

A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

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Ian McEwan's Saturday (2005) is simultaneously a realist narrative, committed to exploring a particularly troubled moment in contemporary history through the consciousness of the scientifically-minded Henry Perowne, and a larger, less strictly rational vision of poetic language and imagination. The narrative point of view remains close to Henry's narrowly-construed materialism, but unbeknownst to him, elements of the plot, scenes and language are constructed out of literary texts that hover above the narrative. The essay argues that these literary ghosts complicate the novel's seeming commitment to Enlightenment ideals of scientific progress and rational explanation. Layered in this way, the novel is a much more complex and inclusive depiction of the relationship between materialist explanation and poetic imagination than its plot and its discussions of literature versus science would seem to allow.

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In *Saturday* (2005), Ian McEwan describes a day in the life of neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, from the pre-dawn moment when he awakes, feeling inexplicably euphoric, and looks down on the London square below his window through to the next dawn when he stands, again at the window, chastened and subdued by all the previous day has brought him. That day, planned around the obligations and pleasures of the weekend, a game of squash with a colleague, a visit to his mother in a nursing home, and shopping for and preparing dinner for a family party, is unsettled first by his rising so early and seeing a burning plane streak across the skyline, then by a minor car accident, which eventually leads to an attack that endangers the entire family. Set on February 15, 2003, the book takes place in the shadow of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and during a huge anti-war demonstration massing in the streets of London. When *Saturday* appeared in 2005, Henry Perowne's anxious attempts to maintain a private life in such perilous times resonated with readers and with reviewers alike. In many ways, *Saturday* is a realist narrative, representing the day as a particularly troubled moment in the contemporary West, and Henry Perowne as an everyman of the

post-9/11 world. However, as I will argue, Henry only seems to inhabit a straightforward, realist narrative; *Saturday* is, in fact, as committed to meanings created out of the novel's relationship to its literary forebears and to the poetic dimensions of language as it is to its realist treatment of the literal, present moment.

The first clue that the novel isn't interested in depicting only "what days these are" is that McEwan continues his practice, begun in *The Child in Time* (1987), of making natural science central to the story. *The Child in Time*, *Black Dogs* (1992), *Enduring Love* (1997) and, since *Saturday*, *Solar* (2010), all use particular branches of science not only as sources of characters' worldviews but as structuring dimensions of the narratives themselves, so that the novels' plots become demonstrations of the ideas of those sciences. Though they are as topical as *Saturday*, their overarching concern with science makes these novels less depictions of the way we live now than philosophical meditations on how scientific ideas shape consciousness and play out in the world.

In *The Child in Time*, for example, a physicist, Thelma Darke, tells the protagonist, Stephen Lewis, that "new" quantum theories about the nature of time should already have begun to revolutionize contemporary consciousness. She assumes that poets and novelists haven't met the challenge of embracing the new science and proving it on the pulses of their readers. While Stephen, the writer within the novel, might not be able to take her up on her challenge, McEwan does. With that conversation as the frame, *The Child in Time* presents a plot that includes quasi-supernatural incidents suggestive of how different the world might appear from within a quantum model of reality. McEwan draws particularly on the work of the physicist David Bohm, whom Thelma claims as a colleague, and the novel imagines experiences consonant with his speculations about mind, matter and the nature of time.¹

Since that book, McEwan has given biology rather than quantum physics a central place in his fiction, and what was a friendly debate between Stephen and Thelma about an ideal unity between science and literature becomes a marriage-ending argument between science and religion in *Black Dogs* and a violent clash among scientific, literary and religious worldviews in *Enduring Love*. Instead of biological theories confirming the validity of forms of consciousness that science had not been able to account for previously, that of the mystic, the child and the dreamer, as Thelma imagines quantum theories to be able to do, the biological explanations explicitly undercut other interpretations of conscious experience, especially religious ones. Each novel features a biologist arguing for an embrace of evolutionary theories of human behavior, with the narratives focusing on the resistance to his ideas and the social friction arguing for them generates.²

The debate in *Saturday* is once again between science and literature, but in the protagonist's mind, literature is mixed up with and virtually indistinguishable from religion; he regards both as outmoded means of understanding the world. As the narrator reports, "it interests [Henry Perowne] less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained" (65). The shift in tone and treatment that accompanies the move from physics to biology seems to reflect the end of

a quasi-mystical phase in McEwan's writing, occurring between his macabre, calculated-to-shock, early stories and this most recent hardheaded endorsement of evolutionary biology and physicalism, though, as we shall see, his most recent work may be more ambivalent about its project than first appears.³

Whatever the source of the change, the openness of Thelma and Stephen's conversations seems no longer possible. In contrast to her position that science needs to grow up and stop insisting on imposing its will on other ways of thinking, these later characters regard themselves as embattled defenders of the truths of science. She says, "Think how humanized and approachable scientists would be if they could join in the really important conversations about time, and without thinking they had the final word" (138). By contrast, Henry reserves the final word for evolutionary biology, no matter how much he may want to connect with his daughter Daisy, a poet. In fact, in a bizarre moment in *Saturday*, Henry mocks *The Child in Time*, grouping it with other magical realist texts Daisy has made him read and listing it among books that exhibit "insufficient imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding reenactment of the plausible" (66). As Dominic Head has argued, *The Child in Time* is the odd book out on that list, which includes by implication *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Satanic Verses* and *The Tin Drum*, since it is trying to build on a scientific hypothesis about the nature of time and is therefore given a "quasi-plausibility that is never attempted by magic realism proper" (188). Head argues that McEwan may have included *The Child in Time* to protest ways it has been misread (188). But, alternatively, in McEwan's as well as Henry's mind, the explanations quantum physics provides may no longer persuade, especially those that posit the entanglement of the observer in the outcome of an event. Early in *Saturday*, Henry derides the famous quantum experiment of Schrodinger's cat, wondering how anyone, let alone physicists, could ever have entertained the nonsensical idea that something isn't real until it is known.

Here, as in *Enduring Love*, McEwan's scientific characters seem committed, not to seeing how a humbled science can join in other important conversations about time and the nature of reality, but rather to seeing how evolutionary biology might direct the course of those conversations and be given the last word on what can count as legitimate knowledge. As these characters construe it, the task is less to use science to show how the great mysteries of human experience can be given mathematical and physical foundations than to debunk those mysteries as delusions and offer instead a more mature, clear-eyed assessment of the real. In Henry's mind, Darwinian theory, like Enlightenment thought generally, asks that we grow up and let go of magical thinking, however appealing it may seem, and accept the "quotidian fact" of what Max Weber called "the disenchantment of the world" ("Science as a Vocation" 13).⁴

If we pay attention only to what McEwan has said in interviews, articles and reviews about the synthesis now seen as possible within the sciences and between the sciences and humanities, it would seem that Henry's preoccupations are evidence of McEwan's attempt to show how that synthesis, once accepted,

might influence consciousness. That he might have such a plan is suggested by his manifesto, first given as a lecture, and then revised and reprinted in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, in which McEwan aligns himself with a new movement of cognitive scientists and literary critics working to dismantle what they regard as the entrenched habits of social constructivism and to establish evolutionary biology as a foundation for future study in the Humanities. The aim of this movement is to encourage literary critics to trust the authority of biological theories of mind and behavior and use these theories as guides in literary analysis. As a defense of literature's continued relevance, McEwan argues for it as a kind of fossil record of consciousness, substituting for the now-vanished tribes anthropologists used to study. He writes. "On our crowded planet, we are no longer able to visit Stone Age peoples untouched by modern times. Mead and her contemporaries would never have wanted to put the question—What is that we hold in common with such people?—and anthropologists no longer have the opportunity of first contact. We can, however, reach to our book shelves. Literature must be our anthropology" ("Literature, Science, and Human Nature" 17–18).⁵

Given the possibility that McEwan may want his biology-centered novels to demonstrate the validity of the science they describe and show how its claims are worked out in the lives of fully-realized characters, we might expect him to create wise and magisterial protagonists like Thelma, who are interested in engaging with different ways of seeing the world. Instead, McEwan focuses not on sensitive scientists open to literature's attractions, but on men who are deaf to anything but the science they espouse and want others to adopt. In *Saturday*, he has created a protagonist who feels that once you have an account of the world that "happens to be demonstrably true" (54), you don't need stories at all, not even as data. In fact, Henry's philistinism and general literary obtuseness as well as his political and professional arrogance were sticking points for reviewers and for the first critics writing about *Saturday*, who couldn't quite believe that McEwan was endorsing the views of a character who seems in so many ways smug and limited, but didn't see any other way to read him except as the author's mouthpiece.⁶

While it may be hard not to equate Henry Perowne's views with his creator's, given that in interviews McEwan attests to having lent Henry his house, his squash game, his fish stew recipe, his mother and "bits of his children,"⁷ and given that Henry also quotes many of the same thinkers that McEwan cites regularly,⁸ it is nevertheless important to read the novel against the grain not only of its protagonist's views but also of McEwan's own. *Saturday* becomes a much richer embodiment of the way we live now if we recognize the interplay of voices supplied by the novel's intertextuality and by the centrality it gives to literature's capacity to adumbrate dimensions of reality not available to the rational discourses of scientific explanation. The larger universe of the novel suggests that as long as science and scientists think they have the whole picture and the last word, something will always elude them, just as so much eludes Henry's consciousness. In fact, *Saturday* as a whole may go so far as to suggest that it is the nature

of literary imagining that it escape the kind of complete answers implied in the idea of explanation itself—characters, like texts, may continue to surprise, and inexhaustible, always yield another reading.

On the level of Henry's awareness, *Saturday* suggests the existence of two virtually incommensurate cultures and echoes both the nineteenth-century debate between Matthew Arnold and Thomas Huxley, and the one between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis a century later. As we have seen, however, it doesn't allow for reconciliation to happen in conversations among characters or within the plot. Here, the science admits no such possibilities; reconciliation is not on its or Henry's agenda and can be got at only by attending to what he is missing and remains oblivious to.

To begin to approach these elusive dimensions of the novel, we can start with the fact that *Saturday* and its (anti)hero part ways in the irony that Henry Perowne is unaware of elements of the narrative known to the reader, and not merely the fact that he is himself invented. Henry is also unaware of how the views he holds reverberate in unexpected ways in the novel's form. *Saturday* includes dimensions that broaden the scope of the novel beyond what Henry, and by implication, his intellectual commitments, are willing or able to consider. The novel as a whole suggests that the debate between literature and science cannot be resolved simply by one side's winning the argument or by the collapse of literature into science. Instead, it takes on the challenge of imagining someone who feels the argument has been dispositively won by science and structures the world of the novel seemingly as a demonstration of his views. But it also suggests both the limits of those views and ways of dissolving some of those same entrenched dichotomies.

In the reading of *Saturday* that follows, I hope to show the different levels on which the imagining of the novel's conflicting ideas is worked out, beginning with the effects of the narrative's keeping so obsessively close to Henry's consciousness as to be almost blinkered by it, and then showing how the narrative keeps another layer of meaning provocatively hovering just out of Henry's reach that suggests dimensions beyond those available to him or to the intellectual debates as they are currently constituted. Even at its most monological, when the reader is trapped in the narrow spaces of Henry's views (mirrored in the narrow spaces, such as his car and train sleeping berths that he seeks for emotional comfort and safety), the text conjures the ghosts of other consciousnesses just outside the window of his mind. Since they are textual ghosts, their existence and influence lie in language, a realm Henry is less at home in than he realizes. My argument focuses on two kinds of evidence for the limits of the views the novel seems initially to endorse: the literary presences that accompany the reader and shape his/her reading of Henry's experiences and also the text's concern with his incapacity to experience language except as information. The associative, musical qualities of language, its making of a kind of non-rational sense, elude him almost entirely, but, like the novel's literary presences, that dimension of language is nevertheless available to readers. Through this reading I hope to show the multiplicity of meanings and

levels of complexity that McEwan is able to draw on as an artist, but which he, like Henry, seems deaf to as a polemicist.

Through Henry's consciousness, McEwan explores what the moment-to-moment "wash of thought" feels like to someone for whom the ideas of evolution are not a vague theoretical background having mostly to do with origins, but instead are actively espoused principles to be used as a guide to interpreting human nature in the present. Like *Enduring Love's* Joe Rose, Henry Perowne believes it important to live each moment with a conscious awareness of the role evolution has played in bringing the present into being and that it continues to play in determining how we live. For him, this awareness means endorsing the centrality of competition in human life, as well as in the natural world.⁹ Competition is not just on Henry's mind but also structures the narrative. Henry's day takes the form of a series of contests: with Baxter at the scene of the accident, with Jay Strauss for dominance on the squash court and, in spite of himself, with his daughter Daisy for the moral high ground on the coming war. Finally, the novel's climactic scene involves the contest over whether science or poetry will save the family from bodily harm.

Every moment of Henry's awareness involves competition for control, for authority, for possession. He acknowledges that for each position he espouses, "his well-being appears to need spectral entities to oppose it, figures of his own invention whom he can defeat" (78). Here, he goes beyond thinking about science all the time or even thinking like a scientist and becomes someone for whom every aspect of his world is shaped by the ideas he espouses.¹⁰ Henry's monomaniacal focus suggests a bullying desire for victory: he believes that the survival of evolution as a theory depends on its eliminating not only anything that contradicts it but also anything that doesn't directly refer to it as a cause.

In addition to embracing competition as intrinsic to human nature, Henry posits chance as the cause for most things that happen. To cite just a few examples, he attributes his pre-dawn euphoria to a chemical accident on the molecular level (4); he attributes even the most intimate and deliberate of choices, his faithfulness to his wife, to luck rather than to any conscious decision on his part. He reflects: "what a stroke of luck that the woman he loves is also his wife," adding, "by some accident of character, it's familiarity that excites him more than sexual novelty" (39, 41). Suspecting from her poems that his daughter might be promiscuous, he worries "that a girl who sleeps around too earnestly has an improved chance of ending up with a lower-grade male, an inadequate, a loser" (189).

Over and over, he relies on an evolutionary frame of reference, explaining his dire fears about what may be wrong with the burning plane he sees from his window, for instance, as originating in a "survival advantage" conferred "in dreaming up bad outcomes and scheming to avoid them." His "trick of dark imagining" is a "legacy of natural selection in a dangerous world" (40). Likewise, he is committed to an "objectivist"¹¹ view, to seeing the world as separate from himself, there to be investigated and explained independent of any trick of imagining, however much evolutionary sense that kind of trick might make in retrospect. He's wary of any

kind of “excess of the subjective,” which might lead to “an inability to contemplate your own unimportance” (16).

This perspective seems to require that he behave as an observer of that world rather than as a participant. Indeed, the capacity for objective observation, assessment and diagnosis are to him the great gift not only of his profession but also of his worldview—providing him with a privileged perspective that allows him to see, understand and accept things as they really are. Indeed, evolution seems to be attractive to him in part because it gives him the necessary strength and mature common sense not only to reject any version of reality that might be merely wishful thinking but also the courage to find joy and wonder in the fact that the origins of all that is beautiful lie in “the war of nature, famine and death” (54).

Henry’s assessment of the natural order as separate from and indifferent to individual human destinies results in a strange kind of passivity, as though observation were incompatible with action—consigning him an onlooker status even when he is in the midst of a crisis. He feels helpless watching the plane, and he feels helpless to alter what seems a pre-scripted scenario in his encounter with Baxter after the car accident. He remembers a family gathering in which he watched helplessly as his father-in-law, the poet Grammaticus, derided Daisy’s poetry. In that instance, understanding Grammaticus as on a seemingly unstoppable trajectory toward drunkenness convinces Henry that protecting his daughter from her grandfather’s competitive taunts would be at best useless if not dangerous, so he simply looks on. Finally, in the crisis in which Baxter takes his family hostage, Henry essentially watches as the scene unfolds before him, again paralyzed.

Henry is anxiously obsessed with being able to understand things according to the right scale. For him that means the big picture, the level over which he has no control, despite his son’s advice to “think small” (35). With what he would call a mature stoicism, Henry believes that psychic health depends on the ability to accept as most real the scale of physical time in which humans are insignificant and on which their illusion of *telos* disappears. However, the certainty that the biggest, most impersonal picture is the most truthful is less manageable than Henry assures himself it should be and results in a sometimes vertiginous sense of helplessness and isolation.

Henry’s views of London become a central means of showing how he tries to achieve the right scale on which to understand something. On the first early morning, looking down on the perfect eighteenth-century square designed by Robert Adam, Henry is impressed by the city’s adaptability; the square looks much as it did when it was first built, but now has fiber optic cables and miraculously efficient sewage lines running underneath it. Like an ecological system, London appears to be a dynamic equilibrium, complexly interconnected, barely sustainable, yet nevertheless strangely resilient. Figuring out its essential nature and how to feel about it are part of what Henry struggles with throughout the day, wondering intermittently how to regard what seems at one moment beautiful evidence of rational progress and at others disturbing evidence of unforgiving

decline. The city brings into focus the kinds of interrogations he's undertaking on politics and science as he makes his way through its various neighborhoods. The perfect square he lives on is a miracle of proportion—its circle of garden inscribed within the square echoing Leonardo's Vitruvian Man and suggesting the Renaissance ideal of a harmonious, human-centered unity of art and science. In contrast, traffic jams clogging interconnected networks of highways suggest a scale that favors machines rather than humans. Despite his general enthusiasm for innovation and ingenuity and his endorsement of the age as one of "wondrous machines," it is not possible, even for Henry, always to approve how they have transformed life.

His interpretations of London are, of course, profoundly influenced by the attacks of September 11, 2001. Seeing the city as a triumph of the secular ideals of the Enlightenment now threatened by global reaction, Henry is obsessed by the irony that the city's embodiment of the ideal of religious tolerance, evident in the three women in burkhas he sees standing outside a doctor's office in Harley Street, and "a Falun Gong couple keeping vigil across the road from the Chinese Embassy" (123), now puts it and everyone in it at terrible risk.

As if to endorse Henry's preference for realism, *Saturday* seems committed to capturing the condition of England and to summing up an historical moment, something that many of the book's most favorable reviews praised.¹² And this realism is compatible not only with Henry's sober assessment of the West's political predicament but also with his physicalism: none of the things he so despises in literature makes an appearance—no angels, no flying children, no out-of-time experiences and most of all no possibility that you could fall out of a plane and not get hurt—just the free indirect style presentation of the consciousness of one man on one day in a troubled moment in contemporary history as he adjudicates among all the different claims on his attention.

However, as stated at the outset, Henry Perowne, whatever his preferences, is not himself in a realist narrative. As many critics have pointed out, the narrative of Henry Perowne's day, unbeknownst to him or to the implied narrator who reports Henry's thoughts and supplies the history and background necessary to make sense of them, is actually constructed largely out of other texts; it is obsessively intertextual.¹³ Scenes are fashioned out of and echo *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Ulysses*, *Howards End*, Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, among others. Matthew Arnold is practically a character, even though Henry has never heard of him. As Sebastian Groes, Dominic Head and others have shown, Arnold's ideas frame and influence the entire novel, not only its denouement. Similarly, Joyce's "The Dead" seems eerily present in the last scene, both in verbal echoes and in Henry's actual thoughts.¹⁴ These literary ghosts can't be said to "cause" what happens, but they are there, creating patterns of meaning that influence our reading of the novel's present.¹⁵

Like the *Goldberg Variations* that Henry listens to during surgeries and the series of chords Theo's band endlessly riffs on, the novel *Saturday* offers variations on themes supplied not only by the book's anxiety over the present moment but

also by its artistic forebears. The reader, aware of the layers of coherence and connection created by this continuous referral to other texts, looks for pattern and meaning on levels beyond what is available to Henry's more limited awareness. This literary level changes how we read his relationship to the city, for example. The epigraph from *Herzog* hovers just outside the narrative, contextualizing the story in a way very different way from Henry's own understanding. It reads, in part:

For instance? Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made the self negligible. Which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pay for order at home. Which permitted savagery and barbarism in its own great cities.

This passage, which prefigures much of what happens in *Saturday* but which expresses sentiments antithetical to Henry's confidence in science, acts as a reminder that the feelings of dislocation and unease that Henry believes were produced by the attacks of September 11th can also be seen more broadly as a feature of modern urban consciousness, and that the alienation Moses Herzog describes may in fact be caused partly by the very things Henry has put all his faith in. Before we even begin *Saturday*, we are prepared that it might be a mistake to single out as cause even the most seemingly unique and monumental of historical events.

Though the monologic nature of the narrative means that the reader has no direct access to what characters other than Henry think, literary ghosts such as Herzog provide a kind of counterpoint, an alternative position from which to assess and rethink the dichotomies Henry understands as intrinsic to his situation. For example, among the text's many echoes of *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is possible to hear Septimus Smith's predicament resonating in Baxter's, Septimus's presence undercutting the certainty Henry brings to Baxter's condition. Septimus's own suffering was misunderstood within the flawed medical theories of "degeneracy" of his time, rather than recognized as resulting from his experience in the war.¹⁶ Baxter, afflicted with a genetic disease, may not be misunderstood in what ails him physically; nevertheless, he suffers from Henry's assumption that he can be entirely understood from within the diagnosis. Henry thinks "here was biological determinism in its purest form" (94), a view that remains unchanged throughout the day: in the middle of Baxter's assault on Grammaticus that evening, Henry looks at him and concludes, "it is *written*. No amount of love, drugs, Bible classes or prison sentencing can cure Baxter or shift him from his course. It is spelled out in fragile proteins, but it could be carved in stone or tempered steel" (217). Strangely enough, he doesn't mention poetry in the list of things that might offer an alternative spelling out of Baxter's condition, though as we'll see, it is precisely poetry that forces Henry to rethink his understanding of Baxter.

Baxter's being thrown down the stairs by a doctor also comes very close to Septimus's flinging himself out the window at the approach of Dr. Holmes. Ultimately, Henry recognizes that Baxter, despite his disease, possesses a sensitivity to language that gives him access to an experience that Henry has never had. He regrets that even in his role as healer he can repair only the damage he has himself inflicted, and, after the operation, under the guise of taking Baxter's pulse, he sits, simply holding his hand.

The literary ghosts provide a kind of company similar to this tender moment. Literature provides companionship, not because it explains or proselytizes, nor because it offers escapist fantasies that evade the "difficulties and wonders of the real," but because it explores what it feels like to possess and inhabit consciousness. Henry's anxieties over the city's as well as his family's vulnerabilities whether new or old are certainly not unfounded, and the political crisis, as he's read, may take a hundred years to resolve. While literature may be "splendidly useless"¹⁷ for dealing with problems requiring the most sophisticated science and diplomacy to unravel, the presence of these literary ancestors hovering just beyond his awareness suggests that he is missing the "help for pain," as Arnold puts it in "Dover Beach" (291), that an appreciation for literature might provide.

The role that literature could play remains beyond his reach in part because he lacks the ear to hear the ways subtle choices in diction shape meaning. He regards metaphor as a tool for developing a line of argument, without being able to appreciate the experience of language as multifold, as meaning more than one thing at once, as producing paradox along with and even within precision and clarity.

Given the rich world of literary reference, it is noteworthy that poetry is made so little of before the denouement in which "Dover Beach" takes center stage. It is strange that Daisy, a poet herself, would recommend only fiction to her father. Dogged in reading what she recommends, he remains utterly ignorant of poetry, to the point of not knowing what the term "stanza" means. Yet, the attention to language explicitly as language that poetry demands may be just the kind of education Henry needs. Indeed, in trying to imagine himself out of his momentary-traffic-jam-induced pessimism about the city, he reflects that "he lacks the lyric gift to see beyond the iron weight of the actual" (173).

Henry admits to never having read any poetry at all until he discovered he had "fathered a poet himself." He thinks:

reading poetry costs him an effort of an unaccustomed sort. Even a first line can produce a tightness behind his eyes. 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 the moment. Slowing down, stopping yourself completely, to read and understand a poem is like trying to acquire an old-fashioned skill like dry-stone walling or trout tickling. (129)

Reading poems requires skills he doesn't feel he has or needs; the scale of them is too small, and the purpose they might once have served is lost and now appears

a kind of quaint nostalgia. He doesn't mention any pleasure in the language of poems or sense of discovery in hearing something articulated in a new way. His blind spot for poetry goes beyond taste and begins to touch on capacities. For example, his literal-mindedness makes him assume that Daisy is always describing things that actually happened to her in her poems. In addition to his worrying about her sexual adventurousness, he's offended that she called the poem describing an operation she watched him perform "The Ballad of the Brain on my Shoe," insisting that "no grey or white matter was lost" (140).

The original two cultures debate between Matthew Arnold and Thomas Huxley is about the merits of an education grounded in science or in literature.¹⁸ While both men advocate broad knowledge across disciplines, Arnold concludes that if he had to choose, he would prefer to have students' educations managed so that they be able to hear the difference in quality between a line from Shakespeare and one that roughly mimics its content. He worries about the student who has learned about the physical universe but hears no distinction in quality between the question put in *Macbeth*, "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?" and "Can you not wait upon the lunatic?" It might very well be a meaningless distinction to Henry, but the capacity to hear it could be the difference between his and Baxter's appreciation of Arnold's poem, and beyond that, having learned to hear the difference between these two particular sentences might have made a difference in how sure he was about his obligations to Baxter. Of course, Arnold's distinction, especially since he doesn't make any effort to show how the differences inhere in the diction and rhythms of the sentences, smacks of the elitism that colors his argument generally and points to his anxieties about middle class culture. In the world of *Saturday*, however, it isn't class or education that determines whether a character can hear something meaningful in poetry, since Baxter can, but rather the deafness is caused by Henry's insistent certainty that it has nothing of value to offer.

Henry's lack of interest in language except as a means of conveying information may be the crucial difference between him and Daisy. In the passage quoted earlier about the consequences of her possible promiscuity, he seems unaware of how strange his language is when he asks himself if it is "only fatherly soft-headedness that makes him suspect that a girl who sleeps around too earnestly has an improved chance of ending up with a lower-grade male, an inadequate, a loser. Or is his own peculiarity in this field, his own lack of exploratory vigor, making for another problem of reference?" (189).

He believes he is thinking scientifically and therefore objectively, but his language reveals a kind of cacophony of discourses. The infelicitous "improve the chance" for describing what he would consider a terrible outcome; the unconscious mixing of technical and in this context demeaning terms in his pairing of "girl" with "male"; the crude, careless shorthand for describing whom she might "end up with," and, finally, his strangely misplaced worry about his fatherly softheadedness instead of the more understandable softheartedness one might expect to mar a father's judgment—these all suggest how inadequate his use of the language

of sexual selection is, how inappropriate it is to this context and how it masks a sexism older than trout tickling.

In one of the few moments that touch on poetry before Daisy's heroic recitation of "Dover Beach," Henry and Daisy have a conversation that suggests the real difference between them is not over ideology or content at all, but, instead, over their differing levels of sensitivity to language and how that sensitivity shapes what and how they think. He remembers her bringing up Philip Larkin's poem "Water," with its opening lines "If I were called in / To construct a religion / I should make use of water" (54). She says she loves the phrase, "If I were called in," adding "as if anyone ever is." His response—that if he "got the call" he would construct a religion out of evolution because it "happens to be demonstrably true"—though "half facetious," misses all the wit and ambiguity in the poem's language as well as its achievement of a Keatsian "negative capability," its contentment to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Letter to George and John Keats, 21 December 1817). The conversation is described as taking place on "a stone bridge at the junction of two streams" (55) in the Lake District, a landscape full of Wordsworthian resonances. The novel, like Daisy, entertains the possibility that Henry's views amount to "good old fashioned religion." But both she and it are more interested in moving beyond dichotomies than in showing up science. It is she, after all, who recommends the biography of Darwin (though her reasons remain mysterious). Henry's favorite phrase from *Origin of Species* provides him with a soothing mantra that accompanies him on his day: "half awake," he hears "the same phrase until he begins to sense a religious content as its significance swells—*there is grandeur in this view of life*, it says over and over" (53).

Henry is aware of the danger of being locked into a single line of thinking, but sees that danger as lying in the endless repetition of particular plots and tropes of novels, movies and TV rather than in the intellectual debates that interest him. Immediately following the car accident he feels that

He is cast in a role and there is no way out. This is, as people like to say, urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere. It is pure artifice. Here are the cars and here are the owners. Here are the guys, the strangers whose self respect is on the line. Someone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other to give way. Popular culture has worn this smooth with reiteration. (87)

He assumes that it is popular culture, rather than the theory he's been slavishly obedient to all morning, that insists there must be a winner and a loser in the encounter to come.¹⁹

Similarly, when his daughter arrives from Paris later that day, he describes her as doing "a stagey little shuffle" and then "walking back towards him, arms outstretched as though on a tightrope, pretending to wobble," which he comments on as being "the sort of thing a character in an American Soap might do when she wants important good news wrung from her" (189). He ignores these hints

and doesn't ask what her news might be, preferring to be in "watcher mode, trying to figure her out," as though the theatricality of her manner were necessarily deceptive, and he would rather figure her out through more tangible clues, such as whether she drinks the champagne he gives her and the state of her fingernails.

In addition to giving him other points of view to draw on, Daisy's reading lists and her insistence that he try to enter imagined worlds created by language may be intended to help him develop the necessary sensitivity to begin to experience metaphors, symbols and images as ways of deepening his participation in the real rather than evading it.

Henry is open to moments of unselfconscious immersion in something outside himself, but not through language. Listening to Theo and his band play, and hearing the sax come in "on a wild and ragged high note, like a voice cracking with joy that holds and holds then tapers and drops away in a downward spiral," and "Theo and the bass guitarist . . . playing in octaves a tricky repeated figure that shifts in unexpected ways and never quite returns to its starting point . . ." he feels "something is swelling in him, or lightening" and thinks: "There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself" (176). Returning immediately to his usual lines of argument, he instantly rejects all other purveyors of transcendent moments, those who promise "Christ's kingdom on earth, or an ideal Islamic state." He is willing to grant the ability to overcome his rational detachment only to music, achievable seemingly because it's beyond words and any explicit discursive content. In describing the moment he retains a degree of literal-mindedness, insisting that it gives us a glimpse of an impossible world, as if in this real world it is not possible to give without losing of oneself. In his emphasis on it as a musical rather than poetic moment, Henry almost misses the ways the words of Theo's song—"Baby, you can choose despair / or you can be happy if you dare. / Let me take you there, my city square, my city square,"—might help him feel less bound within his isolation. He misses his son's repeated advice about scale—the city square rather than the planet—and Theo's promise to provide company, even if he can't prevent danger.

For Henry, it is almost impossible for language to achieve music's effect: its unavoidable content necessarily wedds it to a point of view, which he would be obliged to assess intellectually. Henry's reflections represent his conscious endorsement of music as a vehicle for momentary, impossible transcendence. However, something similar also occurs when, in an uncharacteristic moment of unselfconscious, uncombative meditation, Henry thinks about why he likes Theo's friend Chas, a member of his band from St. Kitt's. Here, Henry reverses his usual habit of attributing mental states to physical causes and locates cause purely in the associations the sounds of the words evoke:

Chas is his favorite among Theo's friends and the most educated too, dropping out of an English degree in his third year at Leeds to play in a band. A wonder that life so far—suicidal mother, absent father, two brothers, members of a strict Baptist sect—hasn't crushed all that relaxed good nature out of him . . . something about the name of Saint Kitt's—saints, kids, kittens—has produced a profusion of kindness in one giant lad. Since meeting him, Perowne has developed a vague ambition to visit the island (155).

This passage at first suggests Henry's usual preference for nature over environment as an explanation of character (in the shuffling of the genetic deck of cards) but then unexpectedly claims not only that his own view of Chas is shaped by the name of the island he's from, but that Chas himself has been. Despite his being "an habitual observer of his own moods" throughout the novel, this moment passes without comment. Normally, Henry might label this kind of nonsensical riffing a mistake of reference, a creating of connections between things that are not, in fact, connected. But here we see him playing with the sounds of the words and through them taking pleasure in things he normally rejects—religion and anything suggestive of childishness or sentimentality. Like plots that violate Henry's standards of plausibility, language itself seems to lead him away from rational sense and to build meaning out of unreasonable, yet felt, relationships. Usually, he is afraid of being misled, duped or trounced. Here, he allows himself a kind of naïve wonder at the mysterious effects of language as well as of music. His momentary playful sensitivity to the sounds of words may even suggest a kinship with Daisy that his ideological commitments have not allowed him to recognize.

As Henry is listening to Daisy recite "Dover Beach," he "feels himself slipping through the words into the things they describe," though they seem to describe something very different the second time through: "The poem's melodiousness, he decides, is at odds with its pessimism" (230). For a moment, he understands poetic language as more than content, as having a musical dimension, which might be in dynamic interplay with meaning. Though we don't know what it is about "Dover Beach" that causes Baxter's elation, he repeats several times "You wrote it!", suggesting that its effect is similar to the effect of Theo's music on Henry: a sudden glimpse of an impossible world not achieved through a particular content but through an embrace of creativity itself. The "brief privilege of consciousness" that Henry believes is the "bracing consolation" for the blind fury, war, famine and death that led to its emergence may feel most like a consolation not in the mature and stoic acceptance of that reality, but in moments in which awareness of separation within an isolated self disappears and a glimpse of the "indivisible universe" creates a brief sense of unity of self, others and world.

The Child in Time and *Black Dogs* both end with characters affirming the value of giving primacy to the phenomenological experience of consciousness over its purely physical determinants and sources. By contrast, in *Saturday*, Henry longs for the moment he can lose consciousness and experience sleep no longer as a "concept" but as a "material thing." The endings of all three novels offer explicit

verbal parallels of one another, with *Saturday* sounding like but refuting the other two. Henry's last thoughts as he fits himself around his wife's "beloved form" are an affirmation of physical rather than conscious intimacy: "'There's always this' is one of his remaining thoughts. And then 'there is only this.' And at last, faintly falling: 'this day's over.'" But the phrase "faintly falling" with its final echo of "The Dead," reminds us that variations on Henry's situation have been sounded before. Gabriel Conroy, lying next to his wife after his own sleepless stint at the window, knows that physical closeness guarantees nothing. As his soul swoons out into the grey impalpable world, he feels closer to Michael Furey, dead many years, than to the Gretta of the present moment, even though Michael Furey is a ghost from her past and not his own.

Whatever Henry's and McEwan's intellectual commitments to evolutionary biology as the winning narrative to explain our various political, social, and personal predicaments, *Saturday's* aesthetic commitments tell a more inclusive story. In doing so, they suggest a greater consonance with Thelma's hopes in *The Child in Time* for a less combative relationship between rational and imaginative, intuitive ways of knowing and for more participatory ways of thinking that don't demand as a prerequisite the detachment and isolation of the observing mind.²⁰

Henry speculates as he operates on Baxter that it is only a matter of time before "the brain's fundamental secret will be laid open," and "the explanations will refine themselves into an irrefutable truth about consciousness" (262–63). For him, it is purely a scientific matter, intelligible within the framework of understanding that he brings to it: "It's already happening, the work is being done in laboratories not far from this theatre, and soon the journey will be completed. Henry is certain of it. That's the only kind of faith he has. There's grandeur in this view of life." It's not clear that that irrefutable truth would have helped him share Baxter's response to hearing "Dover Beach," or to understand his own profound happiness at being able to lose himself in a shared concentration with his operating team that takes him out of his usual combative consciousness and delivers him "into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future" (266). He concludes "there must be something wrong with him," but we can equally wonder at the cost of adhering to a philosophical perspective that demands that he devalue his experiences because they are strange.

In fact, of all the texts that haunt the edges of *Saturday*, *The Child in Time* most persistently suggests how narrowly Henry's biological determinism understands the relationship between consciousness and the world. As we saw, Henry began the day scorning both magical realism and the quantum thought experiment that sought to confirm the centrality of the observing consciousness to the outcome of experiments, and despite his repeatedly transgressing his intellectual allegiances, he ends the day without an epiphany. He remains unaware of the suggestion made by Clarissa Dalloway in the novel most explicitly *Saturday's* progenitor that consciousness might not be best understood physically as bounded within the skull at all but rather as part of the fabric of language and of the world. The literary presences in *Saturday* suggest the patterns within that invisible fabric.

Notes

1. See David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, which McEwan cites in the acknowledgements of *The Child in Time*.
2. In contrast to *The Child in Time*, with its female scientist, *Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love* and *Saturday* all give the biological perspective to a male character. Bernard Tremaine in *Black Dogs* is an amateur entomologist, and in *Enduring Love*, Joe Rose is a failed physicist who makes a living as a science writer.
3. In an interview with Martin Amis shortly after *The Child in Time* was published, McEwan says that he “was keen to try and embody . . . subjective experiences of time and yet place them within both a scientific and almost mystical frame.” Amis remarks that physics has shown us how “The Newtonian world [is] breaking down into a sort of *hippie* world down on the level of matter.” (Roberts 49). David Bohm himself explores the mystical dimensions of quantum physics. See *The Limits of Thought: Discussions between J. Krishnamurti and David Bohm*. Part of growing up for McEwan may involve shedding any vestiges of a hippie or mystical perspective, even if it can be supported by science.
4. Henry got both the ideas and the tone from Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker, all of whom McEwan has expressed admiration for, and all of whom have expressed frustration at resistance to accepting genetics as the basis of human nature and the “consilience” promised by evolutionary theory. In his review of Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, historian of science, Robert Richards comments on the “pugnacious” tone in which the arguments are advanced, a tone that leaves a “bitter aftertaste” whether the reader is open to the arguments or not.
5. In an essay critiquing both the claims and the tone of this volume, James Mellard says that McEwan “has become the face of the new Darwinism in fiction” and that McEwan’s appearance in this volume puts to rest any uncertainty about his intellectual commitments (1). Similarly, McEwan concludes an interview with the artist Anthony Gormley with the following words: “The old Enlightenment dream of a unified body of knowledge is beginning, only just beginning to emerge. Were you to ask cultural theorists and literary critics . . . you would get a much darker view and no solutions. When it comes to the intellectual landscape, I’d rather cross it with scientists like these” (Roberts 142). Brian Boyd, who contributed an essay to *The Literary Animal*, argues elsewhere that “Literary academics have . . . been reluctant to deal with science, except to fantasize that they have engulfed and disarmed it by reducing to ‘just another narrative,’ or to dismiss it with a knowing sneer as presupposing a risibly naive epistemological realism” (145). Clearly, tensions run high in these debates. I am most interested in the effects of Henry’s worldview on his state of mind and on the narrative.
6. Beth Kowaleski Wallace says “*Saturday* is complicated by the striking absence of any specific clues that Henry warrants anything less than the reader’s full engagement and consideration. In light of that absence, the novel seems to imply that the author endorses Henry’s perspective” (466). See also John Banville’s review.
7. See, for example, McEwan’s interview with David Lynn (Roberts 144).
8. To cite just two examples, both Henry and McEwan admire and refer to the work of Fred Halliday and Paul Ekman.
9. Competition and self-interest are regarded as ineluctable human traits that must be acknowledged and worked around rather than ignored or denied. See McEwan’s essay, “Save the Boot-Room, Save the Earth,” in which he draws on a scene in *Solar* that illustrates the self-interestedness of a group of people sharing a boot-room on a ship to the Arctic.
10. In his review of *Solar*, Thomas Jones speaks to McEwan’s penchant for having his scientific characters think about and use their area of expertise under every possible circumstance. He says about the protagonist of *The Innocent*: “The problem isn’t that it makes it hard to believe in him as a scientist, but that it makes it hard to believe in him as a human being. This estrangement masquerading as sympathy is taken to extremes in *Saturday* (2005), in which McEwan’s hero, a neurosurgeon,

can't look at a fish without thinking about its nervous system. Monomania as a shorthand method of characterization has a long history in English fiction, but traditionally it has been used for comic minor characters with no inner life: Thwackum and Square in *Tom Jones*, say, or Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*." It is hard to tell what attitude to take to Henry's monomania; there may well be some mockery in the presentation.

11. "Objectivist" is McEwan's own term. In an interview with Ryan Roberts in 2008, McEwan says, "I don't hold with the sort of postmodern relativist view that the only truth is the one that an individual asserts. I do believe there are realities that await our investigations. In that sense I am an objectivist." (Roberts 189).

12. See reviews by Richard Rorty in *Dissent* and by Lee Siegel in *The Nation*.

13. Mark Currie argues that Henry's "own condition as a fictional narrative is unknowable to him, and it could be argued unknowable to the omniscient narrative voice itself, which is concerned with knowing him, but not with its own relation to that knowledge. The omniscient narration may then know everything about Perowne, but like Perowne, there are some important things that it doesn't seem to know about itself, such as the fact that it is engaged in a polemic between literature and science" (127). We can add that the narrative voice doesn't signal any awareness that in constructing Henry's consciousness it is quoting from literary texts. For an interesting contrast see David Lodge's novel *Nice Work*, which is similarly concerned with the two cultures debate and with the chasm between literary theorists and scientists. Unlike *Saturday's*, the narrator of *Nice Work* continually breaks the realist frame in order to draw comic attention to the limits of each character's worldview. Both novels are situated in relation to nineteenth-century realist fiction and modernist stream of consciousness narratives, but in *Saturday* the echoes are never explicitly acknowledged, though many of the texts are discussed.

14. For example, in the last scene of "The Dead," Gabriel thinks, "Poor Aunt Julia! . . . Soon perhaps he would be sitting in that same drawing room, dressed in black, his silk hat on his knees . . . and Aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died. . . . Yes, yes: that would happen very soon" (Joyce 193). And Henry thinks: ". . . from where he stands up here there are things he can see that he knows must happen. Soon it will be his mother's time, the message will come from the home, and he and his family will be sitting by her bed in her tiny room, with her ornaments . . ." (McEwan, *Saturday* 282).

15. For discussions of *Saturday's* intertextuality, see also Laura Marcus, Michael Ross, Katherine Wall, Molly Clark Hilliard and Elaine Handley. The tendency of the criticism that treats *Saturday's* evocations of other texts has been to show how the presence of particular texts shifts our reading of particular scenes, but it hasn't addressed the cumulative effect of the novel's being haunted by these multiple voices or the way their existence, in combination with Henry's difficulties with the nuances of language, creates a counter-narrative.

16. See Greenslade.

17. This is McEwan's own phrase and view ("Save the Boot Room, Save the Earth"), speaking about whether *Solar* might affect the outcome of climate change discussions.

18. The debate is reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. See Arnold 1415–35.

19. Kathleen Wall attributes his feeling of being trapped to the ways the media generally have "taken away the particularity, the individuality of the actors" (779) in this scene. It is true that the media, in the form of the omnipresent, intrusive TV news, follows him all day and contributes to Henry's sense that he is not thinking independently.

20. What McEwan says about *Atonement's* indebtedness to modernist writers equally describes what happens in *Saturday*: "*Atonement* could not have been written without all the experiments in fiction and reflections on point of view. And tricks with those and that sense drawn from modernism and postmodernism of having other writing, other texts, the spirits of other writers, moving through your pages as if they, too, were as much a part of the real world as forests and cities and oceans." Then,

Henry-like, he adds, “we run narratives about other people in our real lives, we make characters of them, necessarily, because it helps us to guess what they might do next” (Roberts 155).

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