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'Accidents of character and circumstance': *Saturday*

Saturday gives a fresh perspective on what makes McEwan's work unnerving or unsettling. There is always the temptation – fraught with risk – to construct a narrative about a writer's oeuvre, in the light of each fresh addition. *Saturday*, however, serves to confirm a dynamic that is already clear with the publication of his previous novel, *Atonement*, a dynamic of giving offence that has changed its hue in an intriguing way. In 1983, McEwan suggested that the 'unsettling' nature of his work is not conscious: 'it is all after the event. It turns out that what I've written is unsettling, but I don't sit down to think about what will unsettle people next.' In the context of this interview, McEwan is, partly, addressing his reputation as the author of macabre or shocking short stories: 'My friends, most of whom had had a literary education, seemed to take for granted the field of play in the stories; they had read Burroughs, Céline, Genet and Kafka, so that lurid physical detail and a sense of cold dissociation did not stun them.'¹

The argument that, to the literary imagination, the short stories should be unsurprising seems slightly disingenuous. With hindsight, it is hard not to see something anarchic in the early stories, the literary wing of 'punk' culture shaking up the literary establishment, widely perceived as moribund in the 1970s.² That perception of 1970s literature may be questionable, less convincing with hindsight; but it certainly had a bearing on the perceived 'shock' element of McEwan's early work. Yet this may also be to clinch McEwan's point: there are proven models to show that literature can render extreme experiences in startling ways. It is a misperception – and a force for suppression – to suppose that this capacity should not be explored.

Paradoxically, then, the shock value of early McEwan serves as a reminder of the range of the literary effect: it is a value that stands *for*

literariness, giving offence particularly to those who take a narrower view of literature. In a further paradox, the more overtly 'literary' McEwan's work has become, the more uncertain it has been about the role of literature. Eventually, what we see in *Atonement* is a complex exploration of the equivocal nature of literature, in an ethical sense, which is also a partial but compromised celebration of its consoling features.

A similar paradox orders *Saturday*, but here the rejection of the idea of the literary becomes a bald topic, openly presented in Henry Perowne's consciousness of his 'philistinism' vis à vis literary matters. The celebration of neurosurgeon Perowne, however, seems partly to depend on this 'philistinism'. The offence that McEwan gives here is to the idea that literature matters, in a social or cultural sense: more explicitly than in his other novels, scientific discovery is lauded as having a far greater social significance. Yet the notion of an ethical role for the novel is retained in the most obvious way – and without the uncertainty evident in *Atonement* – through the plotting of *Saturday*, and its treatment of how individuals situate themselves in relation to current ideas. This is especially topical in the era of twenty-four hour news, where readers will identify with Perowne's compulsive habit, which has 'grown stronger these past two years' (i.e. since 9/11), to tune into the news, and be 'joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety'. In this false community of the consumer as voyeur, the possibility that 'monstrous and spectacular scenes' might recur is 'one thread that binds the days.' (*S*, p. 176)³

Saturday gained the plaudits of reviewers in the British press, and in a way that often occasioned a broader account of his standing: Theo Tait, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, observed that he is 'the most admired English writer of his generation'; Ruth Scurr, in *The Times*, suggested that 'Ian McEwan may now be the best novelist in Britain – and is certainly operating at the height of his formidable powers'; while, for Peter Kemp in the *Sunday Times*, the novel 'reinforces his status as the supreme novelist of his generation'.⁴

In the spirit of this celebratory mood, Robert McCrum was moved, in a profile of the author, to make a startling claim about the likelihood of McEwan's enduring importance:

Whatever the critical reception, there is no doubt that the international voice of contemporary English fiction is McEwan's. In 2105, readers will turn to his work to understand Britain's painful years of post-imperial transition.⁵

The reason why McCrum chooses 2105 – 100 years on from the date of publication – has a particular significance: he is responding to Perowne's pessimism about the consequences of the war in Iraq, arising from Fred Halliday's view that the attack on America in 2001 had 'precipitated a global crisis that would, if we were lucky, take a hundred years to resolve.' (*S*, pp. 32–3) (McEwan is quoting Halliday verbatim).⁶

McEwan seems broadly in tune with Halliday, who doubts if the consequences of 9/11 will be contained easily or whether lessons will be learnt quickly; yet Halliday does identify 'the root cause of this crisis' as 'intellectual'; as revealing, that is, 'the lack of realistic education and democratic culture in a range of countries, such that irrational hatred and conspiracy theory prevail over reasoned critique':

The world will be lucky to have worked through the impact of these events and dealt with their causes in a hundred years. This is not, of course, a very long time in the span of human history, but it does suggest that a strong dose of resolve, clarity and courage will be needed, in the West as in the East, in the years to come. Above all, reason and insistence on universal values and criteria of evaluation will, more than ever, be essential. The centre has to hold.⁷

The nature of that 'centre' partly concerns redeeming the beneficent elements of American influence. Halliday stresses 'the need for a more measured political assessment of the USA'. He points out that, globally, 'more and more people . . . look to the USA as a model society and as a source of benevolent influence'. The question that then arises is: 'in what ways, small or large, [can] that influence . . . be put to better rather than worse use?'⁸

Those 'universal values and criteria of evaluation' are far from neutral: what is posited, here, is a projection of 'universality' based on the principles of capitalist democracy, as the best that can be hoped for in the global situation Halliday addresses. I suspect that many people, previously predisposed to dispute this, might accept it after 9/11, in a spirit of grim pragmatism. However, a wide spectrum of dissenting voices, from Islamists to environmentalists, will remain. More pertinent, here, are McEwan's own published views. In one of his newspaper columns in the aftermath of 9/11 McEwan made his own appeal to universal human values, arguing that the hijackers 'would have been unable to proceed' if they had been able 'to imagine themselves into' the passengers' 'thoughts and feelings'. What flows from this is a particular conception of moral sense:

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. The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination.⁹

This is ostensibly an attack on religious fundamentalism, rather than an attack on religion per se. However, it does have the effect of valorizing the secular love that McEwan evokes earlier in the article (many victims tried to phone those closest to them with the message 'I love you' before being killed), and a brand of morality that is distinctly humanist. As I have discussed in relation to *Atonement*, this might seem to validate the business of the novelist, or, at least, the germ of novel-writing – 'imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself' – as an intrinsically moral activity, even though such a notion is radically undermined by the overall conception of *Atonement*.

In *Saturday*, this humanism is eventually given a philosophical hue that takes it beyond the immediate political context. At the end, Perowne looks out once more over London from his bedroom window. His train of thought progresses from the inevitability of a terrorist attack to a more philosophical view of history. He wonders on the similar reflections of an 'Edwardian gent', looking out of the same window a hundred years previously, unable to anticipate the carnage of the twentieth century, and particularly the 'body count' generated by its famous dictators, 'Hitler, Stalin, Mao'. Al Qaeda then seems to comprise 'totalitarians in different form', and the thought of a hundred years' war then begins to seem 'an indulgence, an idle, overblown fantasy, a night-thought about a passing disturbance that time and good sense will settle and rearrange' (*S*, pp. 276–7).

The issue that then arises is the extent to which *Saturday* is a novel of its moment. In 1989, contemplating the difference between writing drama and fiction, McEwan expressed the view that the directness with which playwrights can engage their times is unavailable to the novelist, since 'the novel is not best suited to topical issues, or catching on the wing a changing social mood.' 'Novels', he wrote, 'take longer to cook.'¹⁰ In *Saturday*, however, McEwan treats, not an evanescent social mood, but a global political context that will surely endure.

The logic of Theo Tait's review in the *Times Literary Supplement* is to suggest that the novel is very much of its wider political moment, or, rather, that the political moment has caught up with McEwan. Tait

observes how his earlier novels treat 'sinister, chaotic, violent forces' and 'domestic contentment' with equal facility; but that, while the irruption of the nightmare is always impressive – the child abduction, the ballooning accident, and so on – McEwan 'struggles to make sense of the private nightmares, to give them a wider significance.' After 9/11, Tait suggests, that struggle is no longer necessary:

His constant preoccupation – in a word, security – has become the great obsession. The prevailing public mood has come to resemble closely that of an Ian McEwan novel. Constant menace, punctuated with nightmarish atrocities; the insult of the world's continuing normality: these are things we all understand very well.¹¹

Because the attack on America and the 'war on terror' provide the backdrop to *Saturday*, McEwan does not need to explain the nightmare, in Tait's view.

Tait may be right that a particular consonance between *Saturday* and the prevailing public mood conditions its reception at the time of publication. If this is so, the threat to the security of the Perownes parallels the broader insecurity of the West in the face of Islamic extremism, and in respect of those states seeking to foment anti-Western sentiment. This does not mean, of course, that the mood of insecurity to which the novel responds is relevant only to the West, even if that is the chief connotation: the predicament of the Perownes might also evoke a situation in which domestic harmony per se is threatened by global insecurity. In pursuing the allegorical dimension, however, readers may inevitably detect a process of demonization conducted from a Western perspective, most especially in the parallel between Baxter and Saddam Hussein. We may wonder if there is an invitation to speculate on the possibility of a common psychological disorder.

The psychological make-up of dictators is always a focus of political attention and speculation; it is also a consideration in the planning of foreign policy. However, any attempt to establish the psychological state of Saddam Hussein, in the run up to both the Gulf War of 1990 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was clearly fraught with problems: he could not be interviewed, the information available about his childhood and background was patchy, and the efforts of Western psychologists to assess his state of mind were complicated by the further interference of cultural difference, which must surely make any conclusions problematic. Nevertheless, the political and military machinery often depends upon such incomplete psychological profiles.

One such profile was delivered to the US House Armed Services Committee in December 1990, on the brink of war, by Jerrold M. Post, and it is interesting to compare Post's conclusions about Saddam with McEwan's portrayal of Baxter. Post summarizes Saddam's 'political personality constellation' as comprising: 'messianic ambition for unlimited power, absence of conscience, unconstrained aggression, and a paranoid outlook'. These are the things that make Saddam dangerous, in Post's analysis, and which lead to his diagnosis of 'malignant narcissism', which he describes as 'the personality configuration of the destructive charismatic who unifies and rallies his downtrodden supporters by blaming outside enemies'. The immediate purpose of the war was to force Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait, and, to achieve this end, Post advised: 'it is important not to insist on total capitulation and humiliation, for this could drive Saddam into a corner and make it impossible for him to reverse his course.'¹²

The Huntingdon's disease from which Baxter suffers produces some patterns of behaviour that are similar to this, most especially the dangerous response to the humiliating experience of the morning, which leads to his assault on the Perownes, with a sidekick in tow, an attempt, apparently, 'to rescue his reputation in front of a witness' (*S*, p. 210). The plan is an attempt 'to assert his dignity, and perhaps even shape the way he'll be remembered', in Perowne's view (rendered here, as elsewhere, in free indirect discourse) (*S*, p. 211).

This is not a parallel that is fully developed, however; indeed, had it been, it would surely have impoverished the book's engagement with global politics. There is a richness in Perowne's vacillation and uncertainty about how the West should respond to Saddam, which is evidently not matched by the resolution to the dramatic scene of threatened violence: with Baxter isolated and off-guard, Theo and Perowne contrive to throw him down the stairs, without a qualm.¹³

Even though it is steeped in its political moment, this is not a novel that is replete with specific political references, or satirical instances.¹⁴ However much *Saturday* captures the mood of post-9/11 anxiety, its central ideas are drawn from other sources. Matthew Arnold is one of the book's central reference points, and this is most obvious in section four when Daisy recites Arnold's much-anthologized poem 'Dover Beach', as we shall see. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* is a less obvious point of reference, but one that offers an interesting counterpoint to McEwan's treatment of the mass demonstration. Reflecting on the passing of 'the strong feudal habits of subordination and deference'

that formerly affected the working class, Arnold worries about 'the modern spirit' that 'has now almost entirely dissolved those habits, and the anarchical tendency of our worship of freedom in and for itself, of our superstitious faith . . . in machinery'. Here, for Arnold, is the source of anarchy:

More and more, because of this our blind faith in machinery, because of our want of light to enable us to look beyond machinery to the end for which machinery is valuable, this and that man, and this and that body of men, all over the country, are beginning to assert and put in practice an Englishman's right to do what he likes; his right to march where he likes, meet where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes. All this, I say, tends to anarchy.¹⁵

In an editorial note, Stefan Collini observes that these sentences 'chiefly refer to the so-called "Hyde Park riots" of July 1866 when a large crowd attending a meeting of the Reform League got out of hand and broke down the iron railings surrounding Hyde Park.'¹⁶ Perowne's response to the anti-war demonstrators, making their way to Hyde Park in 2003, makes for an intriguing comparison.¹⁷ He responds to 'the seduction and excitement' of 'tens of thousands of strangers converging with a single purpose conveying an intimation of revolutionary joy' (*S*, p. 72). At the same time, however, he understands that his own view is coloured by one of his patients, an Iraqi academic who had suffered at the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime. Consequently, Perowne's view is ambivalent, and he 'can't feel, as the marchers themselves probably can, that they have an exclusive hold on moral discernment' (*S*, p. 73). His meeting with Professor Taleb is a matter of chance, he realizes, suggesting that 'opinions are a roll of the dice' (*S*, p. 73).

Later, in his discussion with Daisy, his judgement of the demonstrators hardens. He asks why the demonstrators betray no sign of criticizing Saddam. Daisy argues that this is 'a given', to which Perowne makes the following response:

No it's not. It's a forgotten. Why else are you all singing and dancing in the park? The genocide and torture, the mass graves, the security apparatus, the criminal totalitarian state – the iPod generation doesn't want to know. Let nothing come between them and their ecstasy clubbing and cheap flights and reality TV. (*S*, p. 191)

There is some affinity between this outburst and Arnold's lament at the uncultured anarchic response, insofar as this response is associated with the 'worship of freedom' and a 'blind faith in machinery'. It is a

pale echo, however; partly because the class consciousness that colours Arnold's view no longer applies; but also because the view that accrues to Perowne through the novel is less judgemental than this outburst, inspired by a father–daughter argument, in which other things are at stake.

Moreover, the 'cultured' view for which Perowne is made to stand is justified by the freedoms of the machine age. Technological enhancements of domestic life, as well as those that facilitate surgery, are openly celebrated. In the account of transsphenoidal hypophysectomy (discussed in more detail below), McEwan betrays consciousness of the technological advances that make such a procedure possible, for example (*S*, p. 44).¹⁸

More generally, the machine age is a matter of celebration in *Saturday*. It is not simply that machines make individual labour less onerous: it is technology that makes the city 'a brilliant invention', as indicated by Perowne's reflection on his own small part of it, 'bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting' (*S*, p. 5).

At the same time, however, there is a clear consciousness, shared by McEwan and Perowne, that current comforts are precarious, sustained by activities that are complicitous in wider processes of despoliation or degradation. McEwan gives to Perowne a recipe of his own for a fish stew (*S*, pp. 176–9);¹⁹ yet, at the fishmonger's earlier in the day, Perowne reflects on the evident 'abundance from the emptying seas', in a passage that also registers new scientific awareness 'that even fish feel pain'. The consequence is 'the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy' (*S*, p. 127). The culture to which Perowne contributes, and to which a novel like *Saturday* belongs, embodies consolations that, it seems, outweigh the doubts occasioned by such ethical paradoxes.

In all of this, however, there is an undeveloped contradiction. The culture of Western scientific advancement, after all, is also the culture that is widely perceived to generate global environmental degradation (even if the consumerist demands of the wealthiest nations are increasingly being emulated in developing countries); and this is the culture that is identified as the enemy by Islamic militants.

Here, the counterpoint with Arnold is illuminating, once again. The passage from *Culture and Anarchy*, quoted above, suggested to Raymond Williams a crucial flaw in Arnold's thought:

Calm, Arnold rightly argued, was necessary. But now the Hyde Park railings were down, and it was not Arnold's best self which rose at the sight of them. Certainly he feared a general breakdown, into violence and anarchy, but the most remarkable facts about the British working-class movement, since its origin in the Industrial Revolution, are its conscious and deliberate abstention from general violence, and its firm faith in other methods of advance.²⁰

Where Arnold, in Williams's view, is clouded by a misperception of class, we might wonder if Perowne is clouded by a misperception of a different 'other'. For him, this is not represented by the demonstrators – he realizes he could have been one of them – but, implicitly, by the shadowy perpetrators of terror and the alternative cultural forces to which they are affiliated. We have seen that Fred Halliday's pragmatic solution is endorsed by Perowne, a solution premised on a questionable faith in the benign aspects of US influence and the global extension of capitalist democracy. In this, there is an appeal to a universal set of values that might transcend the new global ideological stand-off. This view may seem to be arrived at rather too easily.

The sketchiness (and inconclusiveness) of this political strand is less of a problem in the novel than it might be, however, chiefly because the ethical debate that emerges from the novel has another, more prominent, resonance: ultimately, it is the 'two cultures' debate in the book that assumes central significance. Through Perowne, the terms of this debate are established in ways that are obvious enough. In outline, this can seem more schematic than it is: a neurosurgeon, with a daughter who is a poet, and who berates him for his lack of responsiveness to literature, sticks by his own literal, scientific rationale for wonder, and is finally hailed as the champion of moral stability. It is important to recognize, however, that there is a deeply personal (rather than straightforwardly rational) basis to his intellectual affiliation.

In flashback we discover how Perowne met and fell in love with his wife, when he had been a Senior House Officer for four months, and she received an urgent operation to remove a tumour on her pituitary gland that was pressing on her optic nerve and impairing her vision. The account of the surgical procedure to remove the tumour and save her sight – transsphenoidal hypophysectomy – is partly drawn from the book cited in the Acknowledgements, Frank T. Vertosick's *When the Air Hits Your Brain: Tales of Neurosurgery*. The arresting point that emerges from a comparison between the episode in Vertosick's book and the remembered event in *Saturday* inspired by it is the extent to

which McEwan has borrowed from the *narrative situation* Vertosick describes, in similar fashion to the borrowing evident in earlier novels.²¹ As a trainee, sent to London for three months, Vertosick assists in the treatment of an attractive young woman, like Rosalind, referred by a casualty department, and still in her street clothes; like Perowne, he is sent to find the hospital specialist, whose diagnosis addressed to the patient bears a close resemblance to Mr Whaley's address to Rosalind in *Saturday*.

The surgical procedure in the novel is more involved than the account given by Vertosick. McEwan shadowed a neurosurgeon as part of his research for the novel, and it is clear that he had other resources to draw on.²² Yet there are still noticeable echoes. Vertosick's surgeon exposes his patient's 'blue and taut' pituitary gland 'in less than an hour', to remove a 'purulent yellow tumour';²³ while, in the procedure witnessed by Perowne, the 'swollen purplish gland' is revealed 'in less than forty-five minutes', allowing the removal of an 'ochre tumour' (*S*, p. 44).

Most arresting, however, is the way in which the situation of Vertosick supplies a basis for this formative experience of Perowne's. Like Vertosick, Perowne is a trainee, affected by the plight of a woman with no immediate familial support: the patient's father is dead, in Vertosick's memoir, while her mother has a heart condition and cannot be contacted.²⁴ (Rosalind's mother is dead, and her father is abroad (*S*, p. 42).) The tone of the two books is certainly very different: where McEwan produces an internalized sense of personal development (as one might expect in a novel), Vertosick reveals the heartiness, and the raw humour commonly associated with trainees in the medical profession.²⁵ Yet he also implies a sense of vocation behind the blunt exterior, and it is this feeling that McEwan extends. For Perowne, the experience of witnessing the transsphenoidal hypophysectomy is life-altering, on both personal and professional levels: he has 'yet to learn clinical detachment' and is falling in love with Rosalind (*S*, p. 43); but, simultaneously, the majesty of neurosurgery is brought home to him by a procedure that is a 'miracle of human ingenuity', and that is 'humane and daring', embodying 'the spirit of benevolence enlivened by the boldness of a high-wire circus act.' (*S*, pp. 44–5) Perowne's desire to become a neurosurgeon now becomes more than 'theoretical', 'a matter of deep desire':

As the closing up began and the face, this particular, beautiful face, was reassembled without a single disfiguring mark, he felt excitement about

the future and impatient to acquire the skills. He was falling in love with a life. He was also, of course, falling in love. The two were inseparable. (*S*, p. 45)

It is a significant divergence from the detachment usually held to be the requisite norm in the medical profession, governed by the Hippocratic oath, which obliges reverence of life, in a uniform and impersonal sense. Such impersonality is also at odds with the mood of Frank Vertosick's memoir. Recalling an episode as a trainee, he wonders at the callousness of a surgeon nearing the end of his training, able to shut out of his mind a deadly slip of the knife, and apparently to absolve himself of guilt: Vertosick wonders if 'psychopathy' is part of the necessary identity of the neurosurgeon, and if his own 'compassion [will] start to slip away.'²⁶ One of the functions of *When the Air Hits Your Brain* is to advertise the fact that this is not so, that the fully qualified Vertosick is deeply fulfilled, at the level of personal interaction, by his ability to heal, and to utilize his acquired skills to bring happiness to others. In *Saturday*, McEwan responds deeply to this brand of humanism, rooted in scientific advancement.

As the privileging of scientific progress in the novel becomes more pronounced, so does the paradox deepen that this view is being conveyed in the form of a novel, written by a writer widely held to be at the height of his powers. Of course, McEwan makes the paradox a central element of the book by linking Perowne's (frankly) heroic status to his failure of imaginative response in a narrow, literary sense. Mark Lawson suggests one way of accounting for this: in his view, *Saturday* is 'one of the most oblique but also most serious contributions to the post-9/11, post-Iraq war literature', and, consequently, 'it succeeds in ridiculing on every page the view of its hero that fiction is useless to the modern world.'²⁷ Certainly, the consummate achievement of the novel would seem to refute the view that fiction is useless; but this may not be Perowne's view, exactly.

His attitude to literature is expressed through an extended reflection on his daughter's attempts to educate his literary sensibility. In Tolstoy and Flaubert (he read *Anna Karenin* and *Madame Bovary* at Daisy's behest) he found authors who display 'the virtue, at least, of representing a recognisable physical reality', though he was 'unmoved' by Daisy's claim that 'the genius was in the detail'. These novels, he feels, 'were the products of steady, workmanlike accumulation' (*S*, pp. 66–7).

If he finds some minimal value in classic nineteenth-century novels, he has an express distaste for 'the so-called magical realists', writers of

'irksome confections' in his view. McEwan is having some fun with his character, and his readers, here: Perowne has read, it seems, Rushdie, Carter and Grass, among others, and also a novel in which 'one visionary saw through a pub window his parents as they had been some weeks after his conception, discussing the possibility of aborting him' (*S*, p. 67). The novel in question, of course, is *The Child in Time*, which stands as the odd-one-out in this roll-call of magic realism. The timeslip in that novel (to which Perowne refers here) is actually embedded in a series of references to theoretical physics, giving it the kind of quasi-plausibility that is never attempted in magic realism proper. This moment of self-referential play may contain within it an implicit complaint about the way in which *The Child in Time* is sometimes wrongly categorized.

Rather than a simple refutation of Perowne's evaluations, it is hard not to see some affinity between McEwan and Perowne. In a public interview with Vic Sage at the University of East Anglia, McEwan made a comment that is germane here. Discussing an early draft of *Atonement*, he explained that Robbie was initially conceived as a character with brain implants, making him the product of scientific rather than social engineering. In explaining why he rejected this early whimsical idea, McEwan was moved to make a general point about science-fiction, a mode where, 'because anything can happen, nothing is very interesting'. This, of course, is almost identical to Perowne's conclusion about magic realism in *Saturday*: 'when anything can happen', he writes to Daisy, 'nothing much matters' (*S*, p. 68). We should not set too much store by such extra-textual correspondences, of course; more pertinent is the way in which all of McEwan's fiction follows Perowne's predilection for 'the actual, not the magical', and focuses on 'the difficulties and wonders of the real' and the 'demanding re-enactment of the plausible' (*S*, pp. 67–8).

The agreement between McEwan and Perowne on this point suggests an exploratory dimension to *Saturday* rather than an assertion of a given definition of literary value. If advancing understanding of the brain is the occasion for a new form of wonder, how might the novel respond to this evolving discipline, with huge ramification for our understanding of consciousness? The novel situates its response to this question in a broader historical evocation of the 'two cultures' debate.

To get a sense of this, we need to consider the climactic scene in some detail. Here, Baxter, holding Rosalind at knife-point, insists that

Daisy reads aloud from the proof copy of her poetry collection, *My Saucy Bark*: he has made her strip naked, and her evident pregnancy has stalled the march of the intruders' sexual violence. Her grandfather, who had encouraged her to rote-learn poetry as a child, says 'do one you used to say for me', in an apparent effort to give her some fortitude, and to protect her, at least, from the additional humiliation of exposing her own writing to the intruders (*S*, p. 220). The piece she chooses to recite, pretending to read from her own book, is Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. Baxter's ecstatic response to the poem effects a dramatic mood swing, and fills him with the positive desire to go on the trial treatment for his condition that Perowne had invented earlier in the scene. The poem tips the balance in favour of the Perownes: Baxter is diverted from his scheme of revenge; his sidekick, Nigel, leaves the house in disgust; and Theo and Henry are able to overpower Baxter.

This is not, of course, a simple celebration of the 'power' of poetry, though the emotional impact of poetry is strongly registered. The scene also emphasizes the unpredictability and subjectivity of the aesthetic response, as well as the contingency of life. As Daisy reads, 'Dover Beach' takes shape through Perowne's untutored responses to a poem he doesn't recognize. On the first recitation (she is forced to recite it again), Perowne 'feels himself slipping through the words into the things they describe'. This interpretation is coloured by his preconception that Daisy is the author, his discovery that she is expecting a baby, and the day's events concerning the impending war in Iraq. He imagines she is describing a scene that involves her lover, and 'he sees a smooth-skinned young man, naked to the waist, standing at Daisy's side'. Perowne feels the poem expresses Daisy's nostalgic reflection on a time 'when the earth was new and the sea consoling, and nothing came between man and God.' Faced with the 'sadness and loss' heard in the breaking and retreating waves, Daisy turns to her lover to tell him 'that they must love each other and be faithful, especially now they're having a child, and when there's no peace or certainty, and when desert armies stand ready to fight' (*S*, pp. 220–1).

When he hears the poem again, he realizes that he missed 'the mention of the cliffs of England' (his reception was coloured by the preconception that the poem is about Daisy and her lover in France); this second hearing is coloured by his anticipation of how Baxter is receiving it: instead of the young man, Perowne now sees 'Baxter standing alone, elbows propped against the sill, listening to the waves "bring the eternal note of sadness in"'. Hearing 'through Baxter's ears'

the melancholy becomes more emphatic for Perowne, and 'the plea to be true to another sounds hopeless in the absence of joy or love or light or peace or "help for pain".' This reading is filtered through Perowne's attempt to inhabit Baxter's illness: he hears 'no mention of a desert' this time. In conclusion, he feels that 'the poem's melodiousness . . . is at odds with its pessimism', a not unperceptive response (*S*, pp. 221–2).

The haphazard forces of chance are at play in Daisy's decision to recite a poem that will jolt Baxter out of his vengeful mode. Her father's revised interpretation of the poem, as the suspense builds, suggests it may tip Baxter over into despair rather than euphoric hopefulness; and she could certainly have chosen other poems committed to memory, in response to her grandfather's broad suggestion. Yet in the novel, the choice of 'Dover Beach' is artful. It is ideal in several respects in relation to the novel's development, particularly given the historical context of the poem and the circumstances of its composition.

A crucial element of the poem, which McEwan underscores through Perowne's reception of it, is the speaker's loss of religious faith. What is left, instead, is the love between individuals to pit against a world compared to 'a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night.' This closing image, which Perowne initially links with the forthcoming conflict in Iraq, is a reference to Thucydides' account, in his history of the Peloponnesian War, of the night-time battle at Epipolae: in the confusion, Athenian soldiers were unable to distinguish friend from foe, and found themselves killing both indiscriminately.²⁸ The emphasis on love at a personal level and, by extension, the need for individual responsibility – as a counter to indiscriminate (and ultimately self-destructive) conflict, and in the absence of divine intervention – chimes entirely with the novel's simple moral strand.

The 'love' that the world lacks, in Arnold's conception, is sometimes associated with imagination more broadly, rather than with the nuptial love the poet might seem to have in mind, on the basis of his immediate inspiration. ('Dover Beach' was inspired by Arnold's visits to Dover with his new wife in 1851.) Following this association, Perowne's rapid lesson in poetic interpretation, hearing his daughter's recitation of the poem and then urgently revising his sense of its connotations, might be said to constitute an object lesson in the need for rationalism to be tempered with imagination.

However, there is another sense in which 'Dover Beach' functions as a way of sanctioning the world of the rationalist – or rather, the

rationalist with Perowne's credentials – in a secular world. This is so because the poem straddles the moment of the great Darwinian paradigm shift. It is thought to have been composed between 1851 and 1852, but was not published until 1867. The significant cultural event, occurring midway between the composition and publication of the poem, is the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859). The poem registers – and laments – a wider loss of religious faith, implying that 'love', the only 'light' or 'help for pain', perhaps, on the 'darkling plain', is going to be severely tested. This pessimism is melodiously conveyed, in the contradiction between form and content that Perowne dismissively notes.

His dismissiveness need not attract our disapproval, for in the time between the conception and publication of the poem, Darwin produces the clinching work in a new science, sweeping away Biblical explanations of creation and establishing a new way of infusing creation with wonder. In a sense, Darwin establishes a new form of 'love' or imagination. Indeed, this is his claim in the phrase from the final paragraph from *The Origin of Species* that echoes in Perowne's mind in *Saturday*: 'There is grandeur in this view of life'.²⁹ For Perowne (and McEwan) the grandeur arises 'from physical laws, from war of nature, famine and death' to produce 'a bracing kind of consolation in the brief privilege of consciousness' (*S*, p. 56). For Perowne, the grandeur is rooted in the rapidly advancing scientific understanding of consciousness, which might one day explain 'how matter becomes conscious'. Although he 'can't begin to imagine a satisfactory account', he believes 'the secret will be revealed – over decades', and this is 'the only kind of faith he has. There's grandeur in this view of life' (*S*, p. 255).

Here, in his reverence for consciousness, Perowne is very close to McEwan who, in an article on science and belief, stated: 'what I believe but cannot prove is that no part of my consciousness will survive my death.' While acknowledging that 'many will take this premise as a given', McEwan points out that 'it divides the world crucially', separating the rationalists from those who have done great damage by virtue of the conviction 'that there is a life, a better, more important life, elsewhere'. The premise leads McEwan to the world-view enshrined in *Saturday*:

That this span is brief, that consciousness is an accidental gift of blind processes, makes our existence all the more precious and our responsibilities for it all the more profound.³⁰

The impulse behind the ethical imperative here, our responsibility for the precious gift of consciousness, is partly generated by wonder at the biological marvel that science has revealed. In the absence of any other moral system, cognition of the science of mind, as well as that branch of science itself, becomes, in an ethical sense, the superior form of imagination. In that sense, the kind of knowledge acquired by the neurosurgeon is somehow primary, where other mental activities – writing a poem or a novel, say – might be deemed secondary, mere consequences of the consciousness that they cannot comprehend or preserve.

This suggests a new kind of territory for the novel that treats the issue of consciousness. From a technical point of view, *Saturday* reveals literary parallels, of course, the most pertinent of which is the modernist stream-of-consciousness especially as enacted in novels that span a day, like *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf's novel, indeed, prompted a number of comparisons in the reviews.³¹ McEwan is also moving in a new direction, however, trying to produce, perhaps, a diagnostic 'slice-of-mind' novel – working towards the literary equivalent of a CT scan – rather than a modernist 'slice-of-life' novel. *Saturday* is not always successful in this respect, perhaps – it is stilted in some ways, for example, especially in those tense, dramatic scenes with Baxter where Perowne's diagnostic habits seem to crowd out less rational thought processes.

Stylistically, however, the novel makes a bold attempt to engage with the immediacy of human consciousness, and it is in this way that *Saturday* finally stakes a claim to a share of the ethical high ground on behalf of the literary intervention. The most striking stylistic feature of the novel is that McEwan writes an extended fiction in the present tense for the first time, in a manner slightly reminiscent of J. M. Coetzee and the deceptive simplicity of that writer's novels.³² McEwan achieves several things by adopting this method. There is, first, the advantage of a style that contributes to the suspense of the novel. In Section Four, for example, McEwan teases his readers with a series of arrivals to the Perownes' house before the intruders arrive. We know they are coming, because Theo's warning to his father about Baxter (*S*, p. 152) (which only partially impinges (*S*, p. 175)) prepares us; but it is only with the *fourth* arrival at the front door that the menace finally materializes. This would surely have been intolerable rendered in the past tense; but the use of the present ameliorates the teasing because there is no signal, at the level of grammar, of recapitulation by the narrator:

nothing is being withheld, so the stylistic conceit implies, all is happening *now*.

What follows from this is that McEwan has adopted a style that gets very close to the experience of reading novels. Literary critics are in the habit of discussing novels in the present tense – that is, they concern themselves with what *happens* in a novel – and they do this because the substance of a novel, the experiences described, as well as the plot, comprise events and experiences in a sequence that *happen* each time a novel is produced through reading. In this sense, a novel captures a recurring present. Of course the is nothing new in the use of the historic present tense as a vehicle for narrative fiction; but it might be said to be a stylistic attribute that comes closest to the experience of novel reading, a feature that McEwan exploits in *Saturday*.

The vitality of the present is given an additional dimension in the closing pages when Perowne, at the end of his eventful Saturday, is called into the hospital to operate on Baxter, and, at work in the operating theatre, finds himself ‘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’ (*S*, p. 258). Here McEwan allows his character to occupy the mental space that Stephen Lewis hankers after in *The Child in Time*, when he reflects that if he could replicate in his daily life the ‘intensity and abandonment’ of building a sandcastle with his daughter, ‘he would be a happy man of extraordinary powers’ (*CT*, p. 107).

The contentment that flows from inhabiting this pure present, for Perowne, is selfless, since ego is entirely suppressed. If we are tempted to draw a parallel between the activities of the neurosurgeon and the business of writing – and, surely, we are invited to do this – McEwan also makes an implicit distinction by indicating that one aspect of Perowne’s contentment derives from ‘working with others’.³³ The partial parallel remains in the circumstances of this ‘benevolent dissociation’, which requires ‘difficulty, prolonged demands on concentration and skills, pressure, problems to be solved, even danger’. We probably acknowledge the parallel between the business of neurosurgery and the art of the novelist seeking to trace psychological motivation; yet we also realize that the level of difficulty, concentration and danger are of entirely different orders in each case. The result of the parallel, once more, is to privilege the skill of the surgeon, whose

'clarified emptiness' and 'muted joy' are hard won. Despite Perowne's concern that there must 'be something wrong with him' to be at his happiest on his day off when back at work, readers may be more inclined to concur that the experience renders Perowne 'fully qualified to exist' (*S*, p. 258).

The 'only kind of faith' Perowne has is in scientific progress; or, at least, in his own branch of medical science, a conviction that one day 'a satisfactory account' will be arrived at of 'how matter becomes conscious' (*S*, p. 255).³⁴ However, this unprovable faith is part of his inhabitation of the present moment, the secular professional's equivalent of meditation. This, however, is merely an interlude: it does not, in itself, signal a special claim for Perowne's profession, or the prioritizing of science over literature, in the book's scheme, that might enshrine Perowne's higher moral standing.

In the construction of the novel, it is not neurosurgery in general that is the focus of the episode, but this *particular* operation, for it is this procedure that delivers the satisfying sense of completion at the same time that the impression of Perowne's moral stature is confirmed. McEwan engineers a situation, in a work of unabashed symmetry, in which Perowne can make atonement, first for the abuse (as he sees it) of his professional skills in his first encounter with Baxter (where his detection of Baxter's Huntingdon's disease enabled him to humiliate him and to escape a beating); and also for his social position, and the roll of the genetic dice that distinguishes a Perowne from a Baxter.³⁵

The theme of chance forms the arresting counterpoint to the aesthetic perfection, in a structural sense, of McEwan's novel. At one point we discover Daisy's reverence for *The Golden Bowl* (1904) (Henry James is one of those writers Perowne does not get on with), and we should detect, in this allusion, a hint of the consolation offered by carefully crafted fiction in the face of life's imperfections. That consolation, however, serves to underscore rather than obscure the moral problem. In *Saturday*, chance is repeatedly shown to have a determining effect on life. Perowne reflects on: 'the accidents of character and circumstance' that set Daisy apart from the drug addict he has seen out of his window (*S*, p. 65); on the chance encounter that fashions his view of the Iraq situation (*S*, pp. 72–3); and on the 'axis' that binds his life to that of a street sweeper, and that 'could tip them into each other's life' (*S*, p. 74).

The Aberfan disaster of 1966 (where 116 children were tragically killed when their school was swamped by a landslide), we discover, was

a defining experience for the young Perowne, steering him away from a belief in fate or providence, or divine intervention: 'the pickiness of pure chance and physical laws seemed like freedom from the scheming of a gloomy god' (*S*, pp. 31–2, 128).

The novelist, of course, imposes order on the random material on which he or she draws. In alerting us to this facet of the novelist's art, McEwan again reveals an affinity with Iris Murdoch, whose theory of the novel was based on this paradox. For her, there was a necessary tension between form and contingency, the need for a 'unified aesthetic whole' set against the requirement to evoke the 'disunity and randomness' of 'ordinary life'.³⁶ In Murdoch's conception, this involved a moral dilemma for the artist, since formal unity can conceal 'truth', tipping the balance away from contingency and towards a sense of gratification or consolation for the reader.

In *Saturday*, this dilemma becomes the central point, but in a new context. For Perowne, it is genetics that determines who will have a miserable life, on the margins of society, since such a fate is 'down to invisible folds and kinks of character, written in code, at the level of molecules' (*S*, p. 272). This randomness then generates a different kind of order, a predictability about behaviour and opportunity that could not previously have been tied down so exactly. Contingency, in the sense of a roll of the genetic dice, then points to a new kind of social patterning, not discernible in the social 'chaos' that writers previously sought to draw on. This implies a different sense of social responsibility, demonstrated in the duty Perowne feels to treat Baxter in the final section of the novel.

It is worth noting that his decision to operate on Baxter is implausible, according to the narrow definition of professional ethics to which he is subordinate. But that is very much the point: Perowne is advancing to another plane of ethical care, based on an understanding of genetic predetermination, and the new form of social responsibility this must usher in.

The gesture of writing *Saturday*, a novel premised on this perception of new forms of inequality, might be said to parallel Perowne's new duty of care. There are ways in which the order imposed makes Perowne seem the author's moral agent, enacting his own desire for intervention. The inevitability of the reckoning between Baxter and Perowne and the perfection, in a moral sense, of having Perowne treat his adversary in a spirit of atonement for his own genetic privilege, are satisfying fusions of form and content.

Saturday represents a significant risk for McEwan in that it opts for consolation in the face of contemporary uncertainty. His earlier novels create the necessary tension established in Iris Murdoch's poetics of the novel, between 'the consolations of form' and 'a respect for the contingent', in the knowledge that 'only the very greatest art invigorates without consoling.'³⁷ Here, the tension collapses into consolation. Picking up on this, John Banville's excoriating review of the novel observes that previously McEwan 'has been the least consoling chronicler of life's perils and difficulties'; in contrast, he finds *Saturday* to be 'self-satisfied', characterized by 'arrogance', and well received by Western readers who are reassured at a time when they are shaken in their sense of themselves and their culture.³⁸ If one takes Perowne to epitomize Western culture, such a reading is understandable; however, his philistinism in connection with literary culture is one very significant way in which the 'arrogance' that Banville describes is shaken up. (Banville is himself offended by Perowne's ignorance of literature, which he thinks is implausible.) More significant is the treatment of medical science: if Perowne is another high achiever of the privileged West (like Halliday and Linley in *Amsterdam*), the discoveries that make his work possible issue in an understanding of human nature that transcends cultural difference; and this is what legitimizes the novel's mood of consolation.

If the novel, as a form, always plays order off against chaos, form against contingency, this dynamic in *Saturday* generates aesthetic consolations that point to a new perception of society. A crucial aspect of life's contingency, the genetic lottery, is now being deciphered, and the possibility of intervention through medical science is glimpsed. If the social consequences of this are enormous – and not necessarily benign – they are also profound for the novel. If medical science opens the door to greater human agency to address what was previously put down to chance, so might the novel begin to reflect a new kind of social order. How might the novel begin to encompass new models of agency and responsibility? This is the question that *Saturday* tacitly poses, through the 'heroism' of Perowne, reinventing his ethical code in order to save Baxter. McEwan emerges as the neurosurgeon of the cultural sphere in this novel, daring to console his readers, in an extravagant performance that celebrates the developing human capacity to know the self, in both literature and science.

Notes

- 1 From the interview with John Haffenden, in Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 168–90 (p. 169).
- 2 This is discussed in chapter 2.
- 3 This brings to mind McEwan's article, in the aftermath of 9/11 (discussed in the previous chapter), in which he describes how he 'surfed' TV news channels 'hungrily, ghoulishly'. See 'Beyond Belief', *The Guardian*, 'G2' (12 September 2001), p. 2.
- 4 Theo Tait, 'A Rational Diagnosis' (review of *Saturday*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 5315 (11 February 2005), pp. 21–2 (p. 22); Ruth Scurr, 'Happiness on a Knife-edge' (review of *Saturday*), *The Times*, 'Weekend Review' (29 January 2005), p. 13; Peter Kemp, 'Master of the Mind Game' (review of *Saturday*), *Sunday Times*, 'Culture' (30 January 2005), pp. 41–2 (p. 42).
- 5 Robert McCrum, 'The Story of His Life' (author profile), *The Observer*, 'Review' (23 January 2005), p. 5.
- 6 See Fred Halliday, *Two Hours That Shook the World, September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 24.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 172–3.
- 9 From McEwan's front-page article, 'Only Love and Then Oblivion'.
- 10 McEwan, Preface to *A Move Abroad*, p. xxv.
- 11 Tait, 'A Rational Diagnosis', p. 21.
- 12 Jerrold M. Post, 'Explaining Saddam', www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/unscom/readings/post.html (accessed 9 February 2005).
- 13 Some readers will certainly feel that the parallel between Baxter and Saddam is invited. Christopher Tayler feels that the 'grand correspondence between the political musings and the Baxter plot never quite emerges', and that this is 'perhaps . . . for the best'. However, he does feel that this correspondence is 'expected'. See 'A Knife at the Throat' (review of *Saturday*), *London Review of Books*, 27: 5 (3 March 2005), pp. 31–3 (p. 33).
- 14 One notable exception is the episode at the opening of Tate Modern, where Tony Blair mistakes Perowne for a painter (*S*, pp. 143–4). This is based on personal experience – it was McEwan that Tony Blair mistook for a painter, insisting that 'he had McEwans on the wall', even when he was corrected. See Jasper Gerard, 'The Conversion of Mr Macabre' (interview with McEwan), *Sunday Times*, 'News Review' (23 January 2005), p. 5.
- 15 Matthew Arnold, *'Culture and Anarchy' and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 84–5.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 17 I am grateful to my colleague Sean Matthews for bringing this parallel to my attention. A number of points addressed in this chapter were clarified for me through discussion with colleagues at the contemporary fiction

- reading group in the School of English Studies at the University of Nottingham.
- 18 McEwan is drawing, partly, on the account of this procedure given by Frank T. Vertosick in *When the Air Hits Your Brain: Tales of Neurosurgery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 186, where the technological advances that made it possible are revealed.
 - 19 In suggesting that *Saturday* is one of his most autobiographical books, McEwan has revealed that 'Henry is probably closer to me than any of my (characters). I've given him my squash game. I gave him my recipe for fish stew, which is probably a big mistake.' See Peter Fray, 'The Enduring Talent of Ian McEwan' (29 January 2005), www.theage.com.au/articles/2005/01/28/1106850082840.html?oneclick=true (accessed 15 November 2005).
 - 20 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 133.
 - 21 The relevant episode can be found in Frank T. Vertosick's *When the Air Hits Your Brain*, pp. 183–7; the flashback in *Saturday* occurs on pp. 40–5.
 - 22 In his Acknowledgements, McEwan thanks Neil Kitchen, Consultant Neurosurgeon and Associate Clinical Director at The National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Queens Square, London, who he observed at work over a two-year period.
 - 23 Vertosick, *When the Air Hits Your Brain*, p. 186.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 - 25 In one episode a nearly qualified trainee neurosurgeon vents his anger at a presumptuous colleague by engraving 'Fred sucks' on the inside of a bone flap, an insult that becomes public when an infection leads to the removal of the flap. Vertosick, *When the Air Hits Your Brain*, p. 147.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
 - 27 Mark Lawson, 'Against the Flow' (review of *Saturday*), *The Guardian*, 'Review' (22 January 2005), p. 9.
 - 28 See, for example, the notes on the poem at: <http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem89.html> (accessed 22 February 2005).
 - 29 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (1859; Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 396.
 - 30 McEwan, 'Faith v Fact', *The Guardian*, 'G2' (7 January 2005), p. 6.
 - 31 Peter Kemp suggested that 'sanity shadowed by unreason is the theme of another novel about a day in London: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.' He went on to observe that '*Saturday* shares other concerns with it, too: preparations for a party, the allure of the city, intimations of ageing and mortality, medical matters and the reverberations of war. These affinities don't seem accidental.' See 'Master of the Mind Game', p. 42. For Theo Tait, 'the real model for *Saturday*, . . . is *Mrs Dalloway*, also set over one London day. As in Virginia Woolf's novel, the juxtaposition of a wealthy

insider and a desperate outsider creates a nasty and violent climax'. See Tait, 'A Rational Diagnosis', p. 22.

- 32 The 'Rabbit' novels of John Updike are also written in the present tense, and may have served as a model for McEwan.
- 33 At the prompting of Zadie Smith, McEwan has discussed this description of surgery which is 'really . . . about writing, about making art.' See 'Zadie Smith Talks with Ian McEwan', in Vendela Vida, ed., *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers* (San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005), pp. 207–39 (p. 224).
- 34 In this, Perowne resembles Antonio Damasio, who, though 'sceptical of science's presumption of objectivity and definitiveness', is, on balance, committed to scientific progress: 'I do believe, more often than not, that we will come to know.' See Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, pp. xviii, xix.
- 35 Perowne's guilt is a running theme. See pp. 102, 111, 210, 227–8, 278.
- 36 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993), p. 93.
- 37 Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', pp. 22, 23, 24. Murdoch's own novels, of course, enact this tension between form and contingency, while refusing to offer easy consolations to the reader.
- 38 John Banville, 'A Day in the Life' (review of *Saturday*), *New York Review of Books*, 52: 9 (26 May 2005), www.nybooks.com/articles/17993 (accessed 20 October 2005).