

GRAHAM HILLARD

*Trevecca Nazarene University*

## **The Limits of Rationalism in Ian McEwan's SATURDAY**

**Keywords:** *Ian McEwan, Rationalism, Saturday, War on Terror*

---

*Saturday*, Ian McEwan's 2005 novel of a single day in the buildup to the Iraq War, opens with an image emblematic of its historical moment. Henry Perowne, a talented neurosurgeon and devoted materialist, awakens in the early morning to the sight of a plane afire, passing over his Fitzroy Square home en route to Heathrow. Because Perowne serves in large part as an illustration of the post-9/11 Western mindset, he envisions in the fiery sphere a "fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against the fanatics" (15). Although Perowne is mistaken—the burning aircraft is neither the meteorological disaster he first suspects nor the terrorist act he later settles on—the event informs much of the rest of the novel, as Perowne struggles with what Nick Rennison has identified as one of McEwan's central concerns: "the intrusion of brutal, inescapable reality into comfortable lives" (110).

Indeed, comfort represents much of what is at stake in *Saturday*—not only Perowne's and his family's but that of his peers. In Perowne, McEwan lays bare the inner-workings of a particularly Western, particularly contemporary life: privileged, happily secular, and marked by an unsustainable apartness from the "monstrous and spectacular scenes" (180) that fill the news broadcasts with which Perowne later obsesses. The novel's prosaicness—Perowne spends much of the book watching television, playing squash, and visiting his elderly mother—is punctuated by moments of intense existential dread, and although the advent of terrorism in the West provides the novel's substructure, it is what terrorism renders impossible—an untroubled mind, namely—that is McEwan's chief concern.

Perowne's anxiety is indicative of what has been McEwan's central focus for much of the past two decades. For McEwan's characters, the introduction of death acts as a philosophical trigger, engendering a tension between two poles of human thought: doubt and faith, the rational and the intuitive. Although *Saturday*—unlike McEwan's earlier novels *Enduring Love* and *Black Dogs*—reserves its plot-defining violence for its final pages, it is *Saturday*'s hero whose thinking, as Michael L. Ross observes, most “betoken[s] the contemporary drift toward paranoia” (78). For Perowne, it is this movement that must be addressed—this movement, finally, that inspires a partial shift away from materialism.

An understanding of Perowne's emotional journey depends in large part on an awareness of the condition in which he begins the novel. As *Saturday* opens, Perowne “wakes to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, and then rising to his feet” (1). Crucial to this moment is the decidedly Edenic language with which McEwan renders the scene: “It's as if, standing there in the darkness, [Perowne has] materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered” (1). By decontextualizing Perowne—by setting him down among circumstances with which he seems at least momentarily unfamiliar—McEwan creates a contemporary John Savage, gazing in wonder on a brave new world that is not dystopian but idyllic. Perowne's starting point—a cheerful humanism celebrating an “age of wondrous machines” (77) and London's “accumulated and layered achievements” (3)—suggests a mind fully awake to the possibilities of a new century.

For Perowne, the empirically measurable success of the West is itself an answer to what McEwan, writing for *The Guardian*, has called “terror's war on us.” So, too, is the reassuring act of measuring it. Nevertheless, *Saturday* is a novel of emotional bipolarity, and Perowne's optimistic humanism—his rationalism—gives way as frequently as it holds. Watching the crippled plane, Perowne's thoughts “have a reeling, tenuous quality” (22):

He loses his way, and thinks again of the phone. By daylight, will it seem negligent not to have called the emergency services? Will it be obvious that there was nothing to be done, that there wasn't time? His crime was to stand in the safety of his bedroom, wrapped in a woolen dressing gown, without moving or making a sound, half dreaming as he watched people die. (22)

Here, as elsewhere, Perowne seems unable to anchor his thoughts to reality. As he later realizes, the dilemma he imposes upon himself—whether or not to report to the police a major air disaster—is itself an absurdity, an example of the “inability to contemplate your own unimportance” (17).

It is in moments such as this—moments in which Henry is “joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety” (180)—that one of the novel’s central devices is exposed. By giving way to pessimism, Perowne betrays the rational humanism that informs his calmer moments. Indeed, Perowne himself seems to make this connection. When the plane outside his window turns out not to have been piloted by terrorists, Perowne berates himself for falling into “a state of wild unreason” (40) and, in obsessing over news reports, giving way to “an orthodoxy of attention, a mild subjugation in itself” (185). By connecting his agitation to apocalyptic thinking, Perowne draws a direct line between rationalism and secularism, a move that further emphasizes his later shift. Although McEwan punctuates Perowne’s early, panicked speculation with flashes of his surgical life—calm, professional, and utterly significant—it is the irrational Perowne who comes to dominate the novel, bedeviling the reasonable man who tries to reorder his day around a long-anticipated family dinner, seeking as solace what Michael L. Ross has referred to as “cherished humanistic alternatives: domestic intimacy, fidelity between individual lovers” (81).

Rendering Perowne in this way, McEwan seems to suggest that the accoutrements of terrorism—the residuum of daily life played out in the shadow of harm—*incite* a certain degree of irrationality simply by precluding the humanistic tendencies on which rationalism relies. As the political scientist Elizabeth Campbell Corey has stated, “Rationalism depends upon a view of morality that is both Gnostic and perfectionist in character, a view that at once denies the uncertainty of existence and tries to arrange all of experience into logical, ‘rational’ categories” (250). When Perowne’s attempts at categorization fail—when he is no longer able to convince himself of the inherent good of his fellows—his entire intellectual construct collapses, leaving him embroiled in an emotional turmoil that lasts for much of his day. Although Perowne clings to his rationalism, reminding himself when he can that “not everything is getting worse” (68), he seems unable to maintain it given even *imagined* provocations (or the provocations of Baxter, the would-be rapist whose entry into the protagonists’ home marks an instance of terrorism both apart from and analogous in its psychology to the imagined political act of the novel’s first pages). Whereas the Perowne of the first half of the novel would likely resist Corey’s conflation of rationalism and Gnosticism, Perowne’s confidence in science seems itself to be imbued with spiritual significance. When Perowne anticipates the unlocking of “the brain’s fundamental secret” (262)—“the only faith he has” (263)—he echoes the reverence of the devout, stating that

even when it has [been laid open], the wonder will remain, that mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous

present, with a self, another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost at its centre. (262)

In expressing what Peggy A. Knapp has called Perowne's "capacity for awe" (137), McEwan opens the door to something beyond materialism—less than faith, perhaps, but of a piece with it.

### Works Cited

- Corey, Elizabeth Campbell. "Being Otherworldly in the World: Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics and Politics." Diss. Louisiana State U, 2004. *Louisiana State U Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Collection*. Web. 20 Feb. 2009.
- Knapp, Peggy A. "Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and the Aesthetics of Prose." *Novel* 41.1 (2007): 121–43. *Humanities Module*. Web. 11 Nov. 2008.
- McEwan, Ian. "How Could We Have Forgotten That This Was Always Going to Happen?" *The Guardian* 8 July 2005, Comment and Features sec.: 3. *The Guardian Online*. 8 July 2005. Web. 13 Nov. 2008.
- . *Saturday*. New York: Anchor, 2005. Print.
- Rennison, Nick. *Contemporary British Novelists*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Ross, Michael L. "On a Darkling Planet: Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and the Condition of England." *Twentieth Century Literature* 54.1 (2008): 75–96. *Humanities Module*. Web. 11 Nov. 2008.

Copyright of Explicator is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Explicator is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.