

# ANOSOGNOSIA, OR THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS: LIMITS OF VISION IN IAN McEWAN'S *SATURDAY*

Martin Ryle

No British literary novelist has recently been enjoying more favorable reviews than Ian McEwan.<sup>1</sup> Many of McEwan's novels combine eventful—sometimes violent—narratives with an explicit address to social and political topics. (This is the case in his latest work, *Solar* [2010], as it is in *Saturday*.) This has made part of their claim to serious attention, even if a purist might object that the rather melodramatic plots are not always well integrated with the serious themes. The public, historical dimension of *Saturday* was noted by reviewers: “Artistically, morally and politically, he excels;” “A detailed portrait of an age, of how we live now;” “An allegory of the post-9/11 world.”<sup>2</sup>

This novel actively solicits a political reading. The streets of the city where McEwan sets his protagonist's professional and domestic life are dominated by a political event: the very large demonstration that took place in London on 15 February 2003 against the imminent invasion of Iraq. The action occurs entirely on that day, and while it is scarcely about the impending war, or about “Islamic terrorism” (77) (the phrase is used by the protagonist, consultant neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, whose focalizing consciousness mediates everything), *Saturday* is very much about the pressure that public histories and emergencies exert upon the happiness and self-esteem of the private citizen. Moreover, Perowne's opinions and reflections have at times a strongly ideological tenor, which invites or provokes readers to respond by articulating their own views. For example, the argument he has about the war with his daughter Daisy (185–92)—even if this is somewhat banal and flat as “writing”—pushes the reader towards a directly political response.

Perowne's son Theo declares early in the novel that “the bigger you think, the crappier it looks. . . . So this is going to be my motto: think

small" (34). That naive formulation draws attention to its own instability: if one knows something big and troublesome is there, it is hard not to keep looking at it. Willed self-complacency dissolves into a contradictory discourse that at once calls up and seeks to dispel the fuller and more troubling vision. Experiencing this tension is what makes Henry Perowne a "type." "A character is typical" (wrote Lukács) "when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society";<sup>3</sup> and his anxiety about his own comfortable lot is what most makes Perowne an embodiment of the historical moment. He is an enlightened member of the English professional classes at the dawn of the twenty-first century; and *Saturday* bids to represent the political self-understanding of that globally favored class from which many of its readers, in Britain, Europe and the west generally, will have been drawn.

The novel is thus of special interest to any critic concerned with how contemporary literary fiction mirrors and addresses its audience. It engages centrally, and problematically, with the strategy of "thinking small" (the option, we might say, for limited vision); and the present essay focuses on that topic. The question we especially pursue, despite the methodological crux it confronts us with, is whether we judge *Saturday* to share, and to accept, the restricted perspectives of its protagonist. Methodologically, this risks invoking a notion of authorial intention, and asking naively whether "McEwan" is to be identified with Perowne. We hope to avoid this by looking, not for covert expressions of putative authorial opinion, but at the novel's participation in the genre of upward-mobility stories, and especially at the key role its plot plays in both dramatizing and offering to appease Perowne's anxiety about his relatively privileged position. Perowne articulates that anxiety directly in just one scene, but the novel's central narrative thread confirms that the source of its political energy lies in unease about class difference, much rather than in anything to do with Iraq.

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As evidence that the novel does not simply endorse Perowne's view of things, one can cite the long epigraph taken from Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. This suggests a perspective on state power, militarism, technological modernity, and urban disorder more complex and more critical than Perowne ever adopts. In a short piece in the London *Guardian*, McEwan, responding to a review of his subsequent novel, *On Chesil Beach*, but with reference also to criticisms that readers had made of *Saturday*, protested against any presumption that novelistic protagonists speak for their au-

thors. He did not, however, suggest that *Saturday* might be read as fundamentally critical of Perowne.<sup>4</sup>

The text itself does not obviously move any such critique. Perowne's reported thoughts, as much as his actions, dominate the novel. They are relayed through a neutral third-person narrative discourse, and one can point to no scene or juncture at which we are unequivocally prompted to take a distance from him. In this, *Saturday* contrasts with that type of first-person narrative that bids to seduce us into what we will sooner or later find to be an uncomfortable complicity: Nabokov's *Lolita*, and subsequent avatars such as John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*, and John Lanchester's recent *The Debt to Pleasure*.<sup>5</sup> *Solar*, whose opinionated and philandering protagonist commits and conceals a murder, is somewhat akin to these novels.

*Saturday* might more pertinently be compared with Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, which appeared a few months earlier and which similarly explores the lives of prosperous Londoners.<sup>6</sup> (Both novels include cameo appearances by prime ministers: Hollinghurst's protagonist dances with Margaret Thatcher, and Perowne recalls being mistakenly identified at a reception by Tony Blair.) In *The Line of Beauty*, readers are likely to identify with the central character, Nick Guest, who is in many ways attractive and thoughtful; but a series of carefully nuanced scenes impels us to recognize that Nick is refusing to acknowledge the unpleasantly reactionary implications of certain acts and remarks. This selective impercipientia is explained by his wish or need to remain on good terms with the upper-class family in whose house he is staying. These scenes have no exact analogue in *Saturday*, but one might suggest that McEwan is working in a not dissimilar vein, voicing his narration in Perowne's consistently reasonable-sounding tones, while expecting us to resist and question his views. The support Perowne expresses for the invasion of Iraq was certainly bound to evoke disagreement from many of McEwan's readers, and dissent on that point (although the novel is not in any serious sense about the war) opens up in principle a reading position that is more generally critical of Perowne.

Here, we shall focus not only on the content of Perowne's discourse but on some primary structural elements of *Saturday*. We shall suggest that certain aspects of its plot and characterization can be read as colluding with Perowne's prejudices and anxieties: this is the case above all in the central narrative line involving his lower-class adversary, Baxter. Critical readers who fret at the limits and occlusions of Perowne's perspective as this is rendered in the text may rightly fret, too, at some of the discursive strategies that have produced the text itself.

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Perowne's faith in gradualist progressivism ("The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps" [74]) is the thread linking together his reflections on society and history. It plays a key role in his worldview, serving to justify his own relative prosperity, as well as the economy and society of contemporary consumer capitalism. It is articulated as an explicit ideology in three sequences of reflection that we shall review in this essay.

Before discussing these, we must sum up and comment on the narrative centered on Baxter. Perowne and Baxter meet when their cars are involved in a minor collision. Baxter is, presumptively, a white lower-class man.<sup>7</sup> We never find out what, if anything, he does for a living (Perowne thinks he is probably a small-time drug dealer), but he is placed for the genteel reader by sociocultural markers—he smokes cigarettes, and he and his companions have just come out of a lap-dancing club—and by an initial description that highlights his hairy hands, likens his face to a "muzzle" and notes his "general simian air" (87–88): very much Mr. Hyde, vis-à-vis the cultivated doctor.<sup>8</sup> This neo-Victorian collocation of social with bodily difference<sup>9</sup> is reinforced when we find that Baxter suffers from a hereditary neurological disease, Huntingdon's chorea, whose symptoms Perowne quickly spots. The collision leads to an argument in which Perowne is threatened and struck by Baxter but escapes in his Mercedes. However, his movements are tracked; and as evening approaches, Baxter, armed with a knife, and his sidekick Nigel force their way into Perowne's family home (a large flat in expensive Fitzrovia). Here they threaten and verbally abuse his daughter Daisy, make her undress, and tell her to read aloud from the volume of poetry she has just published. Instead, she recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," which briefly pacifies Baxter.<sup>10</sup> Perowne then lures Baxter up to his study, on the pretext of showing him a (nonexistent) clinical report on new drugs that might help his illness; Nigel leaves the building in disgust; Perowne and his son Theo overpower Baxter and throw him down the stairs. He is taken to hospital, under police guard, with a serious head injury. Late in the evening, because no other consultant is readily available, Perowne himself goes into work to perform the delicate operation that will save Baxter's life.

We can read this homosocial melodrama as related metaphorically to the novel's theme of war, terrorism, and antiwar protest. Baxter represents in crudely assertive form the public world of the streets, and Perowne feels hard pressed to defend family life against the possibility of terrorist attack and to seal private space off from the irruption of public politics. This presumably is how the *Washington Post* reviewer was able to find in *Saturday* an "allegory of the post-9/11 world;" and British critic Dominic Head,

who offers no account of how Baxter is to be read in terms of social class, suggests that his pathological state is perhaps intended to call to mind that of Saddam Hussein. Head acknowledges, however, that this parallel cannot be taken very far.<sup>11</sup> It is much more obvious that the Baxter plot discloses and stages an anxious concern with the question of relative privilege, especially in terms of social class within the nation; it inscribes Perowne's general unease, in determinate form, into the basic structure of this neo-realist fiction.

Perowne will justify his comfortable prosperity not by asserting his special merits and deserts, but in the progressivist terms already mentioned. However, a crucial scene<sup>12</sup> early in the novel suggests that whatever justification he produces is likely to be self-delusive and dependent on "thinking small." Immediately before his first encounter with Baxter, a sustained sequence of reflection (73–78) opens with him walking to the secure mews garage where he keeps his car. Nearing the mews, outside a Paris-style *traiteur*, he passes a street cleaner,

a pink-faced man of about his own age . . . with a handcart, sweeping the gutter for the council. . . . His vigour and thoroughness are uncomfortable to watch, a quiet indictment on a Saturday morning. . . . [F]or a vertiginous moment Henry feels bound to the other man, as though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into each other's life. (73–74)

The sweeper offers no threat, indeed makes no sign; but "Perowne looks away," and is moved to troubled thought. It must have been "restful," he reflects, to have been "prosperous" in an earlier age, when people believed that "an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life." The privileged were not even aware, in those days, of how such beliefs "served [their] own prosperity;" they suffered, or benefited, from "a form of anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one's own condition" (74).

Here reflection is at its most open and self-exposed. However uncritically *Saturday* may seem to present its protagonist, here he is forced to confront questions that a wholly complacent fiction would leave buried. Perowne concedes that there can be no metaphysical warrant for his favored "station," and that any case he makes to justify it risks being merely a selfish special plea.

From that exposure, the way back to a more comfortable accommodation, to thinking small again, is won for Perowne by the invocation of “progress.” This is a matter of the character’s arguments (not in dialogue, but in internal monologues presented in free indirect mode), which we shall shortly criticize, but which we have no warrant to associate with a putative authorial view. However, large structural elements of the novel also bid to allay the unease roused by the encounter. The Baxter plot is about to commence, and Baxter’s unreasonable aggression will counterbalance and erase the image of the cleaner’s stoical subaltern labor. Here lower-class resentment expresses itself and is shown as violently excessive and as overdetermined by pathology (sufferers from Huntingdon’s chorea display “poor self-control, emotional lability, explosive temper” [91]). The narrative’s conclusion will tend to justify professional-class privilege by showing Perowne as the therapeutic expert, overcoming personal rancor to succor the enemy he has wounded. Victim of (justifiable?) class resentment, and perpetrator of (justifiable?) near-homicide, he eventually becomes a savior.

More generally, and conformably to Perowne’s faith in gradual improvement, *Saturday* shows Britain as a society where social advance is the due reward of talent. Perowne’s thoughts and memories piece together for us the backstory of his education and career, which has taken him from the obscure London suburb of Perivale to fashionable Fitzrovia, and which stands as an object lesson on the theme of progress (working-class Robbie’s medical aspirations in McEwan’s *Atonement* draw on an earlier phase of the same social and cultural history): generically, this is an upward-mobility story, within the historical ambit of post-1945 British welfare capitalism. The novel is at pains to show the recent extension of opportunity beyond the white men who were the main beneficiaries of widening educational and career opportunities in the decades immediately after World War II. Since Perowne’s youth, the barriers that obstructed women and black people have been removed, and his colleagues in the operating room include Gita Syal, whose name is all we need to know, and Rodney Browne, about whom the narrator must add the phrase “from Guyana” (7). One of the two “West Indian” security guards who greet Perowne when he goes into work is “thinking of training as a paramedic” (244f.). A black girl on whom he has operated dreams of becoming a neurosurgeon herself (260).

It may strike the reader that these new and welcome tales of social advancement cannot dispel the underlying contradiction in the relation between “upward mobility” and “the common good” (in the terms of Bruce Robbins’s recent study of the genre):<sup>13</sup> stories of individual self-distinction

cannot stand as metonyms for collective betterment. Generically, conservative and radical implications coexist uneasily in the upward-mobility tale, since individual success stories may be taken as implying that those (like the street cleaner) who fail to advance have themselves to blame. Neither protagonist nor narrator reflects on these complexities in *Saturday*, which in general is less questioning than such century-old English novels of social mobility as *Jude the Obscure* or *The Nether World*, where the distinction offered to or won by lower-class protagonists is problematic because the background of undistinguished lower-class life is kept quite prominently in view.<sup>14</sup>

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The characterization of Baxter; the initiation of the narrative centered on him just at the point where Perowne's mental grappling with "anosognosia" concludes; the social-mobility narrative that provides a generic template—these are structural dispositions of *Saturday*, which seek to overdetermine our response to the rational argument of its protagonist. Let us now turn to these reasonings.

The first sequence traces Perowne's thoughts as he seeks to dispel the unease left by his "uncomfortable" encounter with the street cleaner. Having acknowledged that no "supernatural force" creates or validates hierarchies of wealth and status, he moves quickly to sum up, and dismiss, the revolutionary projects that have sought to institute an equal society. Egalitarian ideologies may have been progressive as a challenge to feudal hierarchy, but when they contested bourgeois capitalism the outcome was disastrous. The socialist tradition (Perowne implies) finds its essential expression in the inauguration of murderous tyrannies, which he conflates rhetorically with all the other despotisms of the twentieth century:

After the ruinous experiments of the lately deceased century, after so much vile behaviour, so many deaths, a queasy agnosticism has settled around these matters of justice and redistributed wealth. No more big ideas. The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps. (74)

The passage from *Herzog*, which was published in 1964 (the date is given in the epigraph), speaks, perhaps regretfully, of "the late failure of radical hopes;" here, Perowne hails their demise and welcomes the tentative progressivism that has replaced them. A little later, driving towards

Tottenham Court Road, he will register the signs of slow, secular improvement. On Cleveland Road, “fair embodiment of an inner-city byway—diverse, self-confident, obscure,” ethnic restaurants and small shops have replaced sweatshops and brothels (76); in the whole city, life “has steadily improved over the centuries for most people” (77). Mentally rebutting the critical view of “our consumerist and technological civilisation” taken by Daisy’s university teachers, he quotes the humanist scientist Peter Medawar: “To deride the hopes of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind.”<sup>15</sup> Yes, thinks Perowne, smallpox has been eradicated, democracy is spreading, and “if the present dispensation is wiped out now, the future will look back on us as gods” (77). Such “hopes of progress” as Perowne will endorse are vested in and guaranteed by the already admirable “present dispensation.”

This large argument has its small context in Perowne’s walk to the garage: one reason for preferring improvement “by tiny steps” to “big ideas” about the redistribution of wealth is that it will leave him in untroubled possession of his expensive car. Now, rather than returning to the question of anosognosia, of how these beliefs may “serve his own prosperity,” Perowne lets his critical self-scrutiny falter and lapse. His attention shifts, bidding to take ours with it, to the sensuous and proprietary pleasures of Mercedes owning. The fetishized commodity (“the long nose and shining eyes at the stable door, chafing to be free. A silver Mercedes S500 with cream upholstery . . .”) effaces awareness of the social relations in which it is implicated. It moves into the foreground, “picked out in soft light” against the remembered moors and sky of a fishing trip to Scotland: Perowne himself calls this image “the realisation of an ad man’s vision” (75). At this point, the specter of the sweeper has melted away. (He will reappear towards the novel’s end, in a single sentence [244], seen in passing as Perowne makes his way to the hospital to save Baxter’s life.) Perowne will have been driving his Mercedes for only a few minutes when Baxter collides with him.

The sequence is dense and sustained. Readers will need to refer to it themselves to assess fully both the ideas that Perowne develops and the question of whether we are invited and assumed to fall in with his entire line of thought rather than to find him self-convicted of the complacency he apparently imagines himself to have avoided.

Two subsequent passages take up, much more briefly, the themes presented here. Driving back from his weekly squash game and parking to buy fish for the evening’s meal, Perowne is aware of the nearby demonstration (the midday radio news has reported a crowd of at least 250,000) but chooses to celebrate the thriving small world of Marylebone High



Street. Like the restaurants in Clarendon Street, the shops here—"whole emporia dedicated to cheeses, ribbons, Shaker furniture"—are emblems of prosperity and pleasure. They represent the popular consumerism reviled by Daisy's teachers but regarded by Perowne as an essential antidote to threatening fundamentalist ideologies: "It isn't rationalism that will overcome the religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails. . . . Rather shop than pray" (126).

Later, Perowne drives to Perivale, visiting his mother who lives there in a care home. (His wife Rosalind has also driven to work, in a city whose public transport is widely used: nobody in the book is seen boarding a bus or train, or riding a bicycle.) He finds the main route out of town, "the reviled Westway," briefly clear of traffic: "It's one of those moments when to be a car owner in a city, the owner of this car, is sweet. The seven-speed automatic shifts smoothly up" (154). "Reviled" indeed, the Westway is notorious for its destructive impact on the neighborhoods it transects. British cultural critic Julian Stallabrass cites it as emblematic:

[E]veryone can point to areas like the Westway in London, where a massive motorway raised on concrete slabs blights a broad swathe of the city and each day brings a tide of cars to a halt at the urban bottleneck which marks its conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

Returning, Perowne is duly caught in a long tailback, as the afternoon darkens toward evening. Given what automobiles contribute to carbon emissions, and so to the "climate change" earlier listed among the "crises" facing the world (77), this scene might be thought to epitomize what is least sustainable, as well as least pleasurable, in contemporary metropolitan life. Yet Perowne, smelling "the abrasive tang of icy fumes," finds an affirmation of progress in

this moment in the last decades of the petroleum age, when a nineteenth-century device is brought to final perfection in the early years of the twenty-first. . . . Ordinary people! Rivers of light! He wants to make himself see it as Newton might, or his contemporaries, Boyle, Hooke, Wren, Willis. . . . Surely, they would be awed. Mentally, he shows it off to them: this is what we've done, this is commonplace in our time. (168)

Is *anosognosia*, the lack of awareness of one's condition, the inability to see the self-serving aspect of one's beliefs, still a framing concept for how

we should read this affirmation? In terms of the novel's rhetorical strategy, is this a passage to be read against its own grain, as an exposure of Perowne's limited vision? Nothing in the text prompts us to draw connections between the hedonism of shopping and driving and the threat of climate change. However, some readers will believe that growing carbon emissions have been an integral, though seldom acknowledged, part of what contemporary metropolitan consumption "entails."<sup>17</sup> This destabilizes the progressivist assumptions at the heart of Perowne's worldview: if we are moving, even by "tiny steps," into a crisis of sustainability, then the direction of travel is in question, as is the assumption that those in the rear will one day arrive where those in the van are now.

It may be objected that this kind of reading exceeds the novel's frontiers. That large question will be considered in the concluding section.

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First, let us take a bearing on McEwan's figuring of progress by contrasting it to what we find in two other novels: *Jude the Obscure*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, published in the same year as *Saturday*.<sup>18</sup> These are not arbitrary comparisons. We have already noted that *Saturday* and *Jude* are both stories of upward social mobility. This is also the terrain of Ishiguro's novel, which is typical of the author in its generic originality. It may seem to prefigure a twenty-first-century dystopia, but its retrospective narration is explicitly dated and placed at the outset: "England, late 1990s." This is not a futuristic but a backward-looking fable, which offers an arresting dialectical assessment of the social-democratic culture that has formed Perowne.

The notion of progress despairingly invoked by Sue Bridehead, in *Jude*, vests its criticism of the status quo in its hopes of a better world to come: "When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say?"<sup>19</sup> If Sue's aspirations for freer and happier kinds of sexual love seem doomed, if her radical hopes appear to fail, they may yet be realized in a future that will deplore, retrospectively, the society in which she and Thomas Hardy's original readers are living. This contrasts sharply with Perowne's conviction that "the future will look back on us as gods," and that seeing a motorway tailback in 2003 would "awe" the scientists of the Enlightenment. Here, the present appears as the apex of historical achievement. To celebrate the present in these terms is actually to subvert "hopes of progress." A future that looks back in that way will presumably

be a worse future. As much is implied in Perowne's mental reference to possible disaster: "*if the present dispensation is wiped out now*, the future will look back on us as gods." He does not seem aware of this, however; and the passage offers no reflection on what is glimpsed here, quite at odds with Medawar's scientific-humanist "hopes"—namely, the prospect of catastrophe followed by secular regression, already immanent in the "present dispensation."

Ishiguro, too, meditates on progress, in relation to his novel's central theme of social role and self-realization. *Never Let Me Go* represents social mobility from the "wrong" side, confronting us with the unremarkable language and self-understanding of a narrator who works, like Perowne, as a carer in a medical setting: "My name is Kathy H. . . . I do know for a fact that they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. . . . [I]t means a lot to me, being able to do my work well."<sup>20</sup> Ishiguro breaks with the novelistic norm (followed in *Saturday*) by allocating the position of protagonist to one who has neither sought nor achieved distinction. Kathy is a nurse or care assistant, and like her peers she plays her self-effacing role without protest, certain that "they," those whom she is pleased to please, have the right as well as the power to demand this of her.

This is one primary meaning of Ishiguro's narrative metaphor of cloning. Kathy and her former fellow pupils at school (we gradually infer) are all clones, organ donors who will in due course die to preserve others—individuals, then, whose social role, or fate, will deprive them of their identity. But the novel is dialectical. It does not only expose the sacrificial structure of the society it depicts. It also reflects on the equivocal progress we might see in the liberal education that the clones enjoyed in their youth, when they were carefully and even lovingly looked after by public authorities: Hailsham, the school Kathy attended, is recalled in pleasant memories all through her later life. Treating everyone as an equal member of a collectivity, as "they" did at Hailsham, meant, for example, assuming every pupil had a capacity for artistic self-expression that should be fostered. But whereas Perowne asserts that we still live in the progressive era (albeit in the phase of "tiny steps"), *Never Let Me Go* suggests otherwise. Schools like Hailsham have been closed down. A former teacher, Miss Emily, tells Kathy, "You were better off than many who came before you. And who knows what those who come after you will have to face."<sup>21</sup> This implies that, for the likes of Kathy, things have grown worse since the 1970s, in which the school scenes are set: a British reader will have no doubt that Miss Emily's speech refers to the adoption by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, elected in 1979, of the neoliberal economic policies that have been in the ascendancy since then. However, the pre-

Thatcher social-democratic phase was paradoxical, as well as progressive: why offer educational opportunity to everyone in a society where many people will end up as menials, sacrificing themselves for those who are more privileged? Imagined from Kathy's perspective, the history of post-war Britain tells of thwarted potential, of the faltering in recent decades of an always contradictory narrative of progress, and (lately) not of improvement but of retrogression.

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The reading of *Saturday* offered here depends on critical work at the text/context boundary. One aim of our comparisons has been to suggest how other writers have engaged with the social and historical material that McEwan represents (contemporary Britain, but also the British long twentieth century); to speak in such terms is to commit oneself to a view of the novel-text which sees its autonomy as an aesthetic object as qualified by its referential dependence on the social milieu. Although our focus has been on textual detail, thinking about the social histories and anxieties represented in *Saturday* is essential to the process by which we have analyzed, and supplemented, its representations. *Saturday* nowhere reflects, as we have done, on the individual social mobility story's limitations as a register of collective histories. Barring the single reference to climate change, contemporary environmental sensibility is nowhere represented—not even, perhaps surprisingly, in Theo or Daisy. The link between the street sweeper and Baxter is not recognized by Perowne or acknowledged in the narration, except indeed in the revealing fact of narrative sequence itself (reviewers have not recognized it either).<sup>22</sup> To see the Baxter plot as a contrivance pandering to Perowne's need not to feel guilty, to see Baxter as a pathologized embodiment of feared lower-class masculinity and not as a sick man whom the doctor must fend off but will eventually save—this is to read against the grain of McEwan's realism by insisting that representation speaks of its own procedures in the same breath as it claims to show the world; and it is to relate Baxter's characterization to extratextual social facts and discourses (the lack of social advancement of millions of British people, and media and governmental accounts of this as a problem of individual pathology and/or criminal propensities). Context helps make prominent what the text barely acknowledges that it knows: its anosognosia, its ideology, its political unconscious.

Such hermeneutic procedures and the questions they involve have of course been practiced and discussed especially in criticism of a broadly

Marxist inspiration (see, for example, Eagleton, Jameson, LaCapra, Lukács, Macherey).<sup>23</sup> This has often dealt with novels written in the past, but its underlying impulse tends especially to come into play when we read the contemporary: that impulse being to ask, in Dominick LaCapra's formulation, "How does a text relate in symptomatic, critical and possibly transformative ways to its pertinent contexts of reading and writing?"<sup>24</sup> Critical concern with "context" mirrors the procedures of realism inasmuch as broadly realist novels, including most of McEwan's, address their readers not just as connoisseurs of art but as members of a social-political community. In his three most recent novels, especially, McEwan has incorporated by way of dialogue and internal monologue some strongly and directly expressed ideological views; this, we have suggested, will tend to provoke forms of reading that engage directly with political values and ideas. Generically, *Saturday* and *Solar* have less in common with postmodernist metafiction or with the autonomous and well-bounded artwork that has been seen as proper to modernism<sup>25</sup> than with the forceful plots and directly ideological inscription that we find in a late realist writer such as George Gissing.

Thus, while the readerly resistance that finds a quarrel with the figure imagined as "the author" may be naive, its underlying mode of engagement with *Saturday* is apt. Realism appropriates extratextual facts and discourses as its own significant material; it is only by an appeal to readers' engagement with that extratextual world that McEwan's novel can mobilize what "Iraq" signifies, who and what Tony Blair is, what the connotations are of "whole emporia dedicated to cheeses, ribbons, Shaker furniture," or what the discourse of "climate change" refers to. Since any such appeal is a matter of possible disagreements as well as common understandings, such a novelistic text cannot secure the terms in which it will be read and criticized.

Equally, of course, literary objects, including realist texts, exist only through a foundational text/context separation. Gissing construed this antinomy as the unwelcome but ineluctable dependence of fictional art on "the social question." In *The Unclassed*, novelist Osmond Waymark reflects on the fate of "pure art" in "an age in which the social question is predominant."<sup>26</sup> The novel-text must delimit itself vis-à-vis its context (this may be framed as the novel's impossible bid to purify itself of what is not "art"); but it must invoke "social questions" that threaten to predominate: these, then, are somehow to be held at its border.<sup>27</sup>

*Saturday* polices its borders, but does so ambiguously. We have noted two figures that might be taken as equivocal injunctions, drawing attention to boundaries even while instructing us to not to breach them. Theo's expressed preference for thinking small hints at the novel's fascinated

aversion to large horizons and its need to draw back from these. The trope of anosognosia is extraordinarily suggestive, coming at a crucial juncture: it seems to acknowledge, fleetingly, the formative repression that preserves the protagonist's, and arguably the text's, coherence as subjects of their kind of knowledge precisely by refusing to know more. In both cases, the critical reader who presses through the limits that the injunction offers to set is surely the one who respects the spirit of its ambiguity.

*Martin Ryle is Reader in English at the University of Sussex. His books include To Relish the Sublime (jointly with Kate Soper; Verso, 2002) and George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed (coedited with Jenny Bourne Taylor; Ashgate, 2005). Recent articles include discussions of Michel Houellebecq, Ali Smith, and John McGahern.*

## NOTES

1. Novels by Ian McEwan referred to here are *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), *Saturday* (2005; repr., London: Vintage, 2006), hereafter cited in the text; *On Chesil Beach* (2007; repr., London: Vintage, 2008); and *Solar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010). Links to a range of reviewers' responses to *Saturday* can be found at [www.complete-review.com/reviews/mcewani/saturday.htm](http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/mcewani/saturday.htm). There were dissenting voices, including John Banville's acerbic review of *A Day in the Life*, *New York Review of Books*, 26 May 2005; in general, reviews in the United States were a little cooler than those in Britain. However, the publishers were able to garnish the cover and endpapers of the paperback edition with an extraordinary chorus of praise.

Lynn Wells, "The Ethical Otherworld: Ian McEwan's Fiction" (in *British Fiction Today*, ed. Philip Tew and Rod Mengham [London: Continuum, 2006], 117–27), includes a short commentary on *Saturday*: Wells suggests that McEwan's habitual concern with "the need for compassionate interaction among people" (127) is less clearly shown here than in some earlier work. Mark Currie has a substantial discussion of the novel's handling of time in *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 125–32. Recent volumes discussing McEwan's oeuvre up until the dates of their publication include David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide*, ed. Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds, Vintage Living Texts series (London: Vintage, 2002); and Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan*, Contemporary British Novelists series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Head devotes a chapter to *Saturday*. None of these discussions approach the novel along the lines taken in the present essay.

2. These phrases, in reviews excerpted in the front endpapers of the paperback edition, are from (respectively) the *Times* (London), the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Washington Post*.
3. Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 122.
4. Ian McEwan, "Novels are not all about you, Natasha," reply to Natasha Walter's review of *On Chesil Beach*, *Guardian*, 3 April 2007, [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/apr/07/bookscomment.books](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/apr/07/bookscomment.books).
5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955; repr., New York: Vintage, 1959); John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (1989; repr., London: Minerva Press, 1990); and John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure: A Novel* (London: Picador, 1996).

6. Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (2004; repr., London: Picador, 2005).
7. Lynn Wells argues that we might and perhaps should read Baxter as black, although nothing in the text denotes his "race" ("Ethical Otherworld," 126). However, the fact that Perowne as narrator in many places identifies nonwhite others as such (as Wells notes), but never identifies anyone explicitly as "white" (as she does not note), is strong grounds for assuming Baxter's whiteness. It may be relevant that Wells is based in Canada; for English readers, Baxter's look and speech encode no "racial" signs, but markers of class difference are much to the fore.
8. Why "Baxter"? A pertinent intertext, given its dramatization of class and masculinity, is perhaps the episode towards the end of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) in which Paul Morel's initiation into adult sexuality involves rivalry with the estranged husband of his lover Clara Dawes: the husband is called Baxter, and he and Paul fight hand to hand.
9. See William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
10. The scene is a surprising empirical confirmation of the supposedly Arnoldian notion that literature may civilize the lower orders: an understanding of Arnold based on an oversimple reading of his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).
11. Head, *Ian McEwan*, 182.
12. The scene is barely discussed in the reviews and criticism I have read. Head mentions the encounter with the street sweeper, but accords the theme of Perowne's "guilt" no more than a footnoted list of relevant page references (*Ian McEwan*, 194).
13. Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
14. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Penguin, 1987; originally published 1896); and George Gissing, *The Nether World* (London: Everyman, 1973; originally published 1889). For extended discussion of the genre, see Robbins, *Upward Mobility*, and Patricia Alden, *Social Mobility in the English Bildungsroman: Gissing, Hardy, Bennett, and Lawrence* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986).
15. Perowne cites no source; the quotation is presumably from Peter Medawar's *The Hope of Progress* (London: Methuen, 1972).
16. Julian Stallabrass, *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 117.
17. See *The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently*, ed. Kate Soper, Martin Ryle, and Lyn Thomas (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and "The Folly of Growth: How to Stop the Economy Killing the Planet," special section, *New Scientist* 200, no. 2678 (18 October 2008).
18. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber, 2005).
19. Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 276 (book 4, chap. 2). For a full discussion of Sue's question and an illuminating commentary on some larger implications, see Kate Soper, "Heterosexual Utopianism," *Radical Philosophy*, 69 (January/February 1995): 5–15.
20. Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 3 (the opening page of the narrative).
21. *Ibid.*, 243.
22. See note 12: this applies to all the dozen or so reviews that I have seen.
23. Among other works by the authors named, see Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London:

- Methuen, 1983); Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963); Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963); and Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Routledge Classics series (London: Routledge, 1978).
24. LaCapra, *History*, 4; and cf. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*: “Is the text a free-floating object in its own right, or does it ‘reflect’ some context or ground, and in that case does it simply replicate the latter ideologically, or does it possess some autonomous force in which it could also be seen as negating that context?” (38).
  25. Andreas Huyssen notes among the characteristics of the ideal-type modernist text that it is “autonomous and totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life” (“Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski, Theories of Contemporary Culture series [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], 188–207, quotation on 197).
  26. George Gissing, *The Unclassed* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1911; originally published 1884), 212.
  27. This bears some analogies with Theodor Adorno’s argument that although “art exists within reality . . . and is . . . inherently mediated with reality in many ways . . . nevertheless, as art, by its very concept it stands in an antithetical relationship to the status quo” (*Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, trans. S. Weber Nicholson [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 224).



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