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On a Darkling Planet:
Ian McEwan's *Saturday*
and the Condition of England

Michael L. Ross

Although Ian McEwan's recent best seller *Saturday* maintains throughout a conspicuous air of up-to-the-minute internationalism, that impression turns out to be somewhat misleading. In fact, in its broad outlines the book adheres to a long-familiar insular paradigm: the Condition of England novel. Like the encompassing novel genre itself, this subgenre resists strict definition. However, the preeminent Victorian exemplars, like Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), and Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), share certain distinguishing features: they focus on landmark movements in the society of their time, such as rampant industrialization and urbanization, and their action often involves weighty public events. Typically, these hinge on class conflicts: strikes or other types of friction between owners and their workforce. Whatever the authors' explicit political allegiances, their novels, broadly speaking, project a liberal vision, manifesting a compassionate concern with the lives not only of the most privileged but also of the most oppressed members of British society. While such Victorian exemplars may now seem dated, the template itself has been repeatedly pressed into service by writers of the ensuing century and a half, from Edwardians like E. M. Forster to moderns like Martin Amis, William Boyd, Zadie Smith, and, not least, Ian McEwan.

Saturday is not the first work by McEwan to have been identified as a Condition of England novel,¹ though it is the one that most strikingly fits the category. Concerning the shift in his imaginative gestalt that coincided with the writing of *The Child in Time* (1987), McEwan has said:

From then on, I've never really been interested in anything other than trying to find connections between the public and the private, and exploring how the two are in conflict, how they sometimes reflect each other, how the political invades the private world. (qtd. in Louvel 10)

Such an exploration emerges vividly in *Saturday*, where the protagonist Henry Perowne's customary private composure is repeatedly tested by tremors from the public realm. While the book's action unfolds in an England that has long outlived the Industrial Revolution, it displays a number of elements linking it with its Victorian forebears. It focuses on an urban setting epitomizing contemporary English life, and it refers repeatedly to a public event of signal importance—the massive rally opposing war in Iraq. Perowne, though not a captain of industry, is an eminent neurosurgeon who heads a firm of medical associates. And as in its Victorian counterparts, the pivotal conflict in the novel pits members of the elite against a representative of the marginalized, the derelict Baxter. Obviously, however, McEwan's England is not the England of Dickens or Gaskell; the intervening years have drastically reconfigured the nation's socioeconomic map. My aims in what follows are to provide a perspective on what the Condition of England mode has become in McEwan's masterly hands and to assess what remains of the liberal vision that once inspired *Saturday's* illustrious predecessors.

As a writer whose earlier work has sometimes involved French, German, and Italian settings, Ian McEwan has an honest claim to the label *cosmopolitan*. Although geographically more confined, *Saturday* too displays a global reach. This is intimated early on by the book's epigraph, drawn from a well-known text by an American writer: Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. It runs, in part:

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.

The reader infers that McEwan's narrative will respond to the global sweep of Bellow's survey; though its venue will be London rather than Herzog's New York, and its century not Herzog's twentieth but the dawning twenty-first, it too promises to deal with universal questions, above all "what it means to be a man."

Henry Perowne, the key witness for that inquiry, lives in central London with his wife Rosalind, a legal expert attached to a newspaper, and his teenage son Theo, an aspiring and talented blues guitarist. His daughter Daisy is a prize-winning poet; his father-in-law, the venerable but splenetic John Grammaticus, has himself had a long and distinguished poetic career. In their almost comically formidable panoply of professional skill, literary and artistic distinction, and affluence, the Perowne entourage hardly seems a typical family, yet the most prominent American reviews have extolled their mode of life as exemplary, even normative. According to Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, "Mr. McEwan has not only produced one of the most powerful pieces of post-9/11 fiction yet published, but also fulfilled that very primal mission of the novel: to show how we—a privileged few of us, anyway—live today." Kakutani's dashes bracket a telltale contradiction: what her all-inclusive "we" actually denotes is the finely filtered transatlantic audience for "superior" fiction and journalism. For Michael Dirda, in the *Washington Post*, the Perownes are normative in an even more culturally overdetermined fashion: "Clearly, the Perownes represent the very flower of Western civilization—decent, thoughtful, productive, cultivated, deeply, fundamentally good." And Zoe Heller, in another *Times* review, sees Henry Perowne in similar terms as preserving the core values of "our" civilization:

His day is spent shuttling from one privileged, embattled sanctuary to another. . . . But McEwan is not interested here in satirizing yuppie solipsism. . . . In lieu of any larger social cohesion, McEwan suggests, such private joys, carved out from the clamorous world, are what most sustain us. They are our fleeting glimpses of utopia; the ancient ideals of *caritas* and community lived in microcosm.

Once again, the universalized "us" turns out to be a fastidiously screened sampling: the flowers of civilization, not its rank, festering weeds, whose proliferation defeats "any larger social cohesion." Boycotting the "clamorous world," we find our collective salvation by taking refuge in the hermetic Elysium of the cultured.

Why such American literati might so readily identify with the Perownes, McEwan's haut-bourgeois, echt British clan, has much to do with the historical time and locale in which the narrative is poised ("In a century. In a city"). Kakutani's placement of the book in the category

of post-9/11 fiction rings true; the ambit here is nothing if not topical. The Saturday in question, indeed, threatens to be Henry Perowne's personal 9/11, bringing with it a convulsive disruption of his domestic space. Such a development has precedents in McEwan's earlier fiction; as Nick Rennison has written, "One of McEwan's persistent themes is the intrusion of brutal, inescapable reality into comfortable lives" (110). Here, however, the intrusion patently echoes the brutality of still-smoldering public catastrophe. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington are recalled early in *Saturday* by the flaming airplane Perowne sights upon his premature awakening; and while Perowne's fears of an imminent strike against London prove groundless, they betoken the contemporary drift toward paranoia, an undertow that is global in its repercussions. The initial penetration of English airspace by putative hostiles (the aircraft's crew are mysterious foreigners) is proleptic of the later, deadly serious penetration of Perowne's private space by a home-grown hostile, an event that threatens the violent sexual penetration of Perowne's daughter Daisy.²

If the narrative unfolds within English confines, its relevance persistently overflows those limits, confirming what Benedict Anderson has called "nationalism's undivorcible marriage to internationalism" (207). The discursive tension between nation and globe permeates *Saturday*. In this respect the novel strongly recalls a work of nonfiction published the year before, *Free World*, by the English political analyst Timothy Garton Ash. (The two authors enjoy a bond of mutual mentorship; there are gracious acknowledgments of the help of "Tim Garton Ash" appended to several of McEwan's novels, *Saturday* included, and Garton Ash for his part lists McEwan among the "potent array of critical intelligences" who read *Free World* in draft [272].) Garton Ash qualifies as a premier exponent of early twenty-first-century liberalism, an ethos (as the title of his book suggests) bent on looking beyond entrenched national boundaries. Like the Roman god Janus, he argues, contemporary Britain has more than one face—four faces, in fact, as opposed to the god's mere two: "The back and front faces can be labeled Island and World; the face on the left says Europe and that on the right America" (15). In formulating a wise course of action for a postimperial Britain, Garton Ash is principally concerned with the left and right faces. What he advocates is a nuanced double regard, gazing at once across the Channel toward continental Europe and across the Atlantic toward the United States, without according primacy to either tie. Like McEwan a guarded admirer of Prime Minister Tony Blair,³ Garton

Ash commends what he calls the "Blair bridge project" for charting such a course, founding itself "instinctively, but also rationally, on the very nature of Janus Britain" (44) and thus continually "trying to pull America and Europe together" (45). In its fictive sphere, *Saturday* undertakes a comparable bridge project, establishing multiple filaments linking the Perownes to both continents. On the day when Perowne plays squash and later performs surgery with his American colleague and friend, the anesthesiologist Jay Strauss, his daughter Daisy and his father-in-law Grammaticus arrive from France, where both are based. And the future trajectories of the two Perowne children neatly maintain the Janus equilibrium: while Toby will go off to the United States to showcase his gifts as a musician, Daisy will be reunited with her Italian boyfriend Giulio, whose child (a prospective avatar of the European Community) she is carrying.

But while his family could be called globalized, Perowne solidly identifies himself with his native, enisled society. The book may raise the question "what it means to be a man," but that question still is formulated implicitly in familiar national terms: what does it mean, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to be an Englishman? An illuminating correlative for that inquiry is provided by another Condition of England novel written just under a century earlier, E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910).⁴ Like *Saturday*, Forster's text focuses on a small circle of characters, generating insights into the current form and pressure of English society. The pair of *début de siècle* Condition narratives might be thought of as matching bookends bracketing the eventful English twentieth century. Each proposes as a central concern the survival of English civilization in a time of crisis, when that civilization is either shadowed (as in *Howards End*) or direly perturbed (as in *Saturday*) by forces inimical to it. Both focus on a family group representing the flower of that civilization: the Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, and their brother Toby in *Howards End*; the Perownes in *Saturday*. In both works the presiding group is challenged by sudden contact with a trespassing other from a subaltern social stratum: the struggling clerk Leonard Bast in Forster, the marauding hooligan Baxter in McEwan. And both feature a house as a key thematic locus: Howards End itself, the bucolic site that comes to serve the Schlegels as a sanctum of cultured enjoyment and affection, and the Fitzrovia residence that plays an equivalent role for the Perownes.

Just as Garton Ash's *Free World* constitutes a companion piece for *Saturday*, so too there is an influential, contemporaneous work of social

analysis that bears an intimate relation to Forster's novel: a 1909 book called, aptly, *The Condition of England*, by the Liberal politician C. F. G. Masterman. In his introduction to a 1960 reprint of that volume, James Boulton speaks of Masterman's "debt to [Matthew] Arnold" (xiv), and indeed an Arnoldian logic informs both the argument of Masterman's book and its structure, which by and large follows the tripartite analysis based on social class ("barbarians," "philistines," and "populace") that Arnold deploys in *Culture and Anarchy*. Repeatedly, Masterman invokes points made by Arnold, including the fundamental one concerning the dissonance between private opulence and public penury painfully observable in London (23). Here the affinity between Masterman and Forster is unmistakable, since the liberal vision dramatically enacted in *Howards End* has equally firm Arnoldian underpinnings. In *Two Cheers for Democracy* Forster says of Arnold that he "is of all the Victorians most to my taste: a great poet, a civilized citizen, and a prophet who has managed to project himself into our present troubles, so that when we read him now he seems to be in the room" (197). In *Howards End* Arnold is very visibly in the room. The Arnoldian aspiration "to see life steadily and see it whole," which according to Peter Widdowson "expresses what 'Culture', in its full Arnoldian sense, means for [Forster]" (66), acts as an imperative for the novel's paramount consciousness, Margaret Schlegel. "It is impossible," the narrator cautions, "to see modern life steadily and see it whole," but he adds that Margaret "had chosen to see it whole" (165). Her comprehensiveness of vision manifests itself as "a continual and sincere response to all that she encountered in her path through life" (25).

Somewhat unexpectedly, Matthew Arnold has also managed to project himself into the troubles of McEwan's twenty-first century London. But seeing life whole, let alone steadily, becomes a well-nigh insuperable task for McEwan's latter-day protagonist, though his responsiveness to life recalls Margaret's. The narrative dwells fondly throughout on Perowne's individual angle of vision—indeed, literal keenness of sight is a sine qua non for his professional success—yet his vision, for all its impressive amplitude, inevitably falls short of the Arnoldian gold standard. (Defective vision enters as a motif in the opening pages of the novel, where Perowne ludicrously misdiagnoses the distressed aircraft first as a meteor, then as a comet.) For all that, the ideal itself still exerts an insistent pressure. McEwan's protagonist too is engaged in a daily quest for an Arnoldian "sweetness and light"; and in McEwan as in Forster that quest is defined

by an effort to achieve balance and clarity in private life. It is a revered Victorian text, Arnold's "Dover Beach," that crystallizes the central values both of Forster's Edwardian novel and McEwan's post-9/11 one, where it is quoted in full at the crux of the action.⁵ The poem appeals for a withdrawal from the deceptive, strife-ridden, massified modern scene. As a refuge from the collective angst, it advances cherished humanistic alternatives: domestic intimacy, fidelity between individual lovers, what McEwan himself in interviews has called "the small print of private life" (Miller). "It is private life," says the narrator of *Howards End*, "that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision" (91). The conclusion of *Howards End*, which presents an extended Schlegel family group clustered at its rural retreat, establishes the sanctity of personal bonds as a redoubt against the onslaught of public forces looming, like London, in the near distance. Forster's Edwardian rhetoric is a far cry from McEwan's more measured, contemporary idiom, but the conclusion of *Saturday* affirms a homologous set of preferences, vindicating the embattled private realm against the importunities of public turmoil.

Still, despite their common Arnoldian heritage, the overall impressions the two books leave are profoundly different. During the near-century separating them the condition of England has been radically altered, and so, inescapably, has the Condition of England novel. At the end of *Saturday* Perowne muses on the vulnerability that has, since the more secure times in which Forster wrote, come to aggravate the plight in which he and his fellow townspeople find themselves:

London, his small part of it, lies wide open, impossible to defend, waiting for its bomb, like a hundred other cities. . . . A hundred years ago, a middle-aged doctor standing at this window in his silk dressing gown, less than two hours before a winter's dawn, might have pondered the new century's future. February 1903. You might envy this Edwardian gent all he didn't yet know.
(276)

While lying wide open might in less ominous times denote a relaxed, even erotic receptiveness that could counter insularity, openness here has more sinister overtones, giving urbanites like Perowne the sense of being sickeningly at risk.⁶ The note of global trepidation is, in a different register, also sounded in Garton Ash's *Free World*. Globalization, according

to Garton Ash, is not only “a hard economic and technical process” but also “what the poet W. H. Auden called a ‘mind-event.’” (132), so that developments anywhere can infringe on Londoners’ complacent sense of their world: “A shot fired in Kashmir can hit Putney, through the Ahmadi community in Gressenhall Road. Global warming affects Putney’s main street too: when did that Victorian pub Ye Olde Spotted Horse last see a white Christmas?” (170). Such an epochal mind event necessarily has far-reaching consequences for mental constructs like works of fiction. As if taking its cue from Garton Ash, *Saturday* reflects the susceptibility of the nation to assaults by predatory forces sited both within and far removed from its increasingly porous borders. The novel becomes, so to speak, a study in homeland insecurity.

The effects of this troubling awareness on McEwan’s narrative are oddly contradictory. Where the novel’s geopolitical reach is, on one level, more ambitious than that of *Howards End*, on other levels its purview has contracted. Most obviously, *Saturday*’s narrative chronology has been compressed into an exiguous 24 hours, as opposed to *Howards End*’s more leisurely span of several years.⁷ Similarly, the variety of locale in *Howards End*, embracing not only the metropolis but Shropshire, the Dorset coast, and Howards End itself, is sacrificed in *Saturday* in the interest of unity of place: most of the action occurs in or not far from the Perowne domicile. Instead of the roving omniscience of Forster’s narrator, granting privileged access to a gallery of interior worlds—Margaret Schlegel’s of course, but also those of the business magnate Henry Wilcox, the plebeian Leonard Bast, and others—*Saturday* is limited to the consciousness of Perowne, channeling the multifariousness of London through a penetrating but monoptic gaze. Where the overall impression of the English scene created by *Howards End* resembles a panorama, that left by *Saturday* is more like a rapid flurry of snapshots. The manifold sense of compression imbues McEwan’s scenario with a hectic urgency even while severely curtailing its scope.

These formal differences coincide with a crucial shift of social vision, a shift reflected by the contrast between Masterman’s work and Garton Ash’s. As a convenient shorthand for this contrast, one could call Masterman’s book preimperial and Garton Ash’s postimperial. At the date of *The Condition of England*, 1909, British rule was of course still near its global apex, a fact of which Masterman was only too cognizant. But Masterman, a confirmed impero-skeptic, looks back with nostalgia to a time before

Britain was trammled by such involvements. He trenchantly catalogues the moral liabilities entailed by colonialism:

No Conquering Race can possess much power of introspection, of self-examination. . . . No Conquering Race can possess irony: else it will uncomfortably suspect that its conquered peoples are secretly laughing at it, and this suspicion will excite it to resentment and reprisal. No Conquering Race can possess humour: for then one day it will find itself laughing at itself; and that day its power of conquest is gone. (50)

By the time of Garton Ash's *Free World*, the issue of Britain as an imperial power has long since become moot; the metropole has been compelled, even if morosely, to laugh at itself. Global preeminence has passed to the United States, to which Garton Ash assigns "the *unique* responsibility" (163, emphasis in original) for assuming leadership in the common struggle against environmental degradation and climate change. For him, Britain is unique principally for its potential mediating role "inside the extended family of the West" (166), and certainly not because of any enduring claim to status as *paterfamilias* within that clan.

This contrast conditions the two commentators' attitudes toward London itself. For Masterman, London is "this monster clot of humanity" (79), the locus where squalor, wealth, power, and frenetic hurry are grotesquely conglomerated. It is "a metropolis and capital of the Empire living a parasitic existence on tribute levied upon the boundaries of the world" (80). Masterman deplors the stultifying effect of city life—"the bustle and violence of it all" (102)—on the populace, much in the spirit of Arnold's "The Scholar-Gipsy," which laments the "sick hurry" and "divided aims" of modern society (213). A similar vein of Liberal urbanophobia runs through *Howards End*. "I hate this continual flux of London," Margaret Schlegel sighs (184). The Schlegels have lived equably for years in their leased London quarters, Wickham Place, and resent being obliged by a redeveloper's scheme to move out; but the novel leaves no doubt that the modern city, with its relentless tearing down and building up, is becoming a prohibitive milieu for the cultivated life to which they are pledged, embodying forces grimly hostile to moral balance and worthwhile personal relations.

For Garton Ash, by contrast, London epitomizes the vibrant multiculturalism that characterizes twenty-first-century England, despite

the new vulnerabilities attendant upon that development. He notes that “In the second half of the twentieth century, as Empire folded into that ever vaguer Commonwealth, the peoples of the former Empire came, in growing numbers, to live on the island” (17). He makes the claim for London that “Only New York can seriously compete for the title of most cosmopolitan city in the world”⁸ (18); and while he registers the consequent strains on the social fabric, his tone is by and large celebratory. Masterman’s reiterated laments for the fading of the once populous and robust English countryside, vitalized by a thriving yeomanry, are absent both from Garton Ash’s survey and from McEwan’s kindred novel. Shortly after awakening, Perowne enjoys a quasi-epiphanic moment of admiration for his city:

Standing here, as immune to the cold as a marble statue, gazing towards Charlotte Street, towards a foreshortened jumble of façades, scaffolding and pitched roofs, Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work. (5)

It is a vision of urban space remote from Masterman’s and Forster’s, one that McEwan himself may at least provisionally be tempted to entertain.

But Perowne, a “habitual observer of his own moods,” immediately “wonders about this sustained, distorting euphoria” (5), and the ensuing narrative provides ample cause to interrogate such a utopian view of London. The latter-day, postimperial metropole, unlike Masterman’s, seems abundantly capable of stimulating introspection and irony. One such irony pertains to Perowne’s scrape with Baxter’s car, an accident that causes only trivial immediate damage but precipitates a terrifying eventual showdown. Cars, in Forster as in Masterman, embody what Bellow was to call “a condition caused by mechanization,” one that militates against personal fulfillment. Late in *Howards End* the car used in the scheme to entrap the supposedly deranged Helen Schlegel becomes the very incarnation of the predatory: “The car ran silently like a beast of prey” (282). The narrator of McEwan’s *The Child in Time* dryly remarks that “cars were our citizens now” (44), but on the whole McEwan refrains from hand wringing over the negative repercussions of mechanization. Henry Perowne’s Mercedes

is presented as at worst an allowable indulgence, a benign piece of high technology that enables him to execute a long list of errands over the weekend. The yearning for the preindustrial past that colored Forster's and Masterman's brand of liberalism has no place on McEwan's agenda or on that of his scientifically *au fait* protagonist. The life of Darwin sent to Perowne by his daughter "At times . . . made him comfortably nostalgic for a verdant, horse-drawn, affectionate England" (6), but such nostalgia does not impede his own customary, brisk momentum or prompt him to search for a *Howards End* to serve as a bucolic refuge.

What the grazing collision between Perowne's sleek Mercedes and the louche Baxter's aging BMW suggests instead is an anti-idyllic dissonance ingrained in the fabric of contemporary London life. The stranger's bedraggled German car—a tarnished icon of "continental" luxury and efficiency betraying its owner's futile aspiration to the elevated status that Perowne takes for granted—loses a side mirror in the scrape. The minor mishap amounts to an insult compounding the graver injury of chronic inequality, the sort of brush between winners and losers in the twenty-first-century capitalist sweepstakes apt to trigger eventual violence. There is a broadly comparable clash in *Howards End*: the sudden irruption of Leonard Bast into the lives of the Schlegels. Here too a "have" character, Helen Schegel, inadvertently deprives the "have-not" of a valued possession, in this instance Bast's battered umbrella, a pathetic badge of respectability. This encounter too ultimately leads to a violent denouement: Leonard's death at the hands of the self-righteous Charles Wilcox. What is striking, however, is the difference in treatment. Leonard, though aggrieved, does not become physically aggressive: Forster identifies the underclass as a *problem* for the members of the elite, but not as a *threat*.

While such parallels serve mainly to highlight the divergent outlooks of the two novels, both narratives confirm an important point made by Benedict Anderson: in the development of the modern nation-state, "print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernacular" (45). Anderson observes that "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (46). To extend Anderson, I would argue that print competence has also been crucial in determining which subgroups have a controlling stake in the nations thus formed. Forster and McEwan alike dramatize the capacity of

language in printed form to instantiate an imagined community among those lettered adepts who belong properly to the nation and to exclude those verbally stunted subjects who cannot properly belong.

Once again, however, this common understanding of print illuminates the ideological split dividing the two novels. To Leonard Bast, engaged in a dogged effort to “improve” himself, the affluent and bookish Schlegels represent enviable initiates of the print-oriented realm of security and eminence from which he has been barred: “If only he could talk like this, he would have caught the world. Oh, to acquire culture! Oh, to pronounce foreign names correctly! Oh, to be well-informed, discoursing at ease on every subject that a lady started!” (52). The two “ladies,” daughters of a distinguished German humanist, can assume as second nature an easy mastery of the high print medium that Leonard, by grappling with certified “classics” like Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*, toils vainly to attain. Confronted with the pair of wealthy bluestockings, Bast barrages them with an inventory of his reading, hoping to make the catalogue serve as his passport into their select society: “But [Helen] could not stop him. Borrow was imminent after Jefferies—Borrow, Thoreau and sorrow. R.L.S. brought up the rear, and the outburst ended in a swamp of books” (127). Predictably, Leonard’s parade of talismanic names only dampens the Schlegels’ spirits. His “brain is filled with the husks of books, culture—horrible; we want him to wash out his brain and go to the real thing” (150), Margaret explains. The “real thing” for the book-saturated Miss Schlegel can only mean first-hand experience rather than nuggets drawn from indiscriminate reading; yet a woman brought up to take a command of literature as a given finds it tempting to brainwash someone in Bast’s abjected position. In that sense, her heartfelt appeal to “real life” smacks of unwitting condescension.

In the parallel scene from *Saturday*, where the derelict Baxter invades the opulent residence of the hyperliterate Perownes, the social imbalance enforced by print carries a tellingly different emotional valence. Here the intruder does not parade his own attainments as a reader in order to gain acceptance; instead, his vindictive designs on Henry Perowne and his family are stymied by literature, as personified by that standard-bearer of Victorian print capitalism, Matthew Arnold. Baxter himself exemplifies the nightmare of fierce irrationality that repeatedly abrades the taut surface of McEwan’s fiction—a figure akin to the black dogs in the eponymous novel or to the delusionary Jed Parry in *Enduring Love*. Latently violent

and foredoomed by his defective DNA, Baxter, like Bast, springs from the "have-not" underclass; but his animus against the charmed, impregnable circle of the literate is far more uncontrolled and seditious than Leonard's.

According to Anderson, "there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests—above all in the form of poetry and songs" (145). In *Saturday*, what emerges starkly from the recitation of poetry is Baxter's *noninclusion* in the "special" community. During his forcible invasion of the Perowne enclave, the marauder is enthralled by Daisy Perowne's recitation of "Dover Beach," which he has been hoodwinked into mistaking for a composition by the young woman herself. Despite his panic, Perowne is compelled to recognize that the loutish Baxter has a capacity for responsiveness to poetry that he, for all his schooling and professional expertise, cannot match. But this insight, while it might have opened a transformative vista into Baxter's inner world, turns out to be beside the real point. What the incident primarily establishes is the intruder's ineluctable alienation from Perowne family values—from the community of print wizardry that empowers the family, ratifying their social supremacy. His apperception of the poem that so moves him is pointedly aural; that is why he can take it for the production of the young and pregnant girl standing naked in front of him rather than that of a Victorian worthy dead for over a century. (The unliterary Perowne is equally at sea as to the lyric's authorship, but his command of other, vital print resources renders his ignorance on this score merely amusing rather than disabling.)

The main effect of Baxter's enthrallment by "Dover Beach" is not to transfigure him into a mute inglorious Milton but to divert him from his fell purpose of raping Daisy and demolishing the Perownes' well-being. Print thus becomes a *modus operandi* ensuring that the uncouth listener will not for long penetrate the hallowed boundaries of the haut-bourgeois community. The same is true of Perowne's subsequent ruse of reading aloud from a medical offprint "casting doubt on the surgical lesioning of the *globus pallidus* in the treatment of Parkinson's Disease" (226), making it pass for a hopeful commentary on the baffled Baxter's own, unrelated genetic disorder. The result is the flinging of the interloper from upstairs to downstairs, a tumble that inflicts further damage on his already impaired brain, which Perowne subsequently uses his magisterial surgical finesse to mend. The perfect circle of the hyperlettered and hyperskilled remains triumphantly intact.

At first blush, Leonard Bast's abrupt dismissal from the scene of *Howards End* (his death results from a sword stroke on the part of Charles Wilcox, compounded by his already weak heart) looks like an equivalent banishment of the untutored upstart from the charmed enclave of the elite. In fact, however, Forster's treatment of the character points in another direction. While Forster's mostly patronizing tone toward Bast may, as Widdowson argues, expose "The unconscious *elitism* of the Liberal position" (92, emphasis in original), Forster does at least pinpoint some sociohistorical causes for the character's shortcomings. He portrays Bast as a hapless inheritor of the great nineteenth-century exodus from countryside to city and of the collective failure to equip urban newcomers with the cultural and economic wherewithal needed for fulfillment. The narrator asserts flatly that Leonard "was inferior to most rich people, there is not the least doubt of it" (58), but accounts for the imputed inferiority in terms of a systemic social imbalance: "beneath these superstructures of wealth and art there wanders an ill-fed boy" (57). Forster's method of narration, his adopting the persona of an omniscient *raisonneur*, has, within obvious-enough limits, a counterelitist effect, calling into question the "superstructures of wealth and art." Some among Forster's gallery of reflectors, above all Margaret Schlegel's self-interrogating psyche, are privileged by being visited more often and more tenderly than others. So those who best personify liberal habits of mind receive the most lavish helping of narrative scrutiny. All the same, Leonard's floundering, confused mentality, like the self-exculpating, hectoring one of the business magnate Henry Wilcox, is allotted some measure of considerate attention. Meager as Forster's imagining of proletarian subjectivity may now seem, the attempt in itself betokens a brave determination to reach beyond the hermetic boundaries of class—to establish an imagined community of shared consciousness.

Margaret Schlegel insists that the lives of the impoverished could be transformed by a straightforward infusion of wealth: "Give them a chance. Give them money" (133). Applied to McEwan's Baxter, such reasoning would be otiose. Unlike the struggling Bast, Baxter is constructed as at bottom the victim of his own calamitous but unalterable genetic payload; his inferiority has been preprogrammed. Perowne reflects that no change in the makeup of society can remedy the deficiencies of the "losers" loitering within it: "No amount of social justice will cure or disperse this enfeebled army haunting the public places of every town" (272). By this

logic, such derelicts form part of the detritus left by the “late failure of radical hopes” cited by Saul Bellow; now, in the postradical twenty-first century, the best hope for promoting the health of the community is not social activism but clinical expertise.

McEwan enables Baxter's objectification as a “case” by channeling the events of the narrative through the consciousness of Perowne, the urbane and cultivated diagnostician. The choice of point of view has here, as often, powerful ideological implications. Where Forster's omniscient narration allowed for a measure of egalitarianism, McEwan's use of a unitary center of perception—a more “modern” novelistic convention—situates the reader within a discursive universe that is relentlessly judicious, probing, and “superior.” Perowne's enveloping ego system provides a congenial medium for those “flowers of civilization” who read serious literary fiction, in effect a cushion against the grating roar of other sorts of lives being led.

The major occasion on which Perowne is prompted to an act of empathy with such an outsider, Baxter's forced entry, clinches the point:

Before Baxter speaks, Perowne tries to see the room through his eyes, as if that might help predict the degree of trouble ahead: the two bottles of champagne, the gin and the bowls of lemon and ice, the belittlingly high ceiling and its mouldings, the Bridget Riley prints flanking the Hodgkin, the muted lamps, the cherry wood floor beneath the Persian rugs, the careless piles of serious books, the decades of polish in the thakat table. The scale of retribution could be large. (207)

Although some of his observations, like the one about the belittlingly high ceiling, show sensitivity to the intruder's point of view, Perowne's musings betoken no genuine fellow feeling. Instead, they are at bottom diagnostic, betraying a frantic class defensiveness, the troubled awareness of one whose elevated status rests on chic possessions and the nonchalant mastery of print (“the careless piles of serious books”). Later, when the danger has passed, the old poet John Grammaticus's gallant impulse to extend sympathy to Baxter—“there came a point after Daisy recited Arnold for the second time when I actually began to feel sorry for the fellow” (229)—is inwardly rebuked by Perowne: “What weakness, what delusional folly, to permit yourself sympathy towards a man, sick or not, who invades your house like this” (230).

Perowne's feelings toward Daisy's Italian boyfriend provide an instructive foil. Like Baxter, Giulio is an imponderable quantity, a stranger who has, from Perowne's perspective, barged uninvited into the sacrosanct enclave of the family. Amusingly, Perowne must contend "with nascent outrage at this unknown Italian's assault on the family's peace and cohesion, at his impertinently depositing his seed without first making himself available for inspection" (240). Yet the impertinent Giulio has infinitely less to fear from inspection than the unpresentable Londoner Baxter, and vastly more likelihood of being absorbed into the Perowne clan. "Foreign" though he may be, he belongs to the global guild of the highly literate and academically certified, an imagined community that by the twenty-first century has become arguably more cohesive even than the nation. Slavoj Žižek, in his appraisal of Garton Ash's *Free World*, observes:

The slum-dwellers are the counter-class to the other newly emerging class, the so-called "symbolic class" (managers, journalists and PR people, academics, artists etc.) which is also uprooted and perceives itself as universal (a New York academic has more in common with a Slovene academic than with blacks in Harlem half a mile from his campus).

The globetrotting Perownes confirm Žižek's observation. Henry Perowne can more easily relate to his American colleague Jay Strauss or even to the unknown Italian Giulio than to outcast compatriots like Baxter. And another group of compatriots with whom he feels no kinship is the multitude protesting the looming Anglo-American Iraq incursion. For Perowne, that throng corresponds to the "ignorant armies" that "clash by night" in "Dover Beach." He sees the protesters as resisting, under the aegis of a cranky, "politically correct" dogma, the forcible removal of a thuggish and barbaric tyrant. "It's a condition of the times," he thinks, "this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety" (176). Such pervasive dread is the hallmark of an alternate imagined global community, one which Perowne wishes at all costs to keep at arm's length. The protest, in fact, feeds directly into the more immediate, personal threat to his safety. It is the rally that leads to his scrape with Baxter's BMW, impeding his normal momentum and prompting him to swerve down a by-street so as to be on time for his appointment with Strauss. Baxter and the marchers, though overtly antagonistic, are linked by a submerged affinity—their

common unwillingness, as Perowne sees it, to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. In his view, the protest in the name of nonviolence signals an acquiescence in the pathological violence of the Iraqi dictator, and Baxter's private antisocial violence in effect parallels, for all its crudity, this idealistic but wrongheaded public action.

It is worth noting that McEwan's own statements indicate some sympathy with Perowne's position:

"Walking past marchers rather than with them," [McEwan] says, "I was troubled by the sheer level of happiness on the street. I did think whatever the reasoning of America for going in, history has offered us this chance to get rid of Saddam. If you decide you don't want that, it is probably a very reasonable view, but it is a vote for more torture, more genocide. It is a somber, grave choice." (Gerard)

I do not, of course, mean to imply a seamless identification between author and protagonist. In a characteristic move, McEwan has distributed some of his own often discordant convictions among various agents in the book. Catherine Deveney reports:

Henry rows with his daughter, Daisy, about the [prospective] war [in Iraq]. It was, says McEwan, the conversation he had within himself. "I was very torn by it, so she represents one bit of me and Henry represents some other bit. It was like two voices in my head."

Such dialogism constitutes one of McEwan's primary strengths as a novelist. Nevertheless, it is not Daisy's voice of protest that prevails in *Saturday*. In his review of *Free World*, Žižek argues:

Garton Ash's analysis does not allow him to see how the things he condemns (ruthless disregard for the environment, the hypocritical double standards imposed by the superpowers etc) are products of the social dynamics which sustain the role of the exporters of democracy and guardians of universal human rights.

In distancing himself from the Iraq protesters, Perowne by default joins the ranks of Žižek's "exporters" and "guardians." The novel overall performs a comparable evasion: the global threats to the Perownes' eminently civilized way of life, enacted as they are on an essentially personal stage,

become pretexts for sidestepping underlying issues of social equity and abjection.

Quoting a famous passage from *Culture and Anarchy* in which Arnold defines culture as “the study of perfection,” Widdowson comments:

These are fine values but what do they rest on, and do they involve “all parts of our society”? They rest, of course, on exploitation and hence on ascendance; and that rests on having wealth, or, putting it another way, on the *possibility* of leading a life in which the cultivation of such values is viable.

(40; emphasis in original)

Admirer of Arnold though he was, Forster built an awareness of this exploitation underpinning “fine values” into his early twentieth-century Condition of England novel. His prime mediator of such values, Margaret Schlegel, is under no illusions about the “islands” of money (72) that support her family’s way of life. His representative of the exploited underclass, Leonard Bast, disappears from the scene, but Bast’s yeoman stock has mingled with the cerebral, cosmopolitan Schlegel lineage to produce a hybrid—Helen’s child—who transgresses class boundaries yet will inherit, with *Howards End*, the finest tradition of liberal England. Not even this inkling of social expansiveness, however, is detectable in *Saturday*. Where *Howards End* in its hesitant way troubles the apparatus of English privilege, *Saturday* tacitly takes that structure as given.

In his recent book *Wars of Position*, Timothy Brennan raises objections to the widespread contemporary belief “that boundaries of all sorts have broken down, the nation-state is at its end, post-Fordism has triumphed” (37). Brennan wryly observes, “None of these points requires any proof; indeed, proof would be difficult to find, since legally and politically it is more the case that boundaries have intensified” (37). Brennan’s point is borne out even by casual observation: nationalist sentiment, often of a virulently chauvinistic type, still drives politics in a wide array of geographical contexts, promoting ethnically based separatist movements, the barring or marginalization of immigrants, and other related phenomena. Yet national boundaries are far from being the only walls to have hardened; barriers segregating social classes too have defied the logic of globalization. As *Saturday* suggests, while the elite of today may feel a sophisticated kinship that vaults over divisions of nationality, the ramparts of privilege shielding them from the resentful claims of the underclass

now need to be all the more vigilantly patrolled. Ultimately, McEwan's novel has less to do with the condition of England in general than with the vulnerable condition of the English intelligentsia.

The American social commentator Barbara Ehrenreich has noted the disappearance of the nonaffluent as a category from contemporary social consciousness:

When I watch TV over my dinner at night, I see a world in which almost everyone makes \$15 an hour or more, and I'm not just thinking of the anchor folks. The sitcoms and dramas are about fashion designers or schoolteachers or lawyers, so it's easy for a fast-food worker or nurse's aide to conclude that she is an anomaly—the only one, or almost only one, who hasn't been invited to the party. And in a sense she would be right: the poor have disappeared from the culture at large, from its political rhetoric and intellectual endeavors as well as from its daily entertainments. (117–18)

In *Saturday* the party is being held at the sumptuous home of the privileged and print-savvy Perownes. The fish stew being concocted by Henry serves as the symbolic centerpiece of the feast, to which gatecrashers from the underclass are emphatically not invited. McEwan's London may be, as Perowne wishes to believe, “a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece”; even if no longer the hub of empire, still the site of flourishing global interchange. It is, however, at risk from the Baxters stalking within it, bent on crashing the party and spoiling the elegant fun. *Howards End*, in its time, may have adumbrated its own siege mentality, but Forster showed at least some willingness to peer outside the walls and even on occasion to gingerly open a gate. Tendencies to exclusiveness still incipient in the earlier novel have come to full fruition in McEwan's recent one. The “confused alarms of trouble and flight” heard by Arnold in “Dover Beach” permeate the London of *Saturday*. What they portend is a narrowing and hardening of the liberal vision that had once energized the Condition of England novel.

Notes

1. See, for example, David Malcolm, who calls *The Child in Time* “a late twentieth-century ‘condition of England’ novel” (9).

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2. The idea of penetration, primarily in sexual terms, provokes the pivotal crisis in McEwan's most recent book, *On Chesil Beach*.

3. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* McEwan praises Blair, albeit backhandedly, as "the least bad prime minister we've had."

4. Although McEwan was surely familiar with Forster's famous study of English society, I do not wish to suggest that *Saturday* amounts to a premeditated imitation of it, in the fashion of Zadie Smith's novel of the same year, *On Beauty*. (The opening line of *On Beauty*, "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father," parodies the opening line of *Howards End*: "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister," and much of the subsequent text sustains the parody.) While there are stray correspondences of detail between *Saturday* and *Howards End*—the dominant male figure in each is named Henry, the names of the underclass characters, Bast and Baxter, have a chiming resonance, and so forth—these are most likely inadvertent.

5. Arnold's lyric seems to have assumed something resembling talismanic status for McEwan. *On Chesil Beach* is riddled with more or less overt echoes of the poem, starting with the book's title itself.

6. The novel is, of course, eerily prophetic in foreshadowing what neither Perowne nor (at the time of writing) his creator could have known about: the deadly terrorist attacks on London of 7/7/05. See McEwan's comments for *Der Spiegel* shortly after the attacks:

SPIEGEL: Your new book, "Saturday," is written in expectation of an act of terrorism. Now it has happened. What was your first thought when you heard it was a terrorist attack? McEWAN: It confirmed my book. I mean, it's not that I take any satisfaction from it, nor did I share any great insight, everybody's been waiting.

7. This formal feature has prompted some commentators to compare *Saturday* with classic modernist texts like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Some of the parallels between *Saturday* and the latter work are especially suggestive; apart from the single-day time frame, Woolf's novel too features an outsider figure, Septimus Smith, who potentially poses a moral challenge to the socially superior protagonist, in this case Clarissa Dalloway. However, while the implications of such correspondences might be worth tracing, *Mrs. Dalloway*, unlike both *Saturday* and *Howards End*, makes no overt attempt to fit into the Condition of England mode. This is not to deny that, like most of Woolf's fiction, the book yields insights into the social life of the England of its day.

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8. Canadian readers will be likely to raise their eyebrows at Garton Ash's omission of Toronto.

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