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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# The Grandeur in This View of Life: Consciousness and Literary Form in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

In Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, the nature of consciousness – and the consciousness of one man in particular – is the overarching theme of a story that looks at a single, if exceptional, day in the life of a London neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne. Since this story is told in a novel, the subject of literary form as a part of the description of consciousness, or even consciousness itself, is implicit in the very first gesture of the project. McEwan takes on the issue directly by constructing Perowne's daughter, Daisy, and his father-in-law, Grammaticus, as poets, and by having Perowne himself ruminate over literature and its purpose while anticipating visits from these two family members. Literary form becomes a subject that is both intrinsic and extrinsic to the other subjects in *Saturday*, such as consciousness, morality in the modern world, global politics, class structures, masculinity, family, science, and medicine. And the differences between literary forms – especially between poetic forms and the novel form – are connected to what is perhaps the novel's grandest theme: the nature of time.

The very title of *Saturday* designates its interest in time. Time, for McEwan, is inextricably bound up with consciousness. To be conscious, to have a functioning self, one must process time in specific ways. Failure to process time correctly can produce a failure of the self – insanity: “It's of the essence of a degenerating mind, periodically to lose all sense of a continuous self, and therefore any regard for what others think of your lack of continuity.”<sup>1</sup> In order to demonstrate the normative functions of time, McEwan provides in the novel several examples of *abnormal* brains that interfere with a character's ability to experience time and therefore to have a cognizant,

continuous self. Literary form is integral to this examination of time and consciousness. The fact that the examination is a literary one means that the structures of language and text are bound up with the structures of time and consciousness. All thoughts, all ideas in *Saturday* must be translated into text and can only be accessed by readers' brains through particular patterns and forms. McEwan is aware that literary form is both a shaper of time and a product of it, and his novel challenges us to think about the ways in which our readerly awareness is built by the form of the text.

In *Saturday*, the differences between poetry and novels become one part of a chain of interlocking dichotomies – rich and poor, past and future, healthy and unhealthy, sane and insane, ethical and unethical, as well as science and literature – that are collapsed by McEwan in order to construct new possibilities for understanding ourselves in the modern world. *Saturday* is a hyper-conscious text (as one might expect in a narrative about a neurosurgeon), and its hyper-consciousness extends to literary form: the novel explores the ways we read in different formal modes and the resulting differences in cognition, knowledge, and action that can result.

THE BRAIN AND CONSCIOUSNESS: WHO WE ARE;  
HOW WE THINK

*Saturday* is not the first of McEwan's books to explore the topic of self, consciousness, and cognitive science – *Enduring Love* also tackled these issues.<sup>2</sup> But in *Saturday* McEwan focuses more directly on the field of cognitive science, and its neurologist protagonist allows him to make the topic of brain function overt in the narrative. Several sections of the text are given over to clinical descriptions of brain structure and activity. As one would expect, some of these descriptions occur in the voice of the doctor, but others occur within the third-person limited narrative, causing Perowne to become the subject of the description. The space between the protagonist in the novel and the narrator is slight; the narrator seems to share not only Perowne's voice and perspective, but also his medical education and expertise.<sup>3</sup> This apparent similarity between the narrator and the main character permits a doubled perspective, where readers can slip in and out of Perowne's brain. McEwan uses both the internal reflections of Perowne and the voice of the narrator

to describe the physical processes of the brain. The text, therefore, functions analogously to the brain, as the recipient of and producer of structures of time, language, and knowledge. This serves a philosophical purpose as well as a literary one, and reflects the fact that Perowne is as aware of his own cognitive functioning as he is of his patients': his tendency to make himself a medical subject is echoed in the narrative's tendency to represent him as a character both subjectively and objectively.

McEwan is interested in the transitions between the physical brain and thought, between thought and language, and between language and text. Much of the narrative is dedicated to a sort of biological destiny argument: "There is much in human affairs that can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule," muses Perowne, who calls himself a "professional reductionist."<sup>4</sup> The most extreme example of this is of course Baxter, the thug stricken with Huntington's Disease who terrorizes Perowne and his family. But nobody is exempt, as Perowne recognizes when he ponders the likelihood of his own genetic propensity for the dementia suffered by his mother, Lily. On the surface, McEwan seems almost to be writing fictional versions of medical case histories: Baxter's biology is the determining factor of his characterization. McEwan uses the common – by now almost clichéd – construction of the genetic metaphor of the sacred text: "*It is written* ... It is spelled out in fragile proteins, but it could be carved in stone, or tempered steel."<sup>5</sup> But Perowne's sense of wonder admits a more complex vision of biology and character. Even with extensive knowledge of the physical brain, Perowne reflects that the ways in which "matter becomes conscious" will always be wondrous.<sup>6</sup> Perowne, who imagines himself to be a pragmatist, a scientific man ill-suited for literature and imagination, tends to divide the world into two realms: the physical realm of the brain that constitutes reality, versus the conscious realm of the mind that does not have a direct physical location in the brain and thus appears to be a "brightly wrought illusion." This illusion is aligned with fictional texts – a "bright inward cinema of thought" – including literature.<sup>7</sup> What McEwan is focused on in *Saturday*, and what Perowne will learn in his journey on that day, is that the division between these two realms is largely illusory: the brain and the mind work together, experience and fiction work together, and reality and illusion work together to create comprehensive lived experience. As Perowne's own use of

the metaphor of genetics as sacred text reveals, physical reality may depend on an imaginative leap, and imagination may depend on the physical reality of the brain. The physical structure of the brain produces the mind, the self, and our character; and our character determines the reality of all our interactions with other characters. These interactions are dependent on our imaginative capacity, our ability to create fictions in our minds so that we might be better able to understand the perspectives of others (as Grammaticus teaches Daisy that literature is “the accurate description of feelings”).<sup>8</sup> These fictions give us our ability to be empathetic, socially aware, and moral human beings (the backdrop of the war in Iraq, Saddam’s dictatorship, and the democratic right to protest all underscore the point about civil society and cognition). These brightly wrought illusions are, therefore, the very structure of our humanity, and are in no way mere subjective relativism: they are produced by very real physical structures in the brain, which McEwan demonstrates through counter-examples of the diseased brain.

#### TIME, MIND, AND MORAL CHARACTER

McEwan uses portraits of sufferers of mental degeneration to demonstrate how brain structure constructs character. Central to the development of the functioning self is one’s ability to process time, and in the diseased brain this ability is severely compromised. Without the ability to track time, our emotions, our relationships to others, and our ethical frameworks become dysfunctional. Perowne’s mother, Lily, who suffers from Alzheimer’s, lives in an altered reality – “everything belongs in the present” (her present is actually a confused memory of the past; she believes she is still a child).<sup>9</sup> She is incapable of conceptualizing the future, and therefore cannot anticipate a visit from her son or even experience the feeling of boredom while waiting for him. Our basic emotions are often dependent on our understanding of time: we cannot be bored, or anticipate something pleasurable, or mourn something lost if we have no notion of the future or the past. Thus something as simple as Lily’s continual present has deep ethical implications; without a sense of time her connections to other people, even her own son, are disrupted.

Similarly, Huntington’s disease causes Baxter to live in “the confining bright spotlight of the present.”<sup>10</sup> While the reasons for Baxter’s

criminality are surely a complex mix of social and biological circumstances, his behaviour at certain points is clearly connected to his disease. The ethical self – the socially aware character – is dependent upon the continuous self that is aware of its actions in time and can reflect on past moments and anticipate future consequences. Even within the twisted ethics of Baxter’s own criminal world, his discontinuities breach social contracts, which is why his fellow conspirators twice abandon him. Lily Perowne and Baxter are the most extreme examples of the discontinuous self and its moral effects in the narrative, though the alcoholic Grammaticus also struggles with temporal perception and, as a result, has difficulty maintaining healthy relationships. He fractures his relationship with his granddaughter, for instance, because he expects forgiveness for his accusations of plagiarism while he was drunk: “like many drinkers,” Perowne reflects of Grammaticus, “he liked to think each new day drew a line under the day before.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus the experience of time is framed in *Saturday* as being integral to the construction of the self and to our ability to live in social coherence. This goes some way towards explaining the novel’s formal arrangement and why it explores time as both an internal and external experience. Externally, time is measured through the action of the social and political world. Clocks, appointments, television news, and living patterns of the city, like the sound of traffic and the movements of people in the square outside Perowne’s house, all signal the passage of the day. Internally, time is experienced quite differently. Perowne is hyperaware of his aging, and on this particular Saturday he is feeling nostalgic. Indeed, he is frequently lost in reminiscences of the past. His reflective moments are perhaps the result of his day off work, for work is a critical part of experiencing time for Perowne. We are told, in fact, that work structures the lives of people like Perowne and Rosalind, and that without work they are “nothing.”<sup>12</sup> Work is considered by Perowne to be “the ultimate badge of health,” for the patients who go back to work constitute Perowne’s greatest professional successes.<sup>13</sup> Work is what structures time in his life and gives it form and meaning. In this sense it is both external and internal in nature. As we will see, however, work, while essential, is also associated with a kind of positive cognitive dysfunction that is associated with literature – poetry in particular – and the craft of the writer.

## TEXT AND TIME

Humans communicate experience through language and linguistic structures. Conversations and stories, both oral and written, in the various forms available to us (from television news segments, to songs, to novels) are the means by which we know each other and ourselves. At the same time, language and its products always change the nature of lived temporal experience. It typically takes longer to relate the events of an experience than to experience the event itself. Language itself is thus subject to time – it takes up time. McEwan devotes some of his narrative to exploring that fact:

The assertions and questions don't spell themselves out. He experiences them more as a mental shrug followed by an interrogative pulse. This is the preverbal language that linguistics call mentalese. Hardly a language, more a matrix of shifting patterns, consolidating and compressing meaning in fractions of a second, and blending it inseparably with its distinctive emotional hue, which itself is rather like a colour. A sickly yellow. Even with a poet's gift of compression, it could take hundreds of words and many minutes to describe.<sup>14</sup>

The passage itself exemplifies the fact that a second of experience will expand to moments when translated into language. Of course, it is not just the language that fills time in this passage, but the literary techniques, for McEwan's choice to write this explanation using metaphors and images (a sickly yellow) takes even more time than a clinical description might. So structures of literature, not just language, also affect temporal experience and in turn are subject to it.

Forms of literature, including poetry and prose forms, are also subject to time. This idea is central to the passage from *Saturday* that I quoted earlier, in the introduction to this section on prose, in which Perowne reflects directly on the relationship between time and literary form:

Novels and movies, being restlessly modern, propel you forwards or backwards through time, through days, years, or even generations. But to do its noticing and judging, poetry balances itself on the pinprick of a moment. Slowing down, stopping

yourself completely, to read and understand a poem is like trying to acquire an old-fashioned skill like drystone walling or trout tickling.<sup>15</sup>

This passage states unequivocally that one of the key differences between poetry and prose forms is found in the ways that they construct time. The novel form is, inherently, about time, and it is historically designated as modern. Poetry, in contrast, is about slowing or stopping time, and this places it in the past; it is an old-fashioned skill. This comparison of poetry and prose puts them in a temporal relationship in the sense that it identifies certain key differences in the two forms' respective approaches to the issue of time. In making this comparison, meanwhile, the passage also addresses the history of the development of Western literary forms by alluding to a trajectory from poetry to prose. McEwan has neatly captured the idea that literary form is not only about time, but is a product of time as well.

With its historical immediacy and wide-ranging political and social commentary, *Saturday* might be described as “restlessly modern,” but the novel form's relationship to poetry is never forgotten. In part, this is because two of its central characters are poets and because of the reading of “Dover Beach” that comes near the end of the story. The novel's important relationship to poetry is also apparent in the construction of the narrative itself. McEwan is experimenting with the limits of prose forms in *Saturday*, beginning with his choice to write a novel that slows time down to an entire day, as opposed to a “life entire” or some similarly grand sweep of time. This is partly in homage to modernists like Virginia Woolf, of course, but the author's choice of form can also be held in contrast to books that appear within the novel itself, like the biography of Darwin that Perowne is reading. Perowne is frustrated by how the biography handles time: “he was faintly depressed by the way a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages – bottled, like homemade chutney.” Such containment, though vast in scope, nevertheless leaves out some of the most essential aspects of a life – “its ambitions, networks of family and friends, all its cherished stuff.”<sup>16</sup> *Saturday* sets out to capture all that cherished stuff, and as a result a few hundred pages will only allow for a description of one day.

Devoting narrative space to the intimacies of a life requires extensive use of flashbacks, propelling the reader backwards in time in



order to explain Perowne's personal history, especially his relationships with his family and colleagues. Of course, cognitively we are to understand that in real time these flashbacks, which can take several pages to describe, would be extremely brief ("A second can be a long time in introspection").<sup>17</sup> McEwan also stops the narrative altogether to describe instantaneous moments of cognition in the mind of his protagonist. These stopped moments suspend the progress of time and are devoted to the distinctly poetic task of "noticing and judging." As such they are outside of the normal passage of time, and are essentially "timeless" moments. After the trauma of Baxter's attack on the family, Rosalind describes such a moment – the moment when Baxter holds the knife to her throat – as "no time at all – and I don't mean that it seems brief. It's no time, not in time, not a minute or an hour. Just a fact."<sup>18</sup> At another point in the text, one word spoken by Perowne, "crash," produces a similarly dissociative moment that collapses time:

Everything that's happened to him recently occurs to him at once. He's no longer in the present. The deserted icy square, the plane and its pinprick of fire, his son in the kitchen, his wife in bed, his daughter on her way from Paris, the three men in the street – he occupies the wrong time coordinates, or he's in them all at once.<sup>19</sup>

Perowne experiences over the course of *Saturday* a number of these moments that feel like time slowing down or stopping altogether – moments of cognitive shock, either positive or negative: moments of pleasure or fear, moments of surprise or introspection. These moments happen with extreme mental or physical concentration; they are often described in a detached, scientific voice that may be either Perowne or the narrator, and the descriptions often include biological details of neurological function. These details are poetically rendered, with extensive use of imagery and metaphor. A good example is this long sentence:

Walking up three flights of stairs has revived him, his eyes are wide open in the dark; the exertion, his minimally raised blood pressure, is causing local excitement on his retina, so that ghostly swarms of purple and iridescent green are migrating across his

view of a boundless steppe, then rolling in on themselves to become bolts of cloth, swathes of swagged velvet, drawing back like theatre curtains on new scenes, new thoughts.<sup>20</sup>

The extended scene of the squash game is perhaps the most substantial of these episodes. Involving several passages of extensive description of a few seconds or moments, these passages slow or stop the narrative action. Cognitive seconds turn into readerly minutes, which feel like hours, as Perowne struggles through his game. Appropriately, many of Perowne's thoughts during the game are about time – especially his own aging process, a theme he returns to often in the novel. (While Perowne professes to dislike the “bottling” of time in biographical texts, his own biography is still framed textually in *Saturday* by the meditations on his biology: living in his aging body reminds him that his own life story is contained by time, with a beginning and an end: bottled.)

During the squash game scene McEwan writes: “It’s possible in a long rally to become a virtually unconscious being, inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present, merely reacting, taking one shot at a time, existing only to keep going.”<sup>21</sup> In these moments, one’s sense of self is suspended, as during sex: “Now he is freed from thought, from memory, from the passing seconds and from the state of the world. Sex is a different medium, refracting time and sense, a biological hyperspace as remote from conscious existence as dreams.”<sup>22</sup> The most important example of this phenomenon, however, comes in the description of Perowne’s work. Performing surgery prompts one of these states of altered consciousness and time:

For the past two hours he’s been in a dream of absorption that has dissolved all sense of time, and all awareness of the other parts of his life. Even his awareness of his own existence has vanished. He’s been delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future. In retrospect, though never at the time, it feels like profound happiness. It’s a little like sex, in that he feels himself in another medium, but it’s less obviously rooted in pleasure, and clearly not sensual.<sup>23</sup>

In interviews McEwan has connected the description in this scene to the experience of the writer when the work is flowing.<sup>24</sup> Such

moments can therefore be read as poetic not only because they are balanced on the pinprick, but because of their connection to the writer's mind. In an interview with David Remnick, McEwan expanded on the intellectual history of this phenomenon, noting that one of the key problems with describing it is that it is "an experience for which the language lacks a word":

You might find that this word exists in another language. I was informed by a classics Professor ... that the word does exist. It's called *energia*. That is the complete loss of self in an absorbing task. Now, the trouble is that the word *energy* is already firmly staked out for us in English. Psychologists have suggested the word *flow*. I don't think that really does it. There is a form of intense human happiness, often not recognized in the moment, that comes from losing yourself in something difficult. You cease to be aware of time; you cease to be aware of self; you experience no particular emotion because you are inseparable from the task.<sup>25</sup>

The timeless moments of *energia*<sup>26</sup> are described as a "different medium," and in *Saturday* they are connected to different literary forms. In fact, the timeless moments and the flashbacks in the novel are structurally similar, in that they stop the narrative to spend a large amount of text on what would be a second in real time: in this respect, they are both poetic. But they are function in a way that is quite typical of prose – the flashbacks in particular – in that they involve radical propulsions through time. Thus McEwan's text merges poetry and prose; the novel transports us rapidly through time, in its modern way, but even in so doing it stops time and ponders individual moments, like a poem. McEwan in this sense is providing a space where these forms are unified, just as he is providing a space where the disciplines of science and literature are unified.

#### "DOVER BEACH": THE POEM IN THE PROSE

This unification between poetry and prose is most fully realized in the scene in which Daisy recites "Dover Beach." Poetic form and prose form are quite literally mixed, as McEwan weaves the lines of Arnold's poem into his own narrative. As Perowne listens to the

poem, he imagines Daisy and her lover: “Together they listen to the surf roaring on the pebbles, and hear in the sound a deep sorrow which stretches right back to ancient times.”<sup>27</sup> Paraphrased and muddled in Perowne’s mind, the original lines of the poem nevertheless have snuck into the narrative: “you hear the grating roar / of pebbles ... Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Aegean ... Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar.” We see Perowne’s interpretation of the poem because the narrative perspective is so closely entangled with his mind. We are to assume that all the other characters hearing the poem are also experiencing their own unique interpretations – Baxter, most importantly. The poem infiltrates the text and changes the action of the story by changing Baxter’s mind – his mood, his attitude towards others, and his decision-making process – when it changes the biochemistry of his damaged brain.

It is not clear whether it is the meaning of the poem or its form that effects the change in Baxter – the only hints we get about how he has interpreted it are that he says it is “beautiful” and “makes me think about where I grew up.”<sup>28</sup> But it is clear from Perowne’s perspective that the combination of form and meaning are affective; even Perowne, an avowed non-poet who doesn’t understand scansion, recognizes that the “poem’s melodiousness ... is at odds with its pessimism,” and that this is deeply moving.<sup>29</sup> The formal structures of the poem – the melodiousness – merge with the content, as well as the external circumstance in which the poem is read, to produce a unique interpretation – a biochemical response, in part – in the brain of each listener. The variability of such responses is underscored by Perowne’s two different interpretations, which result from the poem being read twice in the narrative. During the first reading, Perowne, still reeling at the sight of his daughter’s pregnant body, envisions the scene as involving Daisy and a “smooth-skinned young man.” Similarly, the intellectual residue of his argument with Daisy about the war in the Middle East causes him to hear “desert armies” for the poem’s “ignorant armies.”<sup>30</sup> Perowne’s brain, with his preoccupations, is actually changing the text, just as the text changes Baxter’s brain. This is somewhat similar to the sort of *poiesis* (discussed in chapter 2) that can be observed in Robyn Sarah’s re-compilation of Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, though the Perowne example is admittedly not as artful. McEwan is in any case suggesting that there is an exchange between the brain and the text in

the act of literary interpretation: they are working on each other and with each other – neither is dominant.

This exchange implicates the reader, of course. At what point does the reader pick up on the fact that Daisy is reading “Dover Beach”? For those who have an anthologized education in the classics of English literature the recognition may occur on the first reading of the poem. For others, who have heard the poem, perhaps “once only and then but far away,” it might occur during the second reading, when McEwan inserts direct lines in quotation marks. And for others who are, like Perowne, not familiar with the poem at all, it may remain mysterious up to its inclusion as an appendix to the novel. McEwan is thus creating a space in the novel that makes the realities of individual readings very broad, so that we are put in the same interpretative positions as the characters. From this, individual readings of the novel itself – the cognitive function of the readers – become part of the narrative, for we are asked to think about our own reading experiences even as we are reading.

There is of course an essential difference between readers’ experiences and the novel’s characters’ experiences – one that relates directly to literary form. Until the appendix, we do not have the full, unmitigated “Dover Beach” before us. And in the narrative, we do not “hear” the poem read in its entirety – rather, we are presented with a neurological reaction to the poem in Perowne’s brain. There is a different life to poetry as an oral construction, which is not necessarily true for prose texts that are written for the page. In the oral form of “Dover Beach,” Perowne hears the “unusually meditative, mellifluous and wilfully archaic” qualities of the poem that we might miss in the written form, especially with the poem distilled by the narrative prose structure – as allusions and quotations, it cannot have the same effect. The oral recitation of “Dover Beach” speaks to the ancient past of poetry (Daisy has “thrown herself back into another century”),<sup>31</sup> where literature was carried in the brain through mnemonic devices and therefore the human mind was the text itself. The oral recitation within the novel allows for the oral poetics of the text to come through – the rhythms and melodies of the language, which effect a direct affect on the brain – “like a musical curse” – as they were supposed to in the time of poetic ritual that gave birth to such literary structures.<sup>32</sup> The fact that Daisy has memorized the poem means that the text has literally become a

part of her: it is part of her physical brain. The oral qualities borne of the poetic form contribute to the change in chemistry in Baxter's brain that mitigates his aggression: the "old-fashioned" quality of the poem makes him remember his own past, which somehow (his thinking is not entirely clear to us) causes him to change his mind. While it is unlikely that Baxter is mourning the retreating "Sea of Faith," the nostalgic impulse of Arnold's text, produced by both the rhetoric and the poetic form, produces an individualized nostalgia in each of the listeners.

If we return to Perowne's mediation on the brain and consciousness – "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"<sup>33</sup> – we have to consider how literature interacts with consciousness and, by extension, the "mere wet stuff." The novel is a kind of self, a "brightly wrought illusion" in an "instantaneous present" (McEwan's unusual use of the present tense narrative brings the reader's brain into Perowne's brain more directly). "Dover Beach" lies like a brain at the centre of the novel/self; it is a ghost at its centre, a kind of literary cerebellum of ancient rhythms and reactions. But by stating that the self is an illusion and a kind of fiction, and then making connections between the text and the readerly brain, is McEwan suggesting a kind of hyper-relative reality status for our very existence? Are we mere fictions, to be placed ontologically on the same plane as a character in a novel?

I would argue that while McEwan is not going to that extreme, he is asking us to consider the implications of our cognitive interactions with literature of different forms. The imagined barrier between reader and text, reality and fiction, may be, on a *cognitive level*, less true than we think. Perowne's condemnation of the post-modern humanities professors at Daisy's university should warn us off any readings that posit relativism in an extreme form, but there is an argument for a decentred self (the illusion) resulting from the physical forms of the brain. Similarly, the text is a physical structure with real form, but interpretation in the minds of individual readers in response to that form can vary widely. Still, in the absence of pathology there is enough mental consensus between different reading brains to produce coherent meaning. For example, "Dover Beach" seems to speak to all of its readers (and especially listeners) of a

lost past: for Grammaticus, the past grandeur of poetic authority; for Daisy, her past relationship with her grandfather; for Baxter, his lost childhood; and for Perowne, his daughter's lost childhood – at least on the first reading. On the second reading, Perowne interprets the poem more broadly, seeing it as a meditation on the lost past of humanity more generally that is figured, interestingly, by Baxter. The fact that on the second reading it is Baxter who Perowne imagines on the balcony, watching the retreating sea, demonstrates the capacity for empathy that can be produced in the brain by poetry – it is the same kind of empathy produced in Baxter that stops him from raping Daisy.

There is a long-standing, very old, and somewhat shaky liberal argument for the empathetic powers of a liberal arts education – especially a literary education. It has been revisited frequently in the first decade of the new millennia, as education systems demonstrate an increased bias towards technical training and job-oriented objectives. Martha Nussbaum's *Not For Profit* is a good example of this argument, which equates the weakening of humanities-focused education with a failure of empathy worldwide, leading to increased forms of violence and a loss of democracy.<sup>34</sup> These kinds of arguments are repeated in the media, and are especially promoted by academics in besieged and underfunded humanities departments. The argument is slippery, if well-intentioned, because there is little real evidence that reading *Madame Bovary*, for example (an oddly frequent example in these debates about ethics and literature), will develop empathy. As Perowne himself says, all literature might really teach us is that “adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so.”<sup>35</sup> Added up, these points do not necessarily produce empathy. Furthermore, the expectation that literature might – or that it should, if one has the correct disposition – produce empathetic reactions presents a sort of moral elitism in favour of humanities types that simply reinforces the us-and-them mentality that such arguments are supposed to resolve. Certainly, Perowne is a reluctant reader of literature and a technically minded fellow, and yet he is not un-empathetic, especially in regard to his patients. Indeed, his ability to see as they see, even with their damaged brains, is essential to his diagnoses, as he has to imagine their world in order to help them. He has a point when he resists such

arguments about empathy and the readerly mind when he says stubbornly: “This notion of Daisy’s, that people can’t ‘live’ without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof.”<sup>36</sup>

Of course, for the reader who is already familiar with the end of the novel, this statement comes off as ironic. We will see that Perowne might not be the best example of a non-literary mind, for he carries with him more literature than he realizes, and, furthermore, his affinity for music and other arts – including his own art of surgery – give him most of the qualities of sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, and, yes, empathy, that would be expected of a literary mind. We also know that his life may indeed be saved by a poem later in the story. And finally, there is the ultimate irony that he himself is a literary character and only “lives” in the text. But I do not believe that McEwan is being snide or ironic here – rather, he is rehearsing the legitimate and important arguments against the kind of liberal elitism that weakens the literature-forms-empathy idea. His challenge is to re-approach the issue from another angle – one that is more scientifically unassailable, perhaps, and one that will demonstrate the essential role of literature in our modern world. In order to do this, he reframes the empathy argument through cognitive science and literary form. The issue of how literary form causes the brain to process time differently, and therefore how it can change our perception of the continuous self, is key in this new approach. He mounts a challenging and somewhat dangerous argument: literature, especially poetry, can produce effects in the brain that are a kind of cognitive dysfunction, and yet those very dysfunctional moments (as long as they are temporary) are essential for healthy brain function, including empathetic, ethical, and social functioning.

#### READERLY PATHOLOGIES

Here we return to the issue of time, especially *energia*, the vertiginous stopped time of extreme concentration. The eternal present in *Saturday* is usually symptomatic of cognitive dysfunction, and yet there are several moments in the text when the internal experience of time in healthy brains is described as slowing down or stopping. These frozen or timeless moments, like the diseased minds, serve to illustrate what is normal because they are so very abnormal. Their abnormality is not necessarily negative; on the contrary, they can



be associated with great pleasure. The best example of this is the description of Perowne's feelings during the surgery on Baxter:

It's a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy. Back at work, and lovemaking and Theo's song aside, he's happier than at any other point on his day off, his valuable Saturday. There must, he concludes as he stands to leave the theatre, be something wrong with him.<sup>37</sup>

Like Baxter, Perowne loses a sense of a continuous self when performing surgery; he is in an eternal present. The association of the eternal present with mental pathology produces a problem: if Perowne and Baxter share the capacity to be in that eternal present, does that mean they are both sick? And, when we consider the fact that the narration of *Saturday* is written in the present tense, does this similarly pathologize the reader? This is a sly construction on McEwan's part, but I would argue that the implicit suggestion that literature produces a kind of true (and dangerous) cognitive dysfunction is not sincere: it all comes back to the question of time.

In the healthy brain, the eternal present moment – the stopped time – is temporary: the result of stress, excitement, shock, or pleasure. It is when the present really *is* eternal for the person – it never stops – that the trouble starts, because this produces the discontinuous self. To be caught in an eternal, forward-moving narrative would mean that one is unreflective, disconnected from one's inner life (something Perowne is perhaps guilty of on occasion, but not to the extent that he is unwell). To be caught in the eternal present moment, as Baxter is, is the real danger. One must be able to move between both kinds of time – to track a narrative with a past, present, and future, and to balance on the pinprick of a moment. The metaphor of blues musical structure that McEwan builds into *Saturday* through Perowne's son's music is helpful here: we must be able to process both the continuous theme, and the variations on it that produce meaning and beauty.<sup>38</sup> Listening to his son's music, Perowne reflects on these microcosmic moments experienced when absorbed in a song:

Perhaps it's one of those cases of a microcosm giving you the whole world. Like a Spode dinner plate. Or a single cell. Or, as

Daisy says, like a Jane Austen novel. When the player and the listener together know the route so well, the pleasure is in the deviation, the unexpected turn against the grain. To see the world in a grain of sand. So it is, Perowne tries to convince himself, with clipping an aneurysm: absorbing variation on an unchanging theme.<sup>39</sup>

The stopped moments are microcosms that allow us to reflect on the immense dimensions of an existence that usually eludes us in our daily existence (and for good reason – otherwise, we would be mad). The poetic associations of this idea are clearly alluded to in Perowne’s unconscious appropriation of Blake’s “grain of sand” line from “Auguries of Innocence” (he knows more poetry than he realizes, and it structures his thinking more than he realizes), but in this passage McEwan also extends the microcosmic function to novels, foreshadowing the implicit argument he will make for his own novel.

As a young woman, Perowne’s mother Lily was a swimmer. Her joy in swimming is another *energia*-like experience. She tells Henry that a day with a swim immerses her in “a different medium ... another element” and that “the day is changed, Henry, when you take a swim. And that day is bound to be marked out from all the rest.”<sup>40</sup> It is the change of medium that imbues importance – meaning – to a day. Similarly, moving back and forth from interpretive spaces is what makes a life meaningful: between poetry and prose, truth and fiction, art and science, work and play. What is required for health is the merging or exchange of the two forms of time – external narrative and internal poetry – which allows the brain to function normally and to produce meaning in one’s life, and (on a literary level) in the text. In short, it is the exchange between the time structures of poetry and prose that makes a good interpretation and a good life: the ability to inhabit both textual spaces, as required. This is true for readers of *Saturday* as well: we are not expected to emerge ourselves completely in its fictions, to read it continuously or uncritically. We are to dip in and out of it as our own realities progress, experiencing its formal shifts of time, its language, and its action as integral to, but essentially different from, our own lives. Even if some of the cognitive mechanics of fiction and form do produce a sort of mental dysfunction, they do so to a greater, and usually positive, effect. The so-called dysfunctions allow us to step outside ourselves enough

to experience alternative realities, to imagine, to connect with other human minds (ill and healthy), and to – in essence – be the compassionate, social beings on which our societies depend.

COME TO THE WINDOW: LITERATURE, COGNITION, AND THE  
SOCIAL ORDER

The larger implications for cognition and the social order hover in the background of *Saturday* in the scenes of the protest against the invasion of Iraq. Insofar as our social world is comprised of masses of individual minds, any statement about cognitive function and literature has not just a personal but a social application. This, in turn, is implicitly connected to more public interactions like political participation. Perowne realizes that social and political decisions are determined by cognitive interactions. Eye contact with a street sweeper, for example, results in a “vertiginous moment” of interpersonal connection, which prompts Perowne’s recognition of the apparently arbitrary circumstances that determine rich and poor.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, he recognizes that the various political actions taken around the issue of the war in Iraq may be due simply to the “accidental nature of opinions” that are formed according to independent circumstances – who you know, what you read, and so on.<sup>42</sup> His own somewhat weak support of the invasion is determined by his personal connection with a victim of Saddam’s torturers (Perowne, being such an uncertain fellow at times, is a useful character for McEwan’s exploration of the ethical ambiguities of these topics). After meeting Miri Taleb, Perowne embarks on a reading program about the horrors of the Ba’athist regime: thus his opinions are formed. We are dependent on our brain’s constant processing of information, including personal interpretations of other people’s words and actions. We read faces, for example, to interpret sincerity, and then base our decisions on those perceptions; it is an “ancient preoccupation” of our brains that allows us to recognize “friend or foe.”<sup>43</sup> Once again, dysfunctional brains can provide counterexamples for essential cognitive practices; the inability to recognize faces (prosopagnosia) or to be unaware of one’s own condition (anosognosia) demonstrate the social chaos that would result should we not possess these abilities.<sup>44</sup>

When powerful or privileged individuals such as political leaders suffer the normal cognitive vagaries of being human, whole popu-

lations can be affected. Perowne has some anxiety about this in connection to the British Prime Minister, who he once privately witnessed in a brief moment of prosopagnosia, and who he fears may be a “dedicated liar” who has persuaded himself he’s sincere:

Government ministers speak up loyally, various newspapers back the war, there’s a fair degree of anxious support in the country along with the dissent, but no one really doubts that in Britain one man alone is driving the matter forward. Night sweats, hideous dreams, the wild, lurching fantasies of sleeplessness? Or simple loneliness? Whenever he sees him now on screen, Henry looks out for an awareness of the abyss, for that hairline crack, the moment of facial immobility, the brief faltering he privately witnessed. But all he sees is certainty, or at worst a straining earnestness.<sup>45</sup>

Lurking behind this figure of relatively moderate concern is the more ominous figure of Saddam Hussein, whose pathologies are responsible for the totalitarian reign of terror in Iraq. One of the key differences between Perowne and Daisy in their respective perceptions of the impending Iraq invasion is that Perowne tends to over-focus on Saddam the individual, while Daisy tends to over-focus on global power dynamics: in other words, he looks at the very small and she looks at the very large in terms of their interpretative frameworks. Neither of them is absolutely right or wrong; the point is that their own personal cognitive practices – their interests and obsessions – cause them to see the same situation very differently.

While Perowne’s political arguments may convince neither his daughter nor the reader, one of his strengths as a character and as a doctor is that he can imagine some degree of the reality of those suffering from cognitive dysfunction. There is a great deal of compassion in this ability, but it is not a completely altruistic quality. He can imagine and anticipate what they are seeing, hearing, and feeling, which allows him not only to treat them but also (in the case of Baxter) to protect himself in dealing with them. This ability is essentially an interpretative one – a kind of reading – and it is paralleled with the imaginative work of the writer and reader of literature (“the accurate description of feelings”). Just as the reader can identify with Perowne through the bifurcated viewpoints of the

narrative, Perowne the doctor can step into the perspectives of his patients, his family, and other people around him. This permits him to learn and to therefore be a compassionate and humane person (within limits: the heroism of his “saving” Baxter must be tempered with the acknowledgement that he has doomed the man to a slow and painful death from Huntington’s Disease).

Perowne dismisses the act of reading (especially of novels) as passive and disengaged, and compares it to being a mere “spectator of other lives.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, his own work requires a similar skill, even though his patients are materially real. McEwan turns to literary symbol to construct his response to Perowne’s implicit criticism of literature: Perowne begins and ends his day standing at the window of his house, observing and imagining other lives in the square. This connects directly to Perowne’s interpretation of “Dover Beach” where he imagines Baxter “propped against a sill,” watching, and so represents an unconscious connection with his tormentor. This in turn connects to us the readership of the novel, the spectators of these lives: we will each see them very differently, from the frames of our own individual consciousnesses, yet there is a great deal of unification and consensus even in multiple readings of the novel. Like the radically different perspectives of Perowne’s family, there is sufficient cognizant coherence between different minds to act together when required. And empathy *can* be constructed through a good reading process: the readers of *Saturday* may connect with a man who professes literature to be frustrating and useless, and that same man can see from the perspective of another man who holds his family captive. Reading, watching, and interpretation are brought together here in such highly empathetic moments. Perowne, Baxter, the narrator, and the reader are all conflated into the same character at the window, engaged in very similar moral actions.

#### THE GRANDEUR OF LIFE

Perowne, even while having faith that the answer to the question of how consciousness comes into being will someday be known, nevertheless admits a place for “wonder” in that knowledge – for imagination, subjectivity, beauty, and, as Darwin says in the conclusion to *The Origin of Species*, the “grandeur in this view of life.”<sup>47</sup> Perowne encounters this phrase in the biography of Darwin that he

is reading, and it is employed at key points in the narrative of *Saturday*. It becomes a way for Perowne (and, I think, McEwan) to articulate his aesthetic and ethical viewpoints on life – a scientific life in particular. In an exchange with the artist Antony Gormley, McEwan once claimed: “You have to go to the sciences today to find any real sense of wonder, any real joy in the intellectual life.”<sup>48</sup> But of course Darwin’s elegant phrase is a textualization – a literary formulation – of a scientific ethos. As such, it behaves as other literary forms. Just as Perowne’s own appropriation of the phrase from the Darwin biography indicates, literature can infiltrate the minds of even the most resistant readers, giving them ideas and language they did not previously have to navigate their world, and by doing so it can quite literally “change their mind.” Textual forms are a part of this; just as the biography changes Perowne and the poem changes Baxter, we as readers are changed by *Saturday*. In reading it, we have experienced the shift of element that Lily described to young Henry when talking about swimming: we are in “different medium” and “the day is changed.” The difference between the narrative and poetic forms is actually far less distinct than we might think, but nevertheless these differences are essential for good interpretation and healthy cognitive function. Like the exchange between the interior and exterior perspectives of the narrator, and between Perowne’s empathetic and selfish perspectives, the exchange between prose and poetry – between external and internal time – is what makes up the grandeur of the mind.

McEwan’s challenge in this book is to try to develop forms within the novel that are more flexible than conventional narrative in the depiction of time, forms that function more like poetry in being able to capture the moments of stopped time in our lives. To do this, he turns to cognitive science, because in describing the physical processes of the brain working he creates a kind of poetry: he effectively stops the narrative. Science in this novel is not just a subject, but part of the formal re-workings that McEwan is engaged in. Science, or, more specifically, scientific description, is essential to the narrative form of *Saturday*: it functions as part of the poetic moments that stop time and capture the immediacy of the lived experience of Perowne. In this way, the usual dichotomy between science and literature is elided; they are different elements, and it is in the work of changing between them that there is an opportunity for expanded

knowledge. The unified space of science and literature may not be in their perspectives, morals, theories, or directives, but in the fact that we experience on a cognitive level the best of science and literature in ways that are very similar to each other. This is their common ground: the microcosm, the suspension of time, the perfect merging of body and brain. Science and literature are both *work* – the kind of gratifying work described in Perowne's surgery, the reading of a poem, or the writing of a novel – and they both give structure to human lives: they give our lives form and meaning.

At the end of the long day, and at the end of the novel, Perowne imagines another man in the same space as him, one hundred years in the past, who might have thought that the future which did in fact occur would be unimaginable. Perowne also imagines his own future years. He is shuttling back and forth in time, like the time-traveller in *A Scientific Romance*, like the novel reader. He imagines his life with a grandchild in the house and, eventually, his and Rosalind's old age and disappearance from the narrative: "Their Saturday will become a Sunday."<sup>49</sup> He is, in effect, remembering the future in the way that Stephen Hawking queries: "Why do we remember the past and not the future?" Of course, the word "remembering" is not quite accurate here; we make firm (if questionable) distinctions between thinking about the lives we have lived and the lives we imagine we will live, even if the cognitive processes are similar. For now, we insist on a key difference: the future can only be "remembered" within the realm of fiction, not real lived experience. But as the form of the novel comes to an end, so too does our cognitive connection to Perowne – a man who is a "brightly wrought illusion" and yet, in his biographical connections to London, the author, and the time, he is also very "real." Although it is unlikely that we have memorized it, Perowne's story is now as much a part of our brain as "Dover Beach" is in Daisy's brain: our personal illusions of self merge with his. This is not magic, nor relativist instability, but the "brain's fundamental secret" of consciousness.<sup>50</sup>