

Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, 9/11 and neuroscience

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In a chapter addressing 'Problems of description in the language of discovery', Gillian Beer (1996) suggests that the divergent ways literary and scientific disciplines approach description may be a useful way to distinguish between them. Whereas the literary, and particularly the poetic, mode allows easy mobility between levels of description, freely creating new associations and connotations, scientists belonging to a particular sub-discipline must constrain themselves to a single level in order to communicate with accuracy to other members of the scientific community. Beer insists, however, that every form of language possesses a surplus that can be drawn upon in new ways by the poet, author, or anyone outside the scientific community. This essay considers how Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2006) negotiates between these modes, deploying neuroscientific terms liberally but in quite specific contexts, and how it functions as both a manifestation and an interrogation of the points at which one discourse may be incorporated into another.

Saturday is written from the perspective of Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon. In his interactions with others, Perowne often infers their neurophysiologic state from their behaviour, and frequently meditates on the nature of mind and of consciousness. The first section of the novel describes Perowne tending to patients suffering from various forms of

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brain injury or disease; another describes a visit to his Alzheimer's-afflicted mother, and the novel concludes with an extended account of neurosurgery. Most significantly, the narrative centres on Perowne's confrontation with a sufferer of Huntington's, an inherited neurodegenerative disease. This episode begins when Baxter's car collides with Perowne's in an alleyway. Baxter, a petty criminal, threatens and attempts to extort money from Perowne. Observing that Baxter exhibits the early symptoms of Huntington's, Perowne escapes by distracting him with promises of better treatments, even a cure. Realising he has been fooled and humiliated, Baxter follows Perowne home. Later that evening, as the Perowne family gathers to celebrate the publication of Henry's daughter, Daisy's first book of poetry, Baxter and an accomplice enter the house armed with knives. First, they force Daisy to undress, at which point it is obvious to all that she is pregnant. Noticing the book, Baxter demands that she read a poem aloud. Perhaps because her poems are mildly erotic, Daisy recites Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* instead. The reading effects a profound change in Baxter, pacifying him and leaving him in awe; the accomplice leaves in disgust. The episode concludes with Perowne and his son Theo throwing Baxter downstairs, whereupon he sustains a head injury and is rushed to hospital. Later in the evening, Perowne is called in to the hospital to operate on Baxter, an event which occasions a detailed description of the operation, interspersed with an extended meditation on genetic determinism and personal responsibility, the nature of mind and freedom.

What the criticism of *Saturday* suggests is that no matter how much liberty the literary author may take to move between descriptive levels, the literary critic is no less free to simply ignore forms of language they deem meaningless or redundant. Indeed, it is when considering the neuroscientific terminology in the text that critics' apparent discomfort with the theme verges on distaste. John Banville's attitude exemplifies the critical response: 'Yes', he concludes, 'there are many big words in this book' (2005, p. 13). For James Wood, the neuroscientific terminology is display: 'McEwan's steely research glints through the fabric of his narrative', (2005, p. 34) he complains. In both cases, the resistance to the



scientific terminology manifests itself by constituting certain terms as mere 'big words', and interfering in the true message of the work.

Another contentious aspect of the work, however, has been its politics—specifically its stance on terrorism. As I shall argue here, the isolation of these issues from each other has limited the terms on which both can be debated. Terrorism features explicitly in three passages, each of which seems to highlight the protagonist's place on the periphery of events. The novel is set on the February day when thousands of Londoners marched against war. But Perowne's encounter with them is perfunctory—on his way to a squash game, they cause him to become stuck in traffic, which occasions a short reflection on the justification for going to war, of which Perowne is in favour. Later, Perowne's daughter challenges this viewpoint in a heated argument. Most significantly, in the opening pages, Perowne watches from his bedroom window as a burning plane falls from the sky. In the course of the day, however, this is eventually revealed as due to a mechanical failure.

The text's political engagement appears, first of all, to be partial and implicit rather than overt and direct. Interestingly, this has given rise to a situation in which the chief point of contention is whether the novel is, in fact, a political work, rather than what its political comment might be. The first shot was fired by John Banville's scathing review, which characterised Perowne, and, by extension, the novel, as solipsistic, smug and complacent (2005). In response, Richard Rorty has claimed that it is precisely the presentation of Perowne's disjunction from an effective politics that constitutes the critical capacity of the novel. 'The book does not have a politics', he writes, 'it is about our inability to have one – to sketch a credible agenda for large-scale change' (2005, p. 92). Indeed, for Rorty, Perowne is the perfect exemplar of the impasse between thought and action that is the reality of the contemporary West. McEwan's finely wrought character Perowne is an 'idiot' (p. 92) in the sense that he is limited to the private sphere—he cannot actualise his thoughts in any meaningful way in the political system in which he exists.



Another critic, Lee Siegel, affirms that '*Saturday* is not a political book' (2005, p. 34). Rather, he writes, 'it is a novel about consciousness that illuminates the sources of politics' (p. 38), and more specifically, 'how politics gets invented from the stuff of emotion the way mind is created out of the brain' (p. 35). Siegel alone ascribes the neuroscience a role in relation to politics, but these statements quite vague and simplistic. The following passage offers a more fertile and subtle account:

Henry's consciousness is haunted by his awareness of the mind's inherent instability, its mutability and fragility ... You could say that this is a state of mind imported into our lives by the attacks on 9/11. But in the context of McEwan's world, Henry's obsessions are also the universal mental soil – the comfortable and technologically protected yet, for that very reason, open and vulnerable Western mind – that has allowed 9/11 to provide moral, political and intellectual pretexts out of all proportion to the events of that day. (p. 36)

'Open, vulnerable, self-conscious societies' (p. 33) are, he argues, at a delicate equilibrium that is too easily taken for stability by members of those societies. Veering between fear of and hope for change, these people become fixated upon a 'Transfiguring Event' (p. 33). Of course, it is hoped that this change will be for the better, but it can just as easily be for the worst. This, the negative event, is the narrative terrain so frequently occupied by McEwan. It is a sudden and cataclysmic transformation of the everyday that radically alters the psyche, producing an awareness of uncertainty, relativity and contingency. It is not difficult to see the links to 9/11, which Siegel reads as an actualisation of McEwan's vision. Siegel praises the subtle elucidation of the links between politics and mind through 'impressions, associations, intuitions' (p. 34) that allow, for example, the drama between Perowne and Baxter to be read as one in which Baxter represents the threat of the 'disenfranchised, militant, impoverished' (p. 34) third world to the fearful and horrified, but effectively apathetic first world personified by Perowne.



Elaine Hadley (2005) interprets the encounter between Baxter and Perowne far more critically, as a conflict between body and mind in which the disruptive capacity of the former, represented by Baxter, is repeatedly suppressed by the despotic consciousness of the latter. Hadley believes the text places a dangerously disproportionate emphasis on Perowne's cognitive elegance, cultivation and control, a practice that operates according to a 'liberal cognitive aesthetic' (p. 94) She argues that the sense of agency evoked by Perowne's cognitive sophistication is illusory, and functions to repress the possibility of collective, embodied and spontaneous action. So, although Hadley lauds the operation Perowne performs on Baxter as a 'mournful human accomplishment' (p. 93), she also dismisses it as yet another falsely elevated achievement of an individual consciousness. Echoing Baxter's response to *Dover Beach*—'You wrote that', she imagines his response to Perowne's expertise, composure and detachment during the operation as an awed, 'You did that' (p. 97). In conclusion, she asks:

Is there some way of thinking about something else than 'you wrote that' and 'you did that'? How might we conceptualise the hundred thousands marching in London streets? How to write about the Iraqi war as something other than a clash of opinion? (p.100)

The debate, it seems, is animated by the question of the relationship of consciousness to individual action, and individual to collective action. Of course, these are questions of considerable scope and complexity, but here I want only to consider how and why the discussion of the novel's politics has been limited by its isolation from the larger philosophical context. Whereas Rorty praises McEwan's masterful depiction of futility, and Hadley views it as a deleterious substitute for political activity, Siegel lauds the effort to sustain uncertainty and ambiguity. He argues that McEwan's objection is to the simplicity, the 'belligerent certainty' (p. 36) implied in the protesters' stance and expressed in their exuberant demeanour.



If the status of thought is an important factor in the politics of the novel, and neuroscience transforms our perception of thought, it would seem that neuroscience should be accorded some significance in all of these arguments. In order to make this case, I want to return to the passage above in which Siegel refers to 'the comfortable and technologically protected yet, for that very reason, open and vulnerable Western mind' (p. 36). Here, the neurosurgeon exhibits a paranoid mode of thinking in common with the general population, but differing in content. Yet, it is possible to read the analogy between neural and social systems here as positing a degree of corruptibility endemic to materially complex systems. This is a concept that I think has the capacity to do more conceptual work. It might, for example, offer a clue to the significance of the tangled and strange series of events that opens the novel. These are set in motion when, in the midst of sleep, Perowne suddenly rises and moves semi-automatically from his bed to the window:

Some hours before dawn Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, and then rising to his feet. It's not clear to him when exactly he became conscious, nor does it seem relevant. (p. 3)

As he looks down upon the square below his window, he 'thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece ...' (p. 5). However, being 'a habitual observer of his own moods, he wonders about this sustained, distorting euphoria' (p. 5). Is it due to a neurochemical accident, or in anticipation of the weekend, or the 'paradoxical consequence of extreme tiredness' (p. 5)? Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Perowne catches sight of a plane on fire, descending through the sky. From euphoria, he rapidly descends into a state of anxious indecision—should he wake his wife and tell her, alert emergency services, or do nothing? Pragmatically, he decides that the passengers' fate is sealed, in a few moments, they will be either alive or dead—either way, he is powerless to influence the outcome, and heads downstairs to wait for the news report.



Here I have outlined a few of many relays between neural pathways, thought, and world, bodily action, and affect in the opening pages alone. Note that McEwan is, from the first, complicating the distinction between thought, action and consciousness, and that this unity is probably related to Perowne's euphoria. As he looks out the window, his euphoria expands, extending itself to his environs: the first of many cases in which, as Siegel points out, his thought supervenes upon his emotional state (p. 37). At the same time, in the disjunction between world and mind, the 'distorting euphoria', Perowne perceives a potential error within himself. The dual possibility of intent and accident is equally present in his own consciousness—his immediate awareness, even in the midst of euphoria, that his mind may be fundamentally random and uncontrollable; *or* it may respond in a common sense way to the conditions of life; *or* more unpredictably to the body. But why does he rise at all—is he called or drawn to the window to witness the event? It seems not, as he cannot intervene in any way. Is the event itself intentional or accidental?

According to Rorty, the plane only signals the certainty of more, less benign accidents (p. 94). In my opinion, it is the first sign of the archetype that Siegel identifies in which an accident or crisis functions as a kind of negative revelation. In addition, it prefigures the recurrence of neurodegenerative disease and brain injury: Baxter's invasion into the protected space of Perowne's home, as well as Perowne's abrupt affective shift, and the 'crash' from euphoria to anxiety. In my view, it represents a literal 'coming down to earth': a sharp but inevitable descent, whether from the cognitive brilliance of the human mind or economic wealth of the city, that 'brilliant invention' into an awareness of materiality.

According to this view, rather than ambivalence, McEwan aims to balance the diversity of thought manifested in literature, art, music and poetry with an awareness of the finite and fragile resources available for living and thinking. He strives to counterpose the myths of infinitude, transcendence, unrestrained growth and progress with sustained attention to the energetic costs and limits of complex systems. In *Saturday*, the neurosurgeon possesses an



awareness that cannot simply be dismissed as reductionist. Consider the remarkable passage in which Perowne visits his mother Lily, who is suffering through the final stages of Alzheimer's. Here, Perowne skilfully responds to the disjunctions of mood, emotion, language and body that result from neural disjunctions. According to Hadley's paradigm, this mode of thought entails detachment and distance. In another light, though, the constant movement between different levels of description allows Perowne to offer an empathetic presence. Consider the sequence of actions that unfolds when she becomes distressed, he

will cut in and laugh loudly and say, 'Mum, that's really very funny!' Being suggestible, she'll laugh too and her mood will shift, and the story she tells will then be happier. (p. 165)

Perowne's simulation of emotion is mirrored, first of all, by his mother's expression, and the events in her narrative are determined by the emotional tone. Here, reason is profoundly undermined not only by material decay, but dependent upon bodily expression and social interaction.

In essence, I have argued, with Siegel, that consciousness in *Saturday* is a profoundly unstable phenomenon, liable to all kinds of breakdowns. Although prominent, cognition is not primary, but co-present with its body, the brain. In this case, it becomes less adequate to characterise the text's politics by drawing on a particular thought or statement as indicative of the author's or character's position or a meaning integral to the text, or, as in Hadley's case, to take a mode or style of thought as the totality of its politics. Rather than 'an elegy for the individual consciousness', then, *Saturday* might be more accurately characterised as an attempt to manifest the laminar nature of mind and consciousness.

In closing, I want briefly to consider how the literary representation of neurodegenerative or neurologically impaired states might reflect critically on the practice and claims of



neuroscientific inquiry. Sufferers of neurodegenerative disease, and Alzheimer's in particular, are on the cusp of the scientific and social worlds, claimed not only by various branches of neuroscience, but by social science, cognitive science, and neurophilosophy, to name a few.¹ Ian Hacking writes that for the majority of the history of neuroscientific inquiry, 'the walking wounded, impaired in life, and dissected in death, were our primary clues to where and how parts of the brain work' (2004, p. 32). Hacking is referring to the extent to which neuroanatomical knowledge depends on localisation through lesion studies. It is thus embedded in the often bizarre and disquieting history of the kinds of breakdowns, diseases, accidents, and degeneration that this text insists upon acknowledging. We might, then, see Lily, Baxter and the many others as signs of an effort to make visible the conditions under which a particular discourse becomes possible, allowing new forms of intervention and control to come into play. We might consider *Saturday* as an effort to reintegrate the terms of neuroscience within a narrative—that is, into a world of sense and significance, at the same time as that world is being radically reconfigured by the terms and claims of a neuroscientific materialist worldview.

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Note

1. See, for example, Y. Christen & P. Churchland (Eds.) *Neurophilosophy and Alzheimer's Disease* (Springer-Verlag: Berlin, 1992), Robin G. Morris & James T. Becker (Eds.) *Cognitive neuropsychology of Alzheimer's disease*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Annette Leibig & Lawrence Cohen (Eds.) *Thinking about dementia: culture, loss, and the anthropology of senility*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006)



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