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“Plastic Fork in Hand”:
Reading as a Tool of Ethical Repair in
Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

Teresa Winterhalter

The opening scene of Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* is, in many ways, a lesson in reading. Waking in the early hours before dawn, the novel’s protagonist, Henry Perowne—an urbane positivist and highly successful neurosurgeon by day—is drawn out of bed toward his bedroom window. Led by a vague compulsion he claims to have never before known, he awakens to a night-time world where he is susceptible to mysterious forces. As he rises, he finds himself “already in motion,” “almost summoned” by an unaccountable call. Moving as if “in a dream,” he feels compelled to look out through the window’s large frame—a structure that literally and metaphorically places margins around as much of the world as is visible to him in the pre-dawn light—where he pauses. From this vantage point, we are drawn into Henry’s thoughts as McEwan blends traditional third-person narration with long passages of free indirect discourse that focalize the scene before us through Henry’s consciousness. Thus while we meet him first as a man whose consciousness is in tow—a man mesmerized before an unfolding scene—in the dim uncertainties of his private musings, it also becomes clear that he is a man of limited scope—a man capable of only glimpsing understandings beyond the frameworks of his everyday world. As Henry struggles to locate an originating context for the penciled

outlines before him, he mirrors our own processes of distilling meaning from texts both strange and familiar as we, too, are pulled into McEwan's pages.

It is significant, therefore, that our invitation into Henry's governing consciousness comes through his reflections before the glass. Here, rather than begin his narration by describing the events unfolding outside his window, he takes several pages to introduce himself. As he does so, McEwan suggests that Henry's window is initially a mirror through which he filters his perceptions. Face-to-face with his own reflection, he describes himself primarily through the years of successful surgeries that have assured him of the right-mindedness of reaching conclusions by locating familiar points of reference. His personal investment in this accounting, however, soon bespeaks the fissures in its narrative surface as well. For as Henry foregrounds his successes, he simultaneously reveals his need to come to terms with his failure to read the accumulating works of literature his poet-daughter, Daisy, sends him. As if he senses that his interior narrative will remain a coherent tale of professional accomplishment only if these unread titles do not impugn his powers of insight and diagnosis, he tells us that the one by Conrad, "however morally fraught, doesn't interest him much" (5). Claiming that the novels piling up on his nightstand leverage ambiguity and open-endedness in a manner that is "antithetical to his training," he vindicates himself for "leaving her recommendations half-finished." Rather than examine his limited capacity to comprehend these texts, he associates the ability to project into the lives of literary characters with passivity and allows himself to reach the tidy conclusion that it would be a waste of his time to spend his weekends lying down as "a spectator of other lives." It does not interest him "to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained" (64-65).

From the first, then, intricate loops of self-rationalization lace the surface of Henry's narrative, and as we note these purposive discursive manipulations, we become better positioned to recognize how McEwan's subtle use of the third-person foregrounds the thematic implications of Henry's mode of personal disclosure. To counter his argument about wasting time, we are challenged, it seems, to gain purchase on a crucial distinction McEwan implies between merely being a spectator of and attentively reading the lives of others. For as we look through the image of himself Henry sees in the glass (away from the interior spaces that make

him most comfortable), his transparent rhetorical maneuvering makes us mindful of how carefully he guards the outlines of his life. Given his psychological investment in maintaining the consistent surface of this narrative, we also begin to note that the inner surveillance required to protect the integrity of such an account exacts its own price.

The stakes in this recognition are, no doubt, high. For without the subtle nuances of McEwan's use of free indirect discourse, we may assume that the stories Henry tells himself about the correctness of his perceptions are actually those the novel endorses. Indeed, this is precisely the move numerous critics who take issue with what they see as the novel's tacitly conservative messages make. Keith Gessen, for example, claims that because the novel occurs entirely from "inside Perowne's head, *Saturday*, like all McEwan's novels, is a product of liberal guilt," which changes nothing in the world. Similarly, John Banville calls *Saturday* "a dismayingly bad book" largely because he assumes that McEwan shares the thoughts of his protagonist (9). And Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, in her keenly argued study of this novel's "postcolonial melancholy," goes so far as to cast what she sees as the novel's inveterate conservatism in sweeping historical terms. While Wallace acknowledges the dangers of assuming that a character mirrors an author, she nevertheless holds that "*Saturday* is complicated by the striking absence of any specific clues that the author does not endorse Henry's perspective" (466). This absence of specificity, in fact, leads her to conclude that, overall, the novel "resists engagement" in the real issues of our contemporary global crisis. She goes on to connect this resistance to what she characterizes as Great Britain's response to its inherited weight of having "perpetrated centuries of colonial injustice" (467), and, quite compellingly, she outlines the tug of conservative politics in a rapidly changing and historically scarred multicultural world.

But, to my mind, premising such readings of *Saturday*'s overarching political tug on McEwan's tacit approval of Henry's provincialism is not fully convincing. Granted, McEwan renders the minute details of Henry's daily life quite tenderly, making it hard not to intuit that he *does* find Henry quite likable. Yet because McEwan's narrative technique also compels us simultaneously to align with *and* observe Henry's private understandings, he not only solicits our intimacy, he also invites questions about what it is that draws us to his hero. For if Henry seems likable, perhaps we find him so because his need to explain himself to himself seems some-

how familiar, not because we approve his explanations themselves. And if we resonate to him as he constructs an apologia out of his psychological defenses, perhaps we do so because his self-disclosures reveal a man with a deep need to account for the person he has become. I think it is short-sighted, therefore, not to recognize that Henry's pedestrian appeal emerges out of a problematic psychological process of self-narrativizing that reaches beyond evidential markers of "McEwan's own cultural denial and repression" (Wallace 468).

In giving us this insight into the psychological needs that undergird Henry's self-serving narratives, in fact, McEwan actually positions Henry's interior rhetorical strategies to indicate those places where his vision is in urgent need of repair. That ineluctable sense of liking Henry—even as he seems oblivious to/unwilling to engage in what Wallace calls the "destabilized politics" of contemporary London—becomes precisely the point. For the novel's inside look at Henry as he cuts himself off from "complexity and history" (Wallace 466) *is* precisely the perspective McEwan uses to solicit his readers' identifications with Henry's self-narrativizing strategies. It does not take a grand stretch of the imagination to assume that most of McEwan's readers will, like Henry, be living lives of bourgeois comfort. Yet when we warm to his depictions of abiding inside his aging body or share his annoyance at the minor disturbances of quotidian family life, we do not so much embrace Henry's small-world inclinations, as engage with the psychological processes he relies upon to live out his daily trials. In this sense, if Henry stands as McEwan's hero, it is not because he applauds his "philistinism"; it is rather because he demonstrates the self-justifying practices so many of us employ to align the stories we tell ourselves about our lives with the people we have become. Henry then, does not tacitly reflect back a world view McEwan has not shed; rather he actively performs McEwan's awareness of the lines of bourgeois denial that operate within his hero's psyche. As we are asked to note how Henry narrates his life, we see that if our own reading is to be more than "passive absorption," we must not only detect the habits of mind that hobble his imagination, we must also recognize that he may be more like us than we care to admit.

Indeed, throughout *Saturday*, there are numerous such challenges to read with attentiveness, which are often located in the disjunctive tensions between the worlds of texts and the predispositions of their readers. It is at

these points where McEwan lays bare the mindsets that hinder our attempts to read one another that he locates the hinge that requires repair if Henry is—and by extension his readers are—to apprehend the dynamics of ethical interaction among people. Like Henry, we are challenged to recognize that our habits of mind can delimit the values we find in the texts we read. Moreover, given that McEwan sets the date for his novel on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and given the communication failures of the post-9/11 world that provide its historical undercarriage, he also compels us to engage with the political and global implications of this challenge. Keeping the novel's setting in mind, we are asked to discern how Henry's efforts to read may model the ideological retooling we need to undergo if we are to redirect the escalating hostilities among nations.

For Henry has placed his belief in the power of progressive, rationalistic, and scientific knowledge to solve the key mysteries of contemporary existence. Throughout the novel, he appears a typical, educated, middle-aged, middle class man whose investments in the political concerns of the day are skeptical and detached. Holding forth on the imminent invasion of Iraq in the morning kitchen scene with his son, Theo, for example, Henry shares his views in a relatively private and unguarded way. But as he invokes an awkward utilitarian calculus to justify his hope that everyone might "end up happy for ever" by "slaughtering a million or two now," we learn less about his political views than we do about his need to retreat to a place that does not pressure him to change his life. He ends their conversation with: "I don't know what I think. . . . It's too late to think. Let's wait for the news" (34). Absolving himself of any need to grapple further with the unknown, he closes the argument by implying that the world's problems are too overwhelming to be solved. Thus, placing Henry's attempts to explain away his imaginative impotence against the backdrop of nations who remain obscure to one another through self-congratulatory mindsets, McEwan suggests that reading the texts of cultural difference may finally require radically augmented powers of empathy, if we are to see beyond the margins of personal absolusions or self-righteous prejudices. As the history that provides the chassis for the story makes clear, such mindsets have naturalized fictions of national superiority and justified policies of military aggression, leaving us blind to our own complicities and misreadings. All-too-often, it seems, we share Henry's summation that ours "is not a visionary age" (74).

Throughout much of the novel, in fact, Henry seems well practiced in such rhetorical dodges. He reads the world through a narrow lens, reducing the very premise of novel writing to an enterprise where “a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages—bottled like homemade chutney” (5) and denigrating literary “musing” as belonging to the realm of “exploratory fantasizing” and “anecdote” (21). It seems to be a matter of pride that when he again picks up “the one” by Henry James—an author with whom he shares a name and who irks him to thought even as he eludes him—that he, “a man of forty-eight . . . who can be on his feet for seven hours for a difficult procedure, who has his name down for the London marathon” falls away “exhausted” by what he sees as an exercise in futility (58). Even this “tale of his daughter’s namesake baffle[s] him,” and he sees no real need to go the distance in her shoes. He cannot fathom what he is “to conclude or feel about Daisy Miller’s predictable decline: That the world is unkind?” For Henry, “It’s not enough” (58). Predictably now, he uses his pragmatism as a prophylactic against any sense of failure; he comforts himself that he is “a man who attempts to ease miseries of failing minds by repairing brains,” and he knows “for a fact” that the old philosophical problem of what constitutes the mind is resolved: it is “the brain, mere matter,” not an elusive soul “worthy of awe” (66).

As his thoughts trowel deftly across this narrative surface, however, we also see Henry’s inner psychological state increase in complexity and disquiet. For even as he dismisses these novels as flights of fancy, he seems to be a man not wholly convinced of his own argument. Although he claims that Daisy Miller disappears in “a cloud of words,” he does not fully give up on his struggle to apprehend “the wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity” his daughter reports from her reading (59). And this is not an impasse he runs into only once. Indeed, he shows us his compulsion to try to see what she sees. At her behest, he has read *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, waiting for their mysteries to unfold, but still he cannot accept “this notion of hers that people can’t ‘live’ without stories,” citing himself as living proof (67). Yet these books maintain their psychic weight in his thoughts throughout the novel, suggesting that on his narrative course toward equanimity they are more than mere inconveniences. They are, rather, markers of the buried depth of his inner unrest. For what else does his abiding suspicion that there might be something eluding him show us than how constricted he is by his commitment to scientific rea-

soning? Although he applauds himself for his rationalism, he also seems unable to shake free of the idea that there might be more to reading than he currently has figured out; there may be insights out there in Daisy's clouds that are beyond his ken.

Henry's Saturday thus becomes his day of reckoning, for ultimately on this day he can no longer rely upon his habit of evading texts that do not fold into, or disappear beneath, his established explanatory systems. He is in fact, pushed through these resources to extreme trauma, as Baxter—a street thug who he accurately diagnoses as suffering from the neurodegenerative disease of Huntington's Chorea, but with whom he has had a tense encounter because of a fender-bender *en route* to his weekly squash match—enters his home, holds his wife at knife point, and humiliates and torments his daughter. It is here, where his scientific rationalism makes him appear obtuse in his responses to Baxter, that he confronts his tenuous hold on his known and cherished world. Here he must finally draw upon unrehearsed strategies of reading and confront the dangers and desires in the faces and pages he has not already assimilated through his habits of mind.

To reach this point, however, Henry literally *and* metaphorically runs into numerous situations where he must revise what he thinks to be true. As we trace these ungovernable “accidents,” McEwan leads us to see that, in its most engaged form, Henry's reading does not culminate in an unyielding conclusion that collapses the tensions between texts and his responses to them. At its most productive, rather, it offers an alternative model for interaction that is not constrained by placing a premium on the rigidity of accurate diagnosis alone. It requires, instead, a dynamic in which the give and take between a text and reader does not lock them in a battle to control meaning. Here the text and its reader enter a reciprocal negotiation of understanding—a dynamic that, if expanded to encompass its larger interpersonal and cultural manifestations, might allow Henry to avoid the dangers of violence, domination, and irrationality that lurk in the world around him. Thus, the parallel between Henry's *en medias res* reckoning and our encounter with his awakening consciousness establishes the governing reciprocity between texts and readers that is central to understanding McEwan's thematic imperative for heightened attentiveness and empathic responsiveness.

I want to elucidate further the centrality of this dynamic of reading by

connecting it to the arguments put forth by Paul Armstrong in *Play and the Politics of Reading*. In his keen analysis of the relationship between reading and ethical exchanges among groups in power, Armstrong argues that reading, if it is to be socially and politically productive, must be “non-coercive and non-objectifying.” He further maintains that through such “playful reading,” it should be possible to approach a world outside our own both sympathetically and critically. This sort of reading, which he argues is the ethical potential embedded in the destabilizing (read: postmodern) hermeneutic strategies of thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty, is achieved through a reciprocally enhanced meeting of subjectivities—where the consciousness appearing on the page and the one absorbing the book progress through a playful openness to multiplicity and contingency. According to Armstrong, “the rare gift of reading would thus seem to be its staging of a reciprocal exchange between subjectivities at the level of their being ‘for-themselves,’ which suspends the mutual objectification of gazes locked in a battle for power” (5). For Armstrong, this interaction between readers and texts could, and should, extend to create the model for ameliorative forms of communication between selves and the others we read, interpret, and respond to throughout our everyday lives. In this way, reading closely follows what Rorty has termed “liberal irony,” in that it “faces up to the contingency of [one’s] own beliefs and desires” (qtd. in Armstrong, 23). Yet this inherent relativity does not paralyze it in the processes of perpetual deferral to which such contingency is susceptible. Rather, Armstrong maintains, because reading makes another world take shape, even as we hold a new text up against our beliefs and assumptions, difference may come to speak. Thus the practice of reading, in its broadest sense, may become the site where transformation and the possibility of new understandings are negotiated.

That McEwan, like Armstrong, considers the question of how we shape our relationships to texts to be one of the crucial determinants of contemporary existence is elaborated further in *Saturday*’s opening scene. For here, rather than next describe the event unfolding in the sky outside the window, Henry defaults to his *idée fixe*: his faith in scientific texts to resolve the mysteries in his life.¹ That this predisposition determines how he sees the world is evident when, even as “an habitual observer of his own moods,” he is driven by his commitment to logical deduction, and he does not entertain the need for a non-medical reading, even of himself. As

he wonders about his early morning “distorting euphoria,” he immediately holds it up against the text of neuroscience, wondering if “there’s been a chemical accident while he slept” that might have flooded his dopamine receptors (4). The exhaustion garnered by the week that led him to sleep so soundly earlier that evening is understood as a “molecular event,” revealing that the horizon of his introspection, especially of his own internal states, is tightly reigned by the explanatory systems he deems legitimate.

Therefore, several pages later, when McEwan returns to the immediate events of the plot, we are not surprised that Henry, without the daylight of his familiar frames of reference, has problems reading the world emerging there. Nor are we surprised that “he doesn’t immediately understand what he sees, though he thinks he does” (12). At first, he reads the glow in the sky as only an unexpected element in his field of vision. But charting its movement, he quickly decides it is a meteor. That perception holds until it behaves uncharacteristically, at which point he “revises his perspective.” It occurs to him now that this is perhaps a comet: it appears larger than a meteor, and registers more continuously, but it is still explicable in terms of the physical universe. A “low rumbling” from somewhere, however, leads him to “revise the scale again,” and because he cannot account for all the phenomena through his knowledge of astronomy, he turns, instead, to other explanatory frameworks: it must be a plane going down (13). Although its contours are not visible to him, it reproduces a shape that contemporary history has seared into his mind’s eye. While it seems certain that this plane will crash into the largest airport in London, initially Henry remains doggedly literal: he reads it in terms of its mechanics and flight trajectories, and his series of misunderstandings seems to be the direct effect of having been guided solely by texts of engineering and physics. But because it also seems clear that the events before him are unfolding beyond his systems of explanation, McEwan cautions that unless we note the narrowness of Henry’s focus, we, too, might be missing something.

What unsettles us is, I think, that while Henry now knows that what he sees is a plane, it takes several modulations of thought for him to imagine the passengers on board. His reading is only partly “non-coercive and non-objectifying,” as Armstrong might term it. For although he is capable of moving beyond the fixity of one interpretation, he does *not* move beyond the need for a single reading to adjudicate the truth of his experience. He seems ill prepared to conjure the empathic intimacy that his multiple read-

ings of this scene might facilitate. His failsafe position is that no matter how numerous the conditions, the “consequence exists separately, in a world independent of himself . . . whatever the score, it is already chalked up. And whatever the passengers’ destination, whether they are frightened and safe, or dead, they will have arrived by now” (18). As a scientist, he pries himself free from personal entanglement and positions himself as an objective observer; here he is accustomed to “catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all,” and through this “emptiness,” which he prefers to “the horror of what he can’t see,” “the obliging imagination” is cleared of its charge to engage (15). In effect, he reads his way through this catastrophe without recognizing what Armstrong calls “the contingency of [his] desires,” avoiding the experiential traumas of others, and returning himself to the familiar world of his kitchen with its fixtures of thought and form.

It is at this point, when Henry convinces himself of the prudence of turning on the TV and averting his mind’s eye from the suffering of others, that his explanatory systems begin to seem not only blatantly self-serving, but also dangerously thin. It is useful, therefore, to pause here for a moment to consider more carefully why McEwan has Henry disclose himself in this light so early in the text. To this end, I want to borrow upon insights Martha Nussbaum offers about the relationship between reading literature and ethical reasoning. In *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum argues that reading literature can serve as a primary tool of ethical development, in as much as it increases our ability to understand the lives of others.² Following her logic, then, Perowne’s reading, had he been able to imaginatively inhabit the fictional lives of the numerous characters his daughter placed before him, might have predisposed him to approach this scene quite differently. Nussbaum’s terms are particularly useful, I think, because she maintains that novels themselves do not function as moral paradigms or exemplum. Instead, according to her, through our engagement in reading them, they function as reenactments of the oftentimes-confusing human struggle to come to terms with one’s sense of morality. She contends that this “coming to terms” is accomplished through a reader’s identification with a character in a novel, but for a reader to fully identify with a character, one must think how “such things” can be instantiated in one’s own concrete life (329). Thus novels offer a complex movement from imagination and

reason through sympathy and identification wherein the reader looks for mirrors of one's world. This movement is the work of literary reasoning, which tends to create and continuously recreate intimacy with a text, and, Nussbaum later contends in "The Literary Imagination in Public Life," it is through the linearity of narrative that such closeness is built into the genre itself (225). It is precisely literature's ability to connect us to the ongoing processes of working through inconsistencies in our expectations about human relationships that might lead Henry to replace the self with the other as he reads.

Or to consider this ongoing process, as McEwan himself does in "Only Love and then Oblivion," which he published in *The Guardian* just days after the collapse of the Twin Towers, the imperative for Henry (or any of us for that matter) to be able "to imaginatively inhabit the lives of others" is a profound "ethical emergency." In this essay, McEwan takes us into the last moments of the passengers on board those hijacked planes, where we see ourselves: sitting with our "snack tray down, plastic fork in hand." And by imaginatively recreating their last "I love you" on their cell phones, he poses the challenge for us to inhabit the horror of their experience as it unfolded for them, to recognize that the last thing of importance for them must have been an expression of love to those they love. But beyond engaging in this vicarious sympathy, he also compels us to inhabit the traumatized lives of those who felt honor bound to seize command and fly those planes to their own certain death as well; he claims "they too compel us to imagine ourselves into that event" (16.31). Thus, in supplement to Nussbaum's call for identification, he argues that we must expand our powers of reading and move beyond seeing a character as self-referential; we must discern values beyond those that the resources of sameness will admit. For it is through this expansion that we gain access to alterity, and through this discernment that we open ourselves to communication with and responsibility towards others who do not mirror ourselves to ourselves.

This imperative to expand the terms of imaginative identification, which McEwan first articulated explicitly in the 1989 preface to *A Move Abroad*, establishes the novel itself, then, as his vehicle of ethical awakening. Through narrative at its best, he contends, we come to understand "not only the experience of the victim, but his oppressor too" (xvi). That level of understanding, of course, requires that the act of reading becomes

not only one of intention, but also one that remains open to a productive exchange of ideas. This openness is precisely Armstrong's concept of play, where reading must remain susceptible to ambiguity, excess, and uncertainty. In this way, the subject that emerges is capable of encountering others without distorting them into an approximation of the self. As Armstrong puts it, in this style of reading, we are challenged to "create and maintain spaces in which different forms of life with incompatible values and beliefs can productively interact in a nontrivial manner" (9).

Henry's descent to the kitchen and the television news, therefore, marks an exemplary instance of the thematic heft McEwan gains in pleating the layers Henry's narrative voice. For at this moment we are hesitant to embrace fully Henry's guiding consciousness as an instance of one-to-one narrator-reader identification. This hesitancy, which in Armstrong's terms might lead us to see him both "sympathetically and critically," engages a reciprocity between the subjectivities of character and reader (5). For although it is easy to project ourselves into Henry's response of turning on the television, it is more difficult to imagine ourselves turning our backs on the painful deaths of others. In the near distance of McEwan's free indirect discourse then, we simultaneously understand and scrutinize Henry as he teeters on the edge of what now seems to him to have been a dangerous balance to risk. He reflects that "[i]t doesn't console him, that anyone in these times, standing at the window in his place, might have leaped to the same conclusions. Misunderstanding is general all over the world. How can we trust ourselves?" (40). And as he stands there, subtly foreshadowing the posture of the speaker of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" that brings the novel to its resolution, he nearly pictures the "plastic fork" in his hand. But unnerved by the implications of that imaginative transference, he withdraws from this interface and justifies his distancing by reminding himself that "misunderstanding is general all over the world," reclaiming legitimacy in his own banality. Unwittingly here, however, he claims this distance by echoing a phrase that closes James Joyce's "The Dead," where the snow that is general all over Ireland softens the edge of Gabriel Conroy's isolation before his own window. For just as Gabriel has failed to imaginatively inhabit the experience of his now sleeping wife, Henry arrives at the brink of seeing himself in the lives of others, but cannot sustain his gaze. Herein, we become privy to a sense of how much he loses as he clears others from his imagination.

Indeed, in echoing the sadness is Gabriel's inability to imagine the inner lives of others, McEwan suggests the far-reaching implications of his call for expansive powers of reading in Henry's own life. Interestingly, this early enjoinder to awaken to new powers of empathy is subsequently reinforced through the numerous intertextual layers of the novel, where McEwan draws upon previous works of literature to demonstrate his understanding that linguistic layering structures our lives. This is not to suggest that *Saturday's* intertextual elements should be collapsed into a kind of a shell game, wherein one's interpretive reward is finding evidence of one text in another, for that would reduce McEwan's present text merely into a belated expression of previous ideas. It is rather to see the intertextual elements in terms of their postmodern position as meta-narrative signifiers.³ As McEwan himself claims, his explicit interest in the texts that he folds into his own plot resides in his hope that through narrative layering "the moral bearing" of a novel may be revealed. First explaining his interest in intertextuality in *The New Review* symposium on the "The State of Fiction" in 1978, he claims to nest texts within one another to reconfigure the innovations of the Modernists with something "less celebratory of its times." Citing other texts directly, he argues, allows him to dispel the illusion that novels are "self enclosed fictions" (51). He hopes thereby to expose their reality as one created of words. But he does so not to dismiss them on those grounds (as does Henry); rather, he shows how their verbal complexity gives us access to the interconnectedness of works that are otherwise approached as aesthetic wholes. In effect, his concern for intertextuality reclaims Henry's "bottles of chutney" as vehicles for moral bearing by showing their key ingredient to be the reverberative properties of language itself.⁴

The novel's climatic scene—pivoting as it does on Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" with its late Victorian lament for surety lost and modern alienation—is, of course, a crucial intertextual moment for readers to consider in this light. But because there are other texts as well that are integrally woven into the novel's structure, McEwan moves beyond what Elaine Hadley has characterized as McEwan's romanticized view of the Victorian "fantasy of agency," which she claims is imported into *Saturday* through the novel's most obvious intertextual overlay. Because violence appears to be forestalled by the whole-cloth importation of "Dover Beach" into the text, Hadley argues that McEwan lodges a resuscitated belief in

liberal humanism and art's ability to humanize us as his concluding message (100). But, I maintain, it is precisely because *Saturday* relies upon a more finely nuanced relationship to other texts that it does far more than enumerate old themes. In fact, through imbricating the superintending narrative frame of the novel with intertextual points of contact, McEwan again implicates the reader, as he does his protagonist Henry, as being in charge of the construction of new meanings. He does so not by superimposing one text's values upon another, but by shaping a mosaic of new meanings from borrowed pieces of older ideas that he challenges us to piece together.

To demonstrate how this challenge renders his call for attentive reading more audible, I want to examine more closely McEwan's obvious, and not so obvious, intertextual choices. It is now commonplace to talk about *Saturday* in terms of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, trading as McEwan does upon its quotidian London framing device.⁵ It is less common, although I argue perhaps more fruitful, to see also the parallels this novel holds to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which like *Mrs. Dalloway* also transpires in a single day. But unlike her novel of a London just returning from the ravages of WWI, *Ulysses* is grounded more firmly in the questions of an inviolable home, which is where, McEwan most heavily relies upon and disrupts past traditions. While the unacknowledged victims of war that *Mrs. Dalloway* embodies in the character of Septimus Warren Smith are adumbrated in Henry's dismissal of the anti-war protests that slow his progress to his squash match as something of a nuisance, it is, to my mind, more significant that one of society's victims actually enters Henry's home. Certainly the knowledge of Septimus's suicide intrudes into Clarissa Dalloway's party, and so doing it becomes the vehicle for Clarissa's transformation. In *Saturday*, however, both the intruder and the man whose home is violated must negotiate meanings simultaneously to reconstruct a space where further violence does not occur. As did Joyce in *Ulysses*, McEwan pivots this crucial moment on the question of a redefinition of home. Like Leopold Bloom, who knows that Blazes Boylan has shared Molly's bed, Henry must be able to imagine himself in a place that is not the same as when he left it. If he is to return to his home and reclaim the promise of love (as we see he does, for the novel is snugly bracketed by scenes of his morning and nighttime lovemaking with his wife), Henry

must learn to reread home as a place that is not removed from and will not remain untouched by time and outside forces.

But for Henry, this is a tall order. And as McEwan borrows upon Joyce's problem of having a character return to things that have been changed, he stresses the arduous struggle Henry must undergo to relinquish his sense of entitlement, not only to the leather upholstery he has come to consider "a part of him" in his Mercedes (75) and his "tall-ceilinged" living room with its "creams and browns" (186), but also to break free of his narrative of interior justification that such luxuries are rightfully his, "that all this is to the good" (78). For this reason McEwan emphasizes the necessity for a simultaneous renegotiation of space in a way that Joyce does not. For unlike Bloom, who ducks into the porch of the National Library to avoid a confrontation with Blazes, Henry comes face-to-face with outside presences when Baxter and his cronies force entry into his home, a space Henry considers his sanctuary. Here "he draws the curtains in the L-shaped room . . . heavy curtains, closed by pulling on a cord weighted with a fat brass knob," and congratulates himself that they "have a way of cleanly eliminating the . . . wintry world beyond" (186). In his obvious self-satisfaction, McEwan asks us to ponder the accumulated weight of Henry's daily practice of insulating himself from the outside world, for it is this luxury of insularity that must be overcome if he is to see that his belief in his inviolable space is his own fiction of bourgeois contentment. Indeed, as Baxter brings the wintry world in with him, Henry is forced to confront the inadequate draperies of his self-satisfactions. His home is no fortress against the encroaching knowledge that he, too, may be culpable for having created the conditions that leave the people he loves most in mortal danger. He finally must see that he has misread the signs that Baxter, the force he is least inclined toward and prepared to understand, has been following him all day.

Because Henry has been so stubbornly literal in his understandings, we have to look closely to find moments when he does possess the untapped resources of the imagination that enable him to share the experience of others. While these moments are subtle, they nevertheless offer us levers from which to achieve some distance from Henry's shortsightedness. And while it is true that he must reject his philistinism if he is to move beyond an endorsement of a threadbare myth of individual contentment, it seems unlikely that this would transpire in one clean renunciation, as if it mimic-

ked some sort of adolescent rebellion against the values of the parent. Indeed, Henry is deeply entrenched in the creature comforts of his life, and he makes peace with the depths of his entrenchment because, as he fully believes that, as a surgeon, he works hard for some portion of the greater good. Submerging himself in the lullaby of perquisites he sees as rightfully his, he looks forward to his return in the evening to a home that offers him sanctuary. If this is complacency, then it is of the sort that is not easy for him to reject. And precisely through asking us to share a point of view with a character caught in the grip of his desire for everyday calm, McEwan hones the novel's political edge. He does not put a world before us that is various in its resistance to the past; rather he shows us that we, like Henry, are borne forth on familiar tides, disavowing the illegitimacy of our privilege through the self-protecting anodyne of routine.

Interestingly, it is possible to trace further McEwan's clues that Henry must awaken from his narrative defenses by looking again into *Saturday's* embedded parallels with *Ulysses*. At the time of its publication, *Ulysses* was heralded for creating "the momentous eruption of everyday life into literature,"⁶ and because *Saturday* is also preoccupied with minutely detailing Henry's quotidian activities, McEwan echoes Joyce's emphasis on the routines that define us. We get an almost exaggerated play-by-play of his weekly squash match and an intricately detailed recipe for preparing his special fish stew, for example. In these focuses he points to Henry's similarities to Bloom, but he also points to crucial differences. Unlike Bloom who is fascinated by his own ability to rhyme and create pastiche patches of language in his descriptions of his daily living, Henry's specificity of detail does not so much construct him as a meticulous narrator as it does underscore his lack of literary sensitivity. For much of the text, even in his most elaborate narrations, he cleaves to the literal details of his day off; he does not follow Bloom's lead in exploring the free-play of language. As he wends his way through the streets of London in his expensive Mercedes, he is oblivious to any allusion to Stephen's idealized lover in the brand of car he drives. Similarly his own declaration that his car is "the realization of an ad man's vision," which is an embedded reference to Bloom himself, is also lost to him (75). McEwan hopes, however, that his readers are sharper than Henry on this score. He makes it possible, in fact, for them to discern how Henry's self-containment requires greater lingu-

tic sensitivity, if he is to hear the subtleties of self-reflection in his own narrative.⁷

That Henry's lack of linguistic awareness contributes to his ethical myopia has also been foreshadowed from the one of the text's first intertextual references. When McEwan ventriloquizes Joyce's Stephen Deadalus from the early pages of *Ulysses* into the crisis that opens this novel, Henry catches no echoes in his own words. Early in *Ulysses*, Stephen tells us that, "History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (28), and yet throughout the text he seems remarkably consistent in his somnambulism of selfhood. Without tuning our ears to Stephen's challenge (and perhaps his failure to awaken) that haunts *Saturday's* dawn, the initial staging of the text could easily be over determined by the obvious framing device of the window that borrows the occasion of Arnold's plea to join him and hear "the long withdrawing roar" of an English landscape. When Henry first imagines the plane as a comet, he thinks of waking his wife and calling her to come join him, to look out a vision "too extraordinary not to share" (13) (perhaps merely coincidentally rhyming with Arnold's "sweet in the night air"). But as he realizes the scene before him is one of terror, he also senses that it may be an expression of cruelty, not love, to ask her to share it. He no longer wants to "wake her into this nightmare" (14). In fact it is Rosalind, stirring in the bed he has just left, who triggers his heightened perceptions of what is happening. Through his awareness of her, his empathic powers momentarily expand, for as he hears her "light snoring," he sees himself sitting with "a snack tray down" on a plane, "plastic fork in hand," confronted with the possibility that the man with "a bomb in the heel of his shoe" is most likely "a man of sound faith" (17). Yet to be able to alter the nightmare in the world unfolding before him, Henry must awaken from Stephen's sense of being a thrall to historical forces. To wake himself from this nightmare, Henry must learn to read as if he, too, were responsible for creating the meaning of what is before him; he must understand that some things are not "already chalked up," that listening to one another might change us.

As such potential moments for imaginative renewal multiply throughout the text, in fact, we see that Henry does gain some measure of insight into the slumber from which he must awaken. Consider the scene late in the day when Henry first tells us he has grown weary of his inability to engage new ideas. His intellectual lethargy now seems to him to be "a con-

sensus of a kind, an orthodoxy of attention, a mild subjugation itself,” and he sees this as symptomatic of the complacency in his world (185). He frets that he has lost his “vital skepticism” and his ability to think independently. He chides himself for not paying closer attention to the texts Daisy has placed before him, and as he disgusts himself with his own laziness, he gains insight into the need to read beyond his familiar margins. This intellectual queasiness seems a crucial step in leading him to a discernment of how he, too, is emplotted in the disorder around him, and how part of that very disorder has been created by his own unwillingness to read beyond his self-affirming diagnoses. Yet here we see the stirrings of that awakening. He tells himself that to escape this malaise, “it is not sufficient” to view the world only “lying on his back on the sofa,” from “the safe distance of the television screen” (185).

This burgeoning consciousness of the narratives of others is pulled into even greater awareness a bit further on when Henry recalls having visited his mother’s house to “dismantle [her] existence” after placing her in a nursing home (284). Because the visit recurs to him in memory, as if he “were striking a set of a play,” he actually sees himself standing in the middle of the drama of the actions of “yesterday,” reading the implications of her life. He sees himself catalogue the artifacts of her existence: “her scores of needles, her thousand patterns, baby’s half-finished shawl . . . her tea cozy,” all of which lead him to a present tense understanding of how “tenuous” life is. And at this point, as he remembers her showing him the space where “she wanted her ashes put” (284), he thinks of her final rest and even projects into the future (again much like Gabriel Conroy in “The Dead,” imagining the passing of Aunt Julia). He tells himself: “All that’s bound to happen, and they’ll stand with bowed heads, listening to the Burial of the Dead” (284). Here, as he draws meaning from the daily touchstones of his mother’s routines, he finds brief passage into the lives of others, a process that he carries on for several pages. He now imagines the fates of all those with whom he lives, projecting beyond what he can rationally know into “a time when they find they no longer have the square, the junkies and the traffic din and dust. Perhaps a bomb in the cause of jihad will drive them out . . .—their Saturday will become a Sunday” (286).

As we have seen, however, Henry’s journey toward this insight is an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. Even as he ap-

proaches these crucial moments where his empathic powers seem to expand, he simultaneously sustains his pattern of denials and aversions. McEwan's narrative layering, then, resists the simplicity of a linear tale of progression or a simple narrative of transformation, for we are reminded repeatedly of the circuitous logic of Henry's psychological coping mechanisms. It seems important, therefore, to consider more fully why this pattern is, to such a large degree, worked out through the competing discourses of literature and science. As McEwan cordons these realms of expression off from each other, he suggests that Henry cannot quite wake himself because he cannot see how deeply invested he is maintaining this divide. Indeed McEwan meticulously asks us to remember that Henry's reservoirs of scientific knowledge are often apt and useful, his surgeries are benevolent and successful, and as a healer, his world-view does contribute to the general welfare. In showing this to be so, McEwan acknowledges the attraction and sanity of rationalism, especially rationalism as a conveyor of meaning in discourse. In this acknowledgment, he swerves clear of establishing the novel as merely a competition between poetry and science, and avoids merely rehashing this old nineteenth-century topic of debate. Thus McEwan does not dismiss the applications of science to our lives, for to do so would sink the novel in such a pabulum version of humanism that we would be compelled to oversimplify Henry's psychological ordeals. Rather, he gives him dignity and extreme competence as a surgeon, underscoring why he seems so likable as a man of science, even as he demonstrates the crippling effects of his unqualified confidence in analysis and quantification.

Tracking the marble that rolls back and forth in Henry's head throughout the novel, in fact, shows us that it is not simply a question of one worldview trumping another for McEwan. Instead he places the discourses of science and humanism in suspension in order to render Henry's inner vacillations with verisimilitude. This juxtaposition allows him to dramatize the contrary tugs between epistemological frameworks that must be renegotiated if we are to survive the consequences of arrogant allegiances to single mindsets. As we have seen, for most of the novel, Henry is unable to fathom why his daughter would "write poems while buildings burned," and he seems dangerously tone deaf to the voices of Theo and his father-in-law, Grammaticus, when in their music and poetry, respectively, they do not use the lyrics he has already learned to identify. Similarly, he

swerves from a distressing confrontation with the possibility that he may have misunderstood his mother's life. In his reflections, he consoles himself that "it's too late for apologies now. Unlike in Daisy's novels, moments of precise reckoning are rare; questions of misinterpretation are not often resolved . . . they simply fade . . . people . . . die" (159), and he deals with his fear that his own children will have to visit him in similar circumstances some day by casting her physical decline as only a question of inadequate preservation of the body. Science is his bastion against impending bereavement and emotional outpouring, but his years in the surgical theater also show him that science can save lives. We are not surprised, then, that he copes with his mother's decrepitude by noting that his own "systolic could be lower," as well as "his total cholesterol," and that he vows to "eat no more eggs, and only have skimmed milk in his coffee" (169). He has lived for many years by wrapping himself in the narrative of science, and since it has supported him well, to simply reject it would require an extremely unnatural gesture, much like changing his spots.

It seems fitting, then, that by the time we reach the crisis of Baxter's intrusion, Henry, like Baxter, is still very much the man we have seen throughout. He seems to remain in character when he, like Baxter, misattributes the authorship of Arnold's "Dover Beach" to Daisy. For Baxter, whose thug façade, we infer, compensates for his lack of socio-economic status and physical degeneration, is also driven by his need to guard his self-image. The difference between the men is that Baxter resorts to violence to do so, and Henry musters his past practices to protect himself. That the escape from potential violence is only reached as Henry *shares* Baxter's moment of encounter with the power of art is extremely significant then, for it qualifies any simple sense that it is art alone that triumphs. Because the narrator tells us that Baxter's response ("You wrote that. You wrote that.") is "a statement, not a question," it does seem (for a moment anyway) that only the poem's lyrical beauty has the capacity to humanize Baxter. But because this moment has been one of Henry's making, as well as one created by the brutal assault Baxter has engineered, we also examine the extent to which Henry's entrenched detachment from empathic response has contributed to the chaos erupting in the world around him. And because the poem transfixes *both* Henry and Baxter, McEwan points toward the crucial role that heightened powers of perception play in prompting them to greater human sympathy (222).

Indeed, only after hearing the poem recited twice does Baxter tell Daisy that she can get dressed again, and only through this doubled recitation does Henry undergo his profound metamorphosis as a reader. In a motion counter to his turning away from the window, as Henry “listens again,” he positions himself in a place where his receptive capacity is expanded. This receptivity, however, unfolds slowly; in fact it models what Armstrong has termed “the incremental progress toward non-coercive reading” (6), for when Daisy first recites “Dover Beach” (rather than to read out one of her own poems as Baxter has ordered), Henry misses the intimate communication that transpires between Grammaticus and Daisy in which Grammaticus protects Daisy’s autonomy by insinuating quietly that she pull up “the one she used to say for [him]” from memory and let it stand in for one of her own (228). This suggestion, which spares Daisy the symbolic rape of her poetic voice to Baxter’s demands, is one of the most profound acts of honoring human dignity in the novel, and it is an example of the reciprocal reading Armstrong calls for, wherein new meanings are negotiated through deep readings of the needs of one another. As Daisy and Grammaticus read one another’s eyes and understand the implications of one another’s words, they thwart the single-mindedness of Baxter’s intent. Theirs is, however, a reciprocity that is lost on Henry at first.

In the first recitation, in fact, Henry only partially reads without coercion. Initially, as he loses control over the words that define the moment, he finds Daisy’s lines to be “unusually meditative, mellifluous and willfully archaic, and he thinks it is as if, “she’s thrown herself back into another century.” And in the thrall of this estrangement, he is shaken loose from his expectations about her lyrical voice and becomes “terrified” that he “misconstrues much.” Certain this is one of Daisy’s poems that he only “half remembers,” he reprimands himself sternly for not “reading closely enough,” for Daisy’s poem quite literally now stands as a last defense between life and death. Thus freighting the recitation with dire consequences, McEwan establishes the personal imperative that triggers Henry’s most profound acknowledgement of his powerlessness to control all the terms of meaning and of the compendium imperative to read with great care. It is this experience of ungovernable dread, in fact, that prepares him for greater attentiveness, and as his imagination engages more fully, he feels himself shaking as he sees her:

overlooking a beach in summer moonlight. . . . She calls to her lover, surely the man who will one day father her child, to come and look, or rather, listen to the scene . . . together they listen to the surf roaring on the pebbles, and hear in the sound a deep sorrow. . . . But this evening the lovers hear only sadness and loss in the sound of the waves breaking and retreating on the shore . . . before they kiss she tells him that they must love each other and be faithful, *especially now that they're having a child* [emphasis mine] when there's no peace or certainty, and when desert armies stand ready to fight. (220–221)

This, of course, is passable summary for any Sophomore-level reader to come up with upon encountering this poem, but what Henry does not recognize is how he has filtered it to conform to his own life. He does not see that he has transferred the gender roles in Arnold's poem to one where the woman has agency; indeed, it does not occur to him that he has read this poem as pure autobiography and that he imports his personal urgency into the poem, that its meaning for him resides in Daisy's now unmistakably evident pregnant state. In effect, although the poem moves him to attentiveness, he is only able to draw upon those resources that are proximal to the conditions of his life; he sees only those he loves who are trapped in the disorder around him.

But Henry's satisfaction at having arrived at this level of understanding is immediately destabilized, for Baxter requests that Daisy read the poem again, and as he is snapped back to the moment, he sees that his family's peril has not been mitigated in the least. Sensing the delicate relationship between Daisy's words and their intensifying danger, in the second reading, Henry now becomes more focused on things he missed the first time. Unmoored from his defenses of dismissing the power of poetry as mere musing, he experiences the words anew, finding them abundant with the free play of linguistic signifiers, the indeterminacy of conclusions, and fluctuating meanings. He notes that he had not previously seen that "the cliffs of England" were "glimmering and vast out in the tranquil bay," nor that "there is no terrace, but an open window." In fact, he is so dislodged from his own certainty that he is now able to change the persona of the poem altogether. The speaker of the poem is no longer Daisy, and there is

not a father of the child in the poem at all; “[i]nstead he sees Baxter standing alone . . . listening to the waves.” And in this empathic passage into the life of the stranger, he considers that perhaps “it is not all of antiquity, but only Sophocles who associated this sound with the ‘turbid ebb and flow of human misery’.” Although he “balks at the mention of a ‘sea of faith’,” it is his awareness that Baxter, too, may inhabit this poem that leads him to hear the “long withdrawing roar” of the sea as something of a “musical curse.” He understands that from Baxter’s perspective this “plea to be true to one another sounds hopeless. . . .” And therefore “the poem’s melodiousness is at odds with its pessimism” (221–222). Through the act of rereading, then, Henry expands his capacity for empathy and begins the process of recognizing the liberatory potential in irreconcilable moments of interpretative ambiguity; he allows space for the lives of others, both victims and oppressors, to emerge in his realms of sympathy.

In this climatic scene, then, it is not only the power of art and spell of lyricism to redeem us that McEwan holds forth. For Henry, who has failed to read the imminent signs of danger that have been following him all day, has also needed to learn to be a more careful reader of others for transformation to occur. At this crucial moment, in fact, McEwan turns to the space between the readings of texts to locate art’s ability to connect us. Henry, like Baxter, is “healed,” in so far as his desires for fixed meanings are revised. He experiences how reading can determine the outlines of the way he sees life, and prompted by this insight, he is able to read the body language of his son—in a manner that echoes the language of the eyes and the silent reading of one another that Grammaticus and Daisy shared—and together they act to subdue Baxter and forestall further violence.

Although several critics have read this scene to suggest that McEwan concludes the novel with normalcy restored, I maintain that if this is normalcy, it is a normalcy newly figured. For this return to daily order has, in fact, been shaped by forces far beyond a desire for domestic simplicity. Indeed, it has been born from a hard-won recognition of the power of ambiguity, open-endedness, and the free-play of meaning. If we are returned finally to a darkling plain—blanched in the wash of the quotidian—then perhaps we have been returned there to examine how our belief in bourgeois contentment is a powerful seduction. For in the turgid ebb and flow of history, we will need to be able to wake from the nightmare of the status quo and cast ourselves again and again on the shores of those places

we have not yet learned to understand. Like Henry, perhaps we will be asked repeatedly to learn to read what opens before us. For if Henry returns to a life of daily peace, it is finally because neither politically, scientifically, nor personally has he held to a fixed reading of the world, and in this productive space the “rare gift of reading,” he has admitted to a “reciprocal relationship between subjectivities” (Armstrong 7). At the close of the novel, all those in Henry’s family “want to have it again, from another’s point of view, and . . . feel in these precise comparisons of feeling and observation that they’re being delivered from private nightmare . . . without which they are nothing” (237–238). Here the novel finally addresses Henry, the reader, and all readers, as friends and fellow agents, and reminds us that we, too, have a chance to understand texts through expanding our powers of empathic awareness. Perhaps thereby we come to consider more broadly the lives of our fellow citizens, our fellow human beings, who emerge through attentive reading and the generosity of the imagination.

Notes

1. In line with Pilar Hildalgo, who argues that the central consciousness of McEwan’s previous novel *Atonement* is that of the writer—and the problem that interests him most in that text is how the writer (in the character of Briony) comes to understand her own ethical relationship to the stories she tells (88–90)—I maintain that, in this novel, McEwan moves the central consciousness into that of the reader who is charged with responding to those very relationships.
2. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature*, especially “The Discernment of Perception,” pp. 54–105. For a more recent exploration of the relationship between ethical reasoning and literature, see Suzanne Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy.” Keen is very interested in the relationship between cognitive processes and our response to narrative techniques. In particular she argues for the enhancement of empathic powers through our sympathy for narrators, and calls upon such identifications to provide a fuller range of empathic effects.
3. Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* has cogently argued for a conception of postmodern linguistic work that serves as a method of deconstructing previous notions of truth and history and becomes a site of self-conscious meta-narrative. These ideas also align with those of numerous other theorists of postmodernism,

whom she discusses, among them Jean Francois Lyotard and John McGowan offer excellent accounts of linguistic self scrutiny in postmodern texts.

4. Elizabeth Kawaleski Wallace's "Postcolonial Melancholia in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," offers an interesting analysis of the autobiographical connection between McEwan's positioning of his protagonist as a foil to his own propensities of thought as a writer. She argues that there are crucial differences between the predispositions of the two that allow McEwan a venue for ironic self-scrutiny. Additionally, McEwan's concern for the intertextual nestedness of our lives is seen clearly in his recent novels *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, both of which gain complexity and anchorage through their explicit borrowings from other texts.
5. For an interesting overview of the intertextual relationship between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Saturday*, see Richard Brown, "Politics, The Domestic, and the Uncanny Effects of the Everyday in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," in particular note his discussion of Woolf and "the contemporary everyday," pp. 91–92.
6. See Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 3: From Modernity to Modernism*, which provides an interesting attempt to grasp the most profound changes as expressed in the dynamics of the unfolding relationship between modernity and everyday life and the way this has been transformed—in a way that is not innocent or neutral, and which has potentially life determining features. Also see Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which outlines provocatively how the objects of one's daily life determine the psychological mindscapes of modern lives.
7. As theorists Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau might claim, Henry relies on the linearity of game plans and recipes to fend off the unaccountable elements that disturb the smooth progress of his established routes and routines. He does not use the itinerary of a daily routine (as Joyce suggests Bloom does), to enact his suppressed desires, as much as subdue his inner life. Yet if precision in accounting is Henry's talisman, it finally cannot ward off his anger at Jay Strauss over a disputed call in their squash match. Nor can it marshal enough memories of his mother to forestall her death. Nor can it enumerate the preparations for the family meal long enough to bar the entrance of strangers into his home. Thus McEwan calls our attention to Henry's linguistic tone deafness, and emphasizes how overcoming it will shape a response to the lethargy that has come to infuse his habits of being.

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