambivalence, other characters in the novel have much more decisive views. A motorcycle policeman, for instance, who is marshalling the crowds, stops Perowne's car "with a glance up the street at the marchers and a pursed tolerant smile that suggests he himself would have bombed Iraq long ago, and many other countries besides" (p. 79). More particularly, Jay Strauss, Perowne's American anaesthetist colleague and squash partner, is "a man of untroubled certainties" for whom the matter is simply that "Iraq is a rotten state" which needs to be "liberated and democratised" (p. 100). On a wider scale he makes the point starkly: "how open societies deal with the new world situation will determine how open they remain" (p. 100).

7. McEwan no doubt has in mind Kanan Makiya's *The Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (1989). Makiya, who originally published the book under the pseudonym Samir al-Khalit for fear of reprisals against his family, reissued the book with an updated introduction in 1998 and emerged as a strong advocate of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.





Perowne's daughter, Daisy, on the other hand, is vehemently opposed to the war, believing that the invasion is "completely barbaric" (p. 185), and that "terrible things are going to happen" (p. 188). More specifically, she argues from a liberal position – though one different from her father – that the forces behind the invasion are conservative and reactionary. As far as she is concerned, "these greedy bullying fools in the White House don't know what they're doing, they've no idea where they're leading us" (p. 188), and she feels that Perowne should "know very well these extremists, these Neo-cons, have taken over America. Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz" (p. 190).⁸ From this anti-conservative perspective, Daisy believes that her father's ambivalence, his desire to "hedge his bets" (p. 188), is morally repugnant: "You're saying let the war go ahead, and in five years if it works out you're for it, and if it doesn't, you're not responsible" (p. 188).

In the face of Daisy's accusations, Perowne has no ready answers. As he admits, "It's true. I honestly think I could be wrong" (p. 188). Considering the views of his colleague and his daughter only intensifies his ambivalence: "He's a dove with Jay Strauss, and a hawk with his daughter" (p. 193).⁹ McEwan is thus able, through the thoughts of Perowne as he goes about his day, and through his interactions with other characters, to allow both sides of the argument to be aired in an authentically dialogic fashion. Aspects of the argument both for and against the war are shown to have merit, and the difficulties involved in making decisive choices are lucidly dramatised.

Violence and Empathy

For all Perowne's concern about "the state of the world" (p. 80), and for all his mindfulness of living in a modern city, there remains something disengaged about him, as if he were emotionally removed from the troubles and dangers of contemporary existence. It is this attitude of complacency, even bordering on smugness perhaps, which is going to be challenged by the events of this particular Saturday. What Perowne lacks is both an awareness of his relationship to the life around him as well as a genuine sense of imaginative empathy for those less fortunate than himself. As Peter Childs (2006: 146) puts it, Perowne "is insufficiently alive to his involve-

8. It is significant that in having Daisy refer to this group as neo-conservatives, McEwan is implicitly rejecting the term "neo-liberal". As Mario Vargas Llosa (2003: 160) has observed, the term neo-liberal is "an artificial construction" of leftist adversaries of liberalism in an attempt to conflate liberalism with conservative politico-economic policies and practices which are, in fact, quite illiberal in their intentions and effects.
9. Perowne's liberalism is thus situated somewhere between the right-wing liberalism of Jay Strauss and the left-wing liberalism of Daisy.





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ment in the world until he is confronted with violence and the opportunity for mercy close to home". It is difficult, furthermore, as Childs (2006: 146) also points out, not to see in Perowne's attitude "a metonym for the material West's indifference to world affairs", so that Perowne's personal development in the course of this day may suggest ways for the Western world more generally to connect sympathetically with the rest of the planet.

As the novel makes clear, it is just this inability to empathise imaginatively with other people that is going to prove dangerous and potentially self-destructive for Perowne. Soon enough he is jolted out of his complacency by a "crash" (p. 105), a minor car accident and its aftermath. In threading his way through the crowds of protesters, whom Perowne regards, if anything, as an inconvenience, he collides with a red BMW, in which there are three young men. His first reaction is a kind of road rage: "there swells in him a peculiarly modern emotion – the motorist's rectitude, spot-welding a passion for justice to the thrill of hatred" (p. 82). But then he realises that he might be in danger as he finds himself in a street that is "completely deserted" (p. 84) because of the road closures for the march, so that his former sense of seclusion from the world is replaced by a fearful feeling of isolation. His fears are realised when Baxter, the powerfully built young thug who has been driving the other car, is provoked by Perowne's "superior" (p. 91) attitude into a violent attack of pure hatred, which produces a very different kind of "thrill" in Perowne:

the blow that's aimed at Perowne's heart and that he dodges only fractionally, lands on his sternum with colossal force, so that it seems to him, and perhaps it really is the case, that there surges throughout his body a sharp ridge, a shock wave, of high blood pressure, a concussive thrill that carries with it not so much pain as an electric jolt of stupefaction and a brief deathly chill that has a visual component of blinding, snowy whiteness.

(p. 92)

Perowne recovers, and manages to extricate himself from the situation, distracting Baxter by drawing attention to his neural disease which he has correctly diagnosed. Nevertheless, he afterwards feels a vague "guilt" (p. 102) about the confrontation, aware of the "shameless blackmail" (p. 95) he has used to deflect Baxter's attention, and sensible also of Baxter's "humiliation" (p. 98) in front of his friends. Sure enough, the consequences come back to haunt him later that evening when, as he is preparing the dinner for the family reunion, Baxter and one of his associates break into his house by forcing Perowne's wife, Rosalind, returning from work, to open the door at knifepoint. Holding the knife to Rosalind's throat, Baxter then commands Perowne's daughter, Daisy, to strip, with the clear intention of raping her. He is, however, rather put off by the fact that she turns out, much to Perowne's surprise, to be three months pregnant. Noticing her book of poems, Baxter decides to prolong the mental torture by making Daisy read





one of her poems. What she does instead is to recite Matthew Arnold's great poem of longing and doubt, "Dover Beach". Incredibly, the poem so moves Baxter that he lets Daisy go, and, responding at last to Perowne's desperate lie about having information on a potential cure for his disease upstairs in his study, follows him there. At this moment, Baxter's associate leaves in disgust at his leader's lack of violent will, and Perowne's son races upstairs to help his father. Together they catch Baxter off guard and fling him down the stairs, where he cracks his skull on the landing and is rendered unconscious. In a final twist, Perowne later that night – having called the police and had Baxter taken to hospital – is called by his anaesthetist, Strauss (who knows nothing of the night's events), to operate on Baxter, whose injuries are so severe that they require a level of surgical skill only Perowne possesses. Perowne responds and saves Baxter's life.

On a literal level, the incident makes a comment on the threat of violence in the streets of any modern city, what Saul Bellow calls "the savagery and barbarism" of contemporary times. It certainly forces Perowne to reconsider his assumptions about the contentment of the city's residents, as well as his belief in the indestructibility of his own well-being. Indeed, during the confrontation Perowne notices a pub called the "Jeremy Bentham" (p. 92). The purpose of the allusion is to suggest that his initial rather vague utilitarian assumptions about the aim of society being "the greatest happiness of the greatest number"¹⁰ needs badly to be refined along more individually focused liberal lines. At a more general and symbolic level, it allows McEwan, through Perowne, to explore the endemic nature of violence in human life, and the necessity for communities to use institutionalised counterviolence to restrain it, both within societies and internationally. In this regard, McEwan draws explicitly on the early social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan* (1651), where life in the pre-social "state of nature" is memorably imagined as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". People thus come together to form communities for a better life, but in so doing have to give up some of their freedom in order to enjoy the just protection of the state, however constituted. For many years, Hobbes's theories have been regarded as unscientific and ahistorical, and even illiberal in some of their aspects. In recent times, however, with an increase in violence on the streets and in international affairs, a number of liberal political philosophers have revisited Hobbes's views and found much to recommend them (see Flathman 1994, Gray 2000 and Kelly 2005, for example). Perowne is certainly provoked by his initial clash with Baxter to recall Hobbes: "Among the game theorists and radical criminologists, the stock of Thomas Hobbes keeps on rising. Holding the unruly, the thugs, in check is the famous "common power" to keep all men in awe – a governing

10. The idea derives from Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789).





body, an arm of the state, freely granted a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence” (p. 88). Indeed, it is not clear how else to deal with the “down-right bad” (p. 37) of the city, who, like Baxter, are filled with “destructive energy waiting to be released” (p. 88).

Matters are not quite so straightforward at the level of international relations, however. McEwan was doubtless put in mind of Hobbes by Bellow’s *Herzog*, where the main character has been working on a PhD dissertation entitled “The State of Nature in 17th and 18th Century English and French Political Philosophy” (1964: 4) while viewing materialistic people like his brother with disdain: “Shura was your true disciple of Thomas Hobbes. Universal concerns were idiocy. Ask nothing better than to prosper in the belly of Leviathan and set a hedonistic example to the community” (1964: 78). For Perowne, this is the other side of the coin. In considering the role of Britain in global interventionist actions like the Iraq invasion, he worries that the State has become too powerful, and that individuals such as he himself have become socialised into enervated, meek obedience: “He’s a double citizen, watching Leviathan grow stronger while he creeps under its shadow for protection He’s lost the habits of scepticism, he’s becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn’t thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses he isn’t thinking independently” (pp. 180-181). Perowne comes to understand more clearly during his eventful day the importance of empathy between individual human beings. What many commentators have found lacking in the *Leviathan* is a sufficient understanding of the moral basis of human motivation. For Hobbes, motivation seems to rest on merely prudential, expedient principles. More recent social contract theorists, such as John Rawls (2001) and Jürgen Habermas (1999), have sought to found social obligation upon autonomous, rational moral choice: for Rawls it is “justice as fairness”; for Habermas it is “ethical discourse”. In so doing they seek to suggest why human beings act not merely out of self-interest, however enlightened, but out of an authentic sense of moral empathy.

Earlier, Perowne had rather impatiently and cynically considered the question of empathy while shopping for his fish stew, as he remembered reading of studies which had shown that fish feel pain:

This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant peoples are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies. For all the discerning talk, it’s the close at hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force. And what you don’t see

(p. 127)

What he is forced to acknowledge is that one can no longer simply confine one’s sympathies to the close at hand and the visible. For one thing, events like 9/11 and the Iraq war have been rendered close at hand and visible





through the greatly advanced media and information technology of the last few decades. Consequently, as Richard Rorty (1989: 192) has noted, moral progress consists in “the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, custom and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’” (Rorty 1989: 192). This is precisely the point that McEwan made about the 9/11 terrorists in his second article about the attacks in *The Guardian* newspaper (2001c: 2), where he argued that they had only been able to carry out their heinous acts because of a lack of imaginative empathy for their victims:

If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.¹¹

(McEwan 2001c: 2)

It is this feeling of moral sympathy that has been awakened in Perowne by the end of the novel, even for someone like Baxter, who has threatened his family. There is a moment, suspended in time, as Baxter is falling down the stairs, when he looks directly at Perowne “with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay”, which Perowne interprets as “a sorrowful accusation of betrayal. He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much – the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family ... and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less” (pp. 227-228). At this moment one realises that contained within Perowne’s name is not merely the suggestion of how he is desperate to protect his “own” family but also of just how much he has come to “own”, materially as well as emotionally.

For many reasons, then, Perowne agrees to operate on Baxter, and also to persuade his family to drop all charges against him. Most particularly, it is because he feels “responsible” for the chain of events that has happened, and a need for both granting and seeking “forgiveness”, the opposite of “revenge” (p. 278). This ability to understand and sympathise with another person’s suffering, and to do something to alleviate that suffering, is, as McEwan rightly observed, the “essence” of morality. This certainly applies at the level of the personal, but, as McEwan suggests in *Saturday*, it has

11. It might be noted that it is the terrorists’ own lack of morality, as defined here, which disqualifies them from the “circle of moral sympathy”. As Zoë Heller (2005: 4) acerbically puts it, there is no obligation to extend moral sympathy “to jihadists who wish you dead”.





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relevance at the level of the global as well, where the medical images of comforting, healing and repairing which recur throughout the novel resonate powerfully in a world marred by destructive violence.

Touchstones

Part of the reason for Perowne's initial inability to empathise may be traced to his inability to appreciate literary imaginativeness. His far more artistic son, for instance, can sense the danger in Perowne's encounter with Baxter far more keenly than he can, warning him: "You humiliated him. You should watch that These street guys can be proud" (p. 152). His daughter meanwhile believes quite openly that her father is "a coarse, unredeemable materialist" who "lacks an imagination" (p. 134). And Perowne does indeed like to think of himself as a "professional reductionist" (p. 272), as "a realist" who "can never escape" (p. 168). In this, he is almost the complete antithesis of the main protagonist in McEwan's preceding book, *Atonement* (2001a). In that book, Briony Tallis brings ruin upon herself and others, including her family, through an overactive literary imagination; in *Saturday* it is an underdeveloped literary sensibility that is the cause of potential destruction.

Perowne is neither unintelligent nor uneducated. He simply does not have the patience or interest to read books all the way through with any pleasure, that is, "to be a spectator of other lives, of imaginary lives" (p. 66). As he puts it, he does not want "to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained. The times are strange enough. Why make things up?" (p. 66). McEwan's self-conscious irony, as James Bradley (2005: 2) has trenchantly observed, is that while *Saturday* "never offers an explicit rebuttal to Perowne's frustration with the power of writing to make the world new again through the gathering of detail, it is in itself a whole proof for the defence". If Perowne is unimpressed by the great realists, however, he has an active and intense dislike for magic realism. As he tartly comments, "When anything can happen, nothing much matters" (p. 68). And so, Perowne concludes that "this notion of Daisy's, that people can't 'live' without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof" (p. 68).

Naturally, the text of *Saturday*, in fact, proves Perowne wrong, as the story of his day, and of his life, unfolds before us. Within this overarching story, moreover, Perowne himself tells numerous stories: the various versions of his clash with Baxter; the incident of the burning plane; his squash game with Strauss; his experience of the march; the invasion of his house; and even his projected view of his future. What Perowne cannot see is that rather than being able to live without stories his entire existence is a narrative and his self-identity is constituted by the stories which make up his life, as is the case with any human individual. If Perowne is not interested in





fiction, this “Gradgrind” (p. 68), as his daughter dubs him, finds poetry utterly insupportable. Despite having a famous poet for a father-in-law, and despite having fathered a promising poet in his daughter, he feels his attempts “to read and understand a poem is like trying to acquire an old-fashioned skill like drystone walling or trout tickling” (p. 129).

As Perowne discovers, poetry does have the power to move even the most unlikely people, as Daisy’s recitation of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”¹² has a profound effect on Baxter. Thinking it is Daisy’s own poem, he not only spares her but undergoes a complete change of attitude: it produces a “transformation in his role, from lord of terror to amazed admirer” (p. 223), as he finds the poem utterly “beautiful” (p. 222). For a terrifying space of time, Perowne has come to see the truth about an unfolding narrative – for that is what Baxter’s invasion of their home is – that “when anything can happen, everything matters” (p. 207). And now he learns further that poetry, far from being an otiose and abstruse intellectual pursuit, can have real, practical significance in the world of the actual:

Daisy recited a poem that cast a spell on one man. Perhaps any poem would have done the trick and thrown the switch on a sudden mood change. Still, Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live. No one can forgive him the use of the knife. But Baxter heard what Henry never has, and probably never will, despite all Daisy’s efforts to educate him. Some nineteenth-century poet ... touched off in Baxter a yearning he could barely begin to define. That hunger is his claim on life, on a mental existence, and ... it won’t last much longer, because the door of his consciousness is beginning to close.

(pp. 278-279)

A keyword in this passage is the word “touched”. It is no coincidence that the poem which Daisy recites was written by Matthew Arnold, for the idea which McEwan is developing here is that of Arnold’s “touchstones”. Arnold originally used the term as a means of expressing how one judges the quality of poetry,¹³ and it is important to note that in Arnold’s understanding, great poetry is that which can “do us most good” ([1880]1967: 669). For Arnold, poetry is not some trivial pastime or a rigidly moralistic blueprint, but rather an inspiring guide for how to live life to the fullest. He then later extended and expanded his notion of touchstones to a more generally inclusive understanding of culture. In his famous collection of essays, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), he asserts that his understanding of culture is that which is quite the opposite of the puritanical Victorianism of

12. Like Daisy, Arnold won the Newdigate Poetry Prize at Oxford: in 1843, for his poem “Cromwell”.
13. The idea is most fully developed in his essay, “The Study of Poetry” ([1880]1967).





his time, with its narrow-minded, mechanistic, unquestioning acceptance of received wisdom.¹⁴ By contrast, culture, properly understood, is the ability to think critically and independently as sensitively rational agents: what he terms “our best self” making use of “right reason” (1869: 97). As he puts it in the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, culture is “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits” (Arnold 1869: 6). Culture can thus serve as a “touchstone” which throws into stark relief “our vulgarity, hideousness, ignorance, violence”¹⁵ and provides “a turn for giving our consciousness free play and enlarging its range” (pp. 151-152). Most importantly, underlying this endeavour Arnold clearly has in mind the fundamental liberal principle of the right of everyone to exercise “personal liberty” in the search for “happiness” (1869: 74), though he argues that this is best achieved by using “reason” to find “beauty and truth”, or what he at times calls “sweetness and light” (1869: 72).

Far more than just appreciating a well-made poem, it is this yearning in himself for knowing the best that has been thought in the world, and thereby living a better life, that alters Baxter’s state of mind. Unlike his fellow street thugs, a part of Baxter clearly longs to leave behind “vulgarity, hideousness, ignorance, violence” and to enlarge the range of his consciousness by giving it free play. The fact that this consciousness is under threat by his disease only serves to intensify his longing, which chimes with the more generalised themes of “Dover Beach”. This experience is not limited to Baxter only: McEwan suggests that this longing is what potentially drives all people, however dimly they realise it, and is most powerfully conveyed through cultural touchstones. Even Perowne, who believes that he has never heard in poetry what Baxter heard, recognises that “there must be more to life than saving lives” (McEwan in Deveney 2005: 4) and unconsciously has his own touchstones to live by: Peter Medawar’s lines about hope and progress, for instance (p. 77); or his son’s song about “my city square” (p. 170); or his appreciation of Bach’s music or Einstein’s general theory of relativity (p. 68); or his various instinctive references to Shakespeare (p. 125) or Blake (p. 27) or even Darwin (pp. 55-56). All of these help to shape his thought and guide his life.

As was the case with Thomas Hobbes, Matthew Arnold is a liberal thinker who had for many years fallen out of favour in the academy but who has in recent years come to be better appreciated for the clarity and relevance of

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14. In *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold popularised the term “philistines” for this kind of person.
 15. Characteristics such as these, rather than public disorder, are what Arnold means by anarchy, which culture must seek to overcome.





his thought (see, for example, Collini 1988, 1993; Pratt 2000; Bertens 2001; Hadley 2005), especially in an age characterised by much ignorance and violence. Like Arnold, McEwan believes that culture is a human universal, not restricted to the Western tradition, but comprising “the best that has been known and thought *in the world*” (my emphasis). Its relevance extends from the very localised level of the streets to the affairs of world politics, and in its ability to inspire imaginative empathy, as *Saturday* makes clear, it functions as a critical source of moral compassion and right conduct.

Conclusion

Saturday describes a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, yet in the course of that day Perowne undergoes a significant degree of personal development. As Peter Kemp observes, Perowne at the beginning of the novel (and the day) is characterised as “guardedly optimistic, liberal, questioning and self-questioning” (2005: 6), and although his fundamental political beliefs are not changed by the end, his outlook becomes one which is far less complacent and disengaged, particularly with regard to the future. Like the post-9/11 liberal world in general, he feels more “timid, vulnerable” (p. 277) and uncertain about the way things are likely to turn out.

From an individual perspective, Perowne undergoes a subtle shift in his attitude towards the coincidental and arbitrary nature of life. He has always taken what might be described as a stochastic view of existence, that the universe has been determined by a random distribution of possibilities. For him, this certainly applies at the level of the evolutionary process (pp. 55-56) and the multiple, “equally real” possibilities of the future envisioned by quantum physics, as in “the famous thought experiment of Schrödinger’s Cat” (pp. 18-19). But it also has pertinence at the level of the very personal: the chances of meeting and falling in love with the one person with whom one really wants to spend the rest of one’s life; having children whose characters are as unlike each other “as randomness will allow” (p. 25); finding a career to which one is ideally suited; even “the accidental nature of opinions” (p. 73), depending on whom one happens to have encountered and been influenced by. For the most part, then, Perowne has been content to accept chance as a condition of life:

The random ordering of the world, the unimaginable odds against any particular condition, still please him. Even as a child ... 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 from the scheming of a gloomy god.

(p. 128)





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After this particular day, however, Perowne comes to adopt a more ambivalent view about what he refers to as “the accidents of character and circumstance” (p. 65), and which Dominic Head (2008) sees as the central thematic concern of the novel. Such accidents come to have a very specific impact on him when he is involved in a traffic “accident” (p. 82) with Baxter, a man who happens to be suffering from a randomly inherited disease which predisposes him to unpredictability and violence. Following this encounter which leads to Baxter’s later attack on his family, Perowne is left with a new sense of anxiety and trepidation at the dangerous uncontrollability of effects: “All he feels now is fear. He’s weak and ignorant, scared of the way consequences of an action leap away from your control and breed new events, until you’re led to a place you never dreamed of and would never choose – a knife at the throat” (p. 277). These thoughts leave Perowne feeling restless and irresolute as he tries to come to terms with his own personal future and that of the world more generally. He knows that fairly soon his mother and his wife’s father will die; that his children will leave and the house will empty; that he and his wife will age, “and a time will come when they find they no longer have the strength for the square Perhaps a bomb in the cause of jihad will drive them out with all the other faint-hearts into the suburbs, or deeper into the country, or to the chateau – their Saturday will become a Sunday” (p. 276).

More broadly, he thinks of his world and the new century lying before it. He has been moved more than he realises by the mood of doubtful reflection in “Dover Beach”. Like the speaker of that poem, he ends his day looking out of the window, and in a final act of empathetic identification he imagines himself in the place of a person like himself but standing on the threshold of the previous century:

A hundred years ago, a middle-aged doctor standing at this window in his silk dressing gown, less than two hours before a winter’s dawn, might have pondered the new century’s future. February 1903. You might envy this Edwardian gent all he didn’t yet know. If he had young boys, he could lose them within a dozen years, at the Somme. And what was their body count, Hitler, Stalin, Mao? Fifty million, a hundred? If you described the hell that lay ahead, if you warned him, the good doctor – an affable product of prosperity and decades of peace – would not believe you.

(p. 276)

Now Perowne senses he might be facing similar prospects. Even though nominally “he lives in different times”, he too is facing a future that is becoming increasingly “harder to read, a horizon indistinct with possibilities” (p. 276). Most significantly, he too is finding himself and his tolerant, liberal way of life threatened by radical fanatics: “Beware the utopianists, zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order. Here they are again, totalitarians in different form, still scattered and weak, but





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growing, and angry, and thirsty for another mass killing” (pp. 276-277). At the end of his day, however, Perowne can no longer consider such weighty matters. Drifting towards the “oblivion” of sleep, his final thoughts are of love, as “he fits himself around” the “beloved form” of his wife (p. 279). Like the speaker of Matthew Arnold’s poem, Perowne knows that in the face of a world characterised by violence, suffering and uncertainty, such love is perhaps the “only” real defence:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,
And we are here as on a darkling plain,
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.¹⁶

(p. 279)

Mark Lawson (2005: 4) has described Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* as one of “the most serious contributions to the post-9/11, post-Iraq war literature”, not only for its skill in rendering this day in the life of a contemporary man, but also because, “as in the best political novels, the evidence and arguments are distributed with careful ambiguity”. What *Saturday* dramatises most of all are the difficulties involved in approaching the major political questions of modern times. That a liberal like Perowne (or McEwan) should feel ambivalence when confronting these issues should by no means be taken to be indicative of the inadequacy of their liberal political outlook, however. As Paul Kelly argues in his defence of contemporary liberalism,

[t]here are still vital questions of central importance for liberal theory, such as intergenerational justice, environmental duties and issues of global justice. Liberals are no more settled on answers to these questions than are non-liberals ... but that there are still questions to address is a sign of the vitality rather than the redundancy of an approach to politics. It would be problematic if liberalism clearly had nothing left to say, as then it would be an outmoded political form.

(Kelly 2005: 156)

As the vital debates about urgent issues which permeate *Saturday* make clear, liberalism is anything but an outmoded political form.

16. The poem is reproduced at the end of the novel.





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