

## Ian McEwan's Neurological Novel

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**Abstract** Drawing on cognitive science, literary critics such as Mark Turner have affirmed that for human beings thinking is crucially bound up with narrative. This essay examines how Ian McEwan in his novel *Saturday* (2005) adds a specifically affective element to the human engagement with narrative through a focus on the neurobiology of consciousness. By casting a neurosurgeon as his protagonist, McEwan attends to what damaged brains can reveal about how story-loving human beings “mind” the world. Moreover, in this essay the work of Gerald Edelman in neuroscience and Lisa Feldman Barrett in psychology is cited to bring together disparate fields in affirming that affective feelings convey information about the interface between self and environment. By setting the novel in a single day in London, after 9/11 and during preparations for war in Iraq, McEwan affirms a constructivist theory of knowledge, in which individuals and collectives—including novelists—participate in making up meaningful presents and livable futures. *Saturday* provides a meditation on how we might further bridge the gap between the humanities and the sciences of mind through cautious collaborations based on the biological rootedness of storytelling, the centrality of feeling to thinking, and a shared empiricism that embraces human activities of interpretation balanced by testing, calibration, and revision.

The human mind loves a story. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh spots a pretty woman on a London sidewalk and, feeling a sudden

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spark of interest, proceeds to follow her. In his mind, Walsh casts the brief encounter into a diminutive tale of adventure: "Other people got between them on the street, obstructing him, blotting her out. He pursued; she changed. There was colour in her cheeks; mockery in her eyes; he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring . . ." (Woolf 1990 [1925]: 53). These few sentences contain the essential elements of a story—characters, events, time, location—making a quotidian walk into an affectively rich experience of suspense. Mark Turner has argued that such narrative imaginings underlie and indeed enable everything that we do: "Most of our action consists in executing small spatial stories . . . Our experiences [may] differ in detail, but we make sense of them as consisting of a repertoire of small spatial stories, repeated again and again" (1996: 19, 43).<sup>1</sup>

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, events diverge from Peter Walsh's anticipated romantic climax and the woman disappears into a building. Sceptically, he reflects on the human tendency to project stories onto experience: "it was half made up, as he knew very well, this escapade with the girl; made up, as one makes up the better part of life, he thought—making oneself up; making her up, creating an exquisite amusement, and something more" (Woolf 1990 [1925]: 54). The story in his head, Peter believes, gives temporary purpose and meaning to his own wayward stroll and, by extension, to his own wayward life. Yet his imaginings, apparently, have scant reference to the actions of the young woman whom a mere accident of time and space placed in his way.

This brief scene prompts a larger question, one pertinent to critics interested in the relationship of the sciences of the mind and narrative poetics: What can a small, interior story about following a woman through London, embedded as it is within a novel that follows a woman through London, tell us about the relationship between everyday instances of narrative thinking and great works of narrative fiction? Instances of Peter Walsh's "making up" are linked by their lack of reference to actual things, persons,

1. Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind* is an early instance of a literary critic applying the insights of cognitive psychology to the study of narrative. Examining "how the human mind is always at work constructing small stories and projecting them" onto the world, Turner concludes that, "although literary texts may be special, the instruments of thought used to invent and interpret them are basic to everyday thought" (1996: 12, 7).

Over the past decade a growing number of critics has argued for a unique relationship between cognitive science and literary studies, marking a "cognitive turn" in the humanities. The special issue of *Poetics Today*, "Literature and the Cognitive Revolution," provides a useful introduction to the field; see especially the foreword by Alan Richardson and Francis F. Steen (2002). In treating a contemporary novel that thematizes the encounter between neurology and narrative, the present article seeks to preserve the specificity and methodological modesty of historicist work while also drawing on empirical work being of cognitive neuroscience.

or events. Small story and novel, on this account, mark the discrepancy, rather than the correspondence, between what we make up and the stuff of the real world. As a critique of narrative, this position has deep roots. In his "Defence of Poetry," Percy Shelley (1971 [1840]: 518) disparaged narrative as a literary genre precisely because it allowed one to concatenate arbitrary bits of experience into factitious "truth": "A story is a catalogue of detached facts which have no other bond of connection than time, place, circumstance, cause, and effect." Hayden White (1980: 24) extended the critique to the historical narrative, which, despite its referential aspirations, merely "wears the *mask* of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience."

*Mrs. Dalloway*, however, resists the terms of anti-referential critiques of narrative: by situating imagination within, rather than in opposition to, experience (contra White); and by tracing out the ways that delicate, affectively rich bonds of "time, place, circumstance" thread individuals together and place them meaningfully in a world that is itself emergent and unfolding (contra Shelly). Woolf's novel reveals, and revels in, what Wayne Booth (1983: 457) has called the "story-loving mind[s]" of human beings, minds that seek not simply reference narrowly construed but meaning, relevance, and a way forward. Richard Walsh (2007: 36) puts it this way: "The knowledge offered by fiction . . . is not primarily specific knowledge of what is (or was), but of how human affairs work, or, more strictly, of how to make sense of them—logically, evaluatively, emotionally." Stories, the small ones that live in the mind as well as those formalized as novels, can be helpfully understood as tools of navigation. They situate individuals, imaginatively and corporeally, within a world of "affairs"—of not just things and events but also relations, persons, and other, sometimes competing stories—and suggest options for action based on felt values and opportunities.

As with any mode of piloting, the stories that propel us also require coordination and calibration with all that exist beyond our own skins—and indeed, with the stories that guide the beliefs, hopes, and actions of other storymakers. By focalizing the narrative through different characters, Woolf's novel traces the flights and perches of human minds as they come in contact with places, feelings, events, memories, and other minds. *Mrs. Dalloway* also portrays a physician who, working on a very different set of assumptions, believes that consciousness is a matter of mental contents that do or do not correspond with the outer world and therefore treats his patients' "delusion[s]" with doses of "proportion" (Woolf 1990 [1925]: 99). When his treatment of a shell-shocked soldier deepens rather than assuages the patient's anguish, the novel makes it clear that the physician's rage for reference reflects an impoverished understanding. The physician's

“expertise” in maladies of the mind is predicated, disastrously, on not just rank cruelty but also neurological ignorance: he knows “nothing about—the nervous system, the human brain” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup>

Almost a century later, Ian McEwan picks up this thread, focusing his novel *Saturday* (2005) on a day in the life of a London neurosurgeon, someone with precisely the expertise Woolf’s physician lacked. In recent decades, neuroscience—as practiced by McEwan’s protagonist Henry Perowne—has helped supplement the cognitive model of the human mind by emphasizing the ways consciousness is distributed throughout the nervous system, thus releasing the mind from its equivalence with reason and its isolation in the brain’s cerebral cortex.<sup>3</sup> Neurobiology also provides an account of how mind extends into the world and its objects, explaining, for instance, how Henry Perowne can move with ease through the familiar space of his darkened bedroom.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of “the nervous system—the human brain” for understanding how human affairs work is thematized in *Saturday*, a contemporary novel that, I argue, both resonates with and instructively diverges from *Mrs. Dalloway*.<sup>5</sup> In it, McEwan explicitly tempers the wisdom of science by the insights of narrative: Henry Perowne may spend his workdays diagnosing and treating brain injuries, but at home he is prompted by “his literate, too literate daughter, Daisy” to read novels and biographies (2005: 4). (In what could be a hat tip to his literary forebear, McEwan gives these

2. For a brief history of cognitive science’s “idea of mind as an information processing device,” see LeDoux (1996: 29) and Gardner 1987. For a sophisticated account of the persistence of the “analytic-rationalist philosophy of mind” even in the work of evolutionary psychologists such as Stephen Pinker, John Tooby, and Lena Cosmides, see Smith (2006: 131). For thorough accounting of how an overly rationalistic cognitivist criticism downplays or ignores “the interpenetration of feeling and understanding, evaluating and remembering,” see Sternberg (2003: 358 and *passim*).

3. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has played an important role in conveying the “idea that mind derives from the entire organism as an ensemble” (1994: 225) to a wider, nonspecialized readership.

4. In *Kinds of Minds*, Daniel Dennett has a terrific description of how minds extend into things and spaces, using the example of the elderly, whose homes contain “ultrafamiliar landmarks [that are] triggers for habits [and] reminders of what to do.” He continues, “Taking them out of their homes is literally separating them from large parts of their minds—potentially just as devastating a development as undergoing brain surgery” (1996: 138–39).

5. Critics frequently mention McEwan’s penchant for intertextual engagement with earlier literary works, including Woolf’s. Kathleen D’Angelo (2009: 89), for instance, argues that Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922) serves as an important “literary predecessor” for McEwan’s *Atonement*. Brian Finney (2004: 71) notes that “most of his [McEwan’s] novels, according to him, allude in some way to existing genres,” and provides a compendium of such influences: between McEwan’s *The Cement Garden* (1978) and William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* (1954); *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912); *The Imitation Game* (1981) and Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938); *Amsterdam* (1998) and Evelyn Waugh’s work.

characters a storied address: elegant Fitzroy Square, where Virginia Woolf lived as a young woman.) As Linda Hutcheon (1988: 6) has written, until recently the humanities have tended to “challenge the empiricist, rationalist, humanist assumptions of our cultural systems, including science.”<sup>6</sup> A scientifically minded novelist, McEwan envisions the Two Cultures arguments writ small, sparking both conflict and cooperation within a loving family who, despite dramatic upheavals, manage to break bread at the end of day. A reading of the novel that takes seriously its engagement with the neurobiology of consciousness follows the author’s lead, strengthening conceptual links between literary study and the sciences of mind by affirming the biological rootedness of storytelling, the centrality of feeling to thinking, and the importance of an empiricism founded on processes of communication, testing, and collaboration.

If Woolf’s physician figured a dogmatic, rationalistic cognitive science, McEwan’s surgeon represents (and practices) an interactive, constructivist neuroscience. Recent researchers—such as Lisa Feldman Barrett, in psychology, and Gerald Edelman, in neuroscience—have sought to bring together scientific disciplines in order to understand the ways in which consciousness involves immense constructive resources of imagination and feeling, capacities that are materially rooted in the complex human nervous system. From their different disciplinary vantage points, Edelman (2006: 36) and Barrett (2005: 263) both argue for a conception of a “dynamic core” of neural activity in which evolutionarily primary regions of the brain, the brainstem and amygdala, process stimulus from the environment and from within the body while engaging higher brain regions in the thalamus and cerebral cortex. Rich conceptual thinking emerges as neurons that “fire together” begin to “wire together”: like jazz improvisation, neuronal groups with their rhythms become attuned through repetition, producing “melodies”—an individual’s patterns of thought and behavior—that over time “become more coherent” (Edelman 2006: 30). This account is constructivist:

If the assumptions of Neural Darwinism are correct, then every act of perception is to some degree an act of creation, and every act of memory is to some degree an act of imagination. Remember, in addition, that the mature brain speaks mainly to itself. Dreams, images, fantasies, and a variety of intentional states reflect the massive recombinatorial and integrative power of brain events underlying conscious processes. (Ibid.: 100)

6. Hutcheon counts among these “challengers” the theorists Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Gianni Vattimo, and Pierre Baudrillard, who, she argues “follow in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx and Freud” (1988: 6).

Just as a mind- and reason-centered cognitive science is increasingly coordinated with a body- and affect-attuned neurology, so in the hands of Ian McEwan the psychological novel expands into the neurological novel: a postmodern work of realist fiction that, focalized through an intelligent though at times obtuse character, is concerned with depicting how an embodied, socially embedded, story-loving consciousness shapes everyday human acts of perception.<sup>7</sup> As such, it affirms a constructivist worldview through what Edelman (1989: 266) has called a “qualified realism”: a commitment to the provisional efficacy of narrative and emotion in piloting human beings more-or-less successfully through a shifting world of objects, relations, and events.<sup>8</sup> Edelman (2006: 10) has argued that a neurobiological theory of consciousness may bring humanistic concerns together with scientific ones by helping to develop “an account of knowledge that relates truth to opinion and belief, and thought to emotion by including aspects of brain-based subjectivity in an analysis of human knowledge.”

Literary studies can contribute to the development of a “biologically based epistemology” (ibid.) by cultivating awareness of (1) the stories that shape our everyday experience; (2) the centrality of feeling, not just to individual belief and action but to human affairs and the search for truth, more broadly construed; and (3) the consequent necessity for collaboration, testing, and above all *revision* in producing relevant interpretations of individual and collective experience. Exposing the limits of both rationalism (thought to be the bedrock of the sciences) and relativism (thought to be the shaky ground of the humanities), complex narrative works can, to quote McEwan (2005: 74), help to cure us of our “anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one’s own condition.” In its attentiveness to the motions of embodied human consciousness engaging with and shaping a complex and chancy world, *Saturday* exemplifies how the neurological novel in particular can serve, in the words of Richard

7. In thus describing the “neurological novel,” I am following the lead of David Lodge in his (pre-*Saturday*) review of work by McEwan and other contemporary authors such as Jonathan Franzen. In drawing “knowledgeably on the concepts and language of contemporary neuroscience to describe and defamiliarise mental processes,” these authors are postmodern in their sensibility. Yet, in focalizing the narrative through a single consciousness, McEwan employs a narrative perspective elaborated by Henry James, supporting Lodge’s (2002: 88) speculation that we might be seeing a “return to the third-person novel of consciousness in postmodern literary fiction.”

8. Edelman describes a neurologically sensitive epistemology in these terms: “We can check individually and mutually whether a conscious thought corresponds to a real-world state. . . . While we can continually check our constructions, the Cartesian quest for certainty is, in any extreme form, hopeless. We must take a more humble view of the solidity and completeness of what we can know” (1989: 266).

Powers, as a “connection machine—the most complex artifact of networking that we’ve ever developed” (Williams 1999: 8).

*Saturday*, this article argues, exemplifies a nonskeptical form of constructivism, which presents both a (postmodern) challenge to claims of objective knowledge and a (realist) commitment to empirical processes of knowledge production and verification. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2006: 4) has argued, “constructivist accounts of cognitive processes see *beliefs* not as discrete, correct-or-incorrect propositions about or mental representations of the world but, rather, as linked perceptual dispositions and behavioral routines that are continuously strengthened, weakened, and reconfigured through our ongoing interactions with our environments.” Precisely such “dispositions,” “routines,” and “interactions” constitute the subject matter of McEwan’s depiction of a day in the life of a London neurosurgeon.

### Narrative Homeostasis

*Saturday* is unusual in McEwan’s oeuvre, in that it spends such a vast amount of time on quotidian successes rather than spectacular failures. The novel’s final moments are exemplary: the central character performs a difficult late-night brain operation, returns to his comfortable home, cuddles his beautiful wife, and falls into a deep slumber. The novel’s persistent focus on expertise and professional accomplishment has led reviewers to puzzle over *Saturday*’s bourgeois ethos: it centers on the wealthy physician Henry Perowne, happy father to two loving, well-adjusted grown children; husband to a sexy, accomplished lawyer; owner of an elegant London mansion; blessed with vigorous, squash-playing buddies and competent colleagues who marvel at his expertise. How, John Banville (2005: 12) chides in one review, could “a connoisseur of catastrophe” like McEwan “take on the role of bedtime storyteller to our own time of ‘crisis and boredom’”?<sup>9</sup>

The novel’s action takes place on February 15, 2003, the date on which millions of people in cities worldwide gathered to protest the march to war

9. Richard Rorty (2005: 92) echoes Banville regarding the novel’s perspective on world events: “The book does not have a politics,” he writes. “It is about our inability to have one.” For a thoughtful reading of *Saturday* that challenges those who see it as “perfunctory” in its relationship to contemporary politics, see Eber 2008. Eschewing “ideology critique,” another line of criticism takes up the novel’s artistry: Peggy Knapp (2007: 122, 141) argues that in *Saturday* McEwan captures, at the level of the sentence, an aesthetics of consciousness—though she also acknowledges “the ‘shadow’ of an argument about aesthetics and the world of action.” My own account of *Saturday* focuses on this shadow argument, by tracing how the novel thematizes the neurological and affective links between aesthetics (including small stories as well as narrative fiction) and the world of action (including politics and decisions about going to war).

in Iraq following 9/11. (The neurosurgeon does not participate—though he does spend the early part of the novel steering his Lexus through traffic caused by London’s massive antiwar rally.) Despite the hovering topic of terrorism, *Saturday* is integrally a book about how on a daily basis things usually go right, despite surprises and dangers and human beings’ propensity for grand narratives that set us on a slow slide to disaster. The protagonist reflects that history itself is by and large marked by progress, though the “young lecturers” at his daughter’s college “like to dramatize modern life as a sequence of calamities”; it “wouldn’t be cool or professional to count the eradication of smallpox as part of the modern condition” (2005: 77). These instructors, of course, could easily be lecturing on McEwan’s earlier works, the plots of which could roughly be described as a “sequence of calamities.”<sup>10</sup>

The first scene of *Saturday* does strike an ominous note, beginning pre-dawn with the surgeon spotting a fiery object in the sky and fearing terrorism. For those familiar with McEwan’s work, this opening enhances the expectation of calamity. As events unfold, however, the plane does not explode in flames but lands without casualties; the men flying it are not extremist Chechen fighters, as the first news reports had indicated, but workmanlike pilots of a damaged aircraft. The domestic plot that structures the novel (as in *Mrs. Dalloway*)—day-long preparations for an evening gathering—ends in an affectionate reconciliation between Henry’s overbearing father-in-law and the granddaughter he has alienated. The novel’s climax, which involves the neurosurgeon’s family being held at knifepoint by a volatile thug with a degenerative brain disease, consists of Henry and his son working together to disarm the intruder and toss him down the stairs. The closing pages dwell on the neurosurgeon’s benevolent resolve, after performing an operation to mend the man’s head injury, not to press charges.

Despite the steady stream of near-disasters, for which readers of McEwan’s prior works are well primed, the strong narrative tug of *Saturday* is toward *reparation*. This appears thematically, in the repairing of friendships (after a tiff over politics or a disputed squash point), and in the startling number of pages depicting—with technical precision—the painstaking reconstruction of damaged skulls and brains. *Saturday*’s impulse toward reparation is structural as well as thematic. To cast this point in the biological terms that the novel’s protagonist prefers (Perowne frequently

10. McEwan is renowned for writing novels about the consequences of things going shockingly badly: e.g., a stroll disrupted by an attack of vicious dogs (*Black Dogs*, 1992); an afternoon picnic interrupted by a hot air balloon accident (*Enduring Love*, 1997); a promising young couple whose lives are torn apart by a false accusation of rape (*Atonement*, 2001).



refers to the biography of Charles Darwin he is reading), McEwan's narrative tends toward homeostasis, the prompt restoration of equilibrium following moments of instability or impairment. As the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has written, homeostasis is a living organism's innate orientation toward regaining metabolic balance in the face of disequilibrium or injury. This embodied predisposition to the achievement of balance is not an externally enforced commitment to "proportion," the favored term of the physician in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Rather, "the goal of the homeostasis endeavor is to provide a better than neutral life state, what we as thinking and affluent creatures identify as wellness and *well-being*" (Damasio 2003: 35). "A better than neutral life state" is for McEwan bound up with satisfaction, which marks not merely an individual state of mind but also a narrative tendency toward equipoise that constitutes happiness, neurologically understood.

Coming as it does from a "sensational writer caricatured by the British press as Ian Macabre and the Clapham Shocker" (Finney 2004: 82), the narrative commitment to equilibrium is unexpected for readers and critics attuned to the twists and narrative transgressions for which McEwan is known.<sup>11</sup> Most flagrant in this regard are the final pages of *Atonement*, which repudiate central elements of the story (e.g., revealing key characters to be dead in fact) and reveal the narrative itself to be a fictional creation of a treacherous character's unquiet mind. In the context of McEwan's literary career, *Saturday*'s consistent focalization through a level-headed main character and swift resolution of the smallest conflict constitute almost comedic instances of narrative propriety. One of Henry's first thoughts upon looking out his window is that, rather than anarchic or chaotic, the complex city is "a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work" (2005: 3). McEwan invites readers to see the novel itself in similar terms: the hybrid product of cultural and evolutionary achievements, a well-ordered "biological masterpiece" (ibid.).

The focal character's scientific proclivities and the scrupulous descriptions of cerebral disorders and surgeries align the novel with brain-centered neuroscience. Yet Henry's "habitual observ[ation] of his own moods" (ibid.: 4) and the narrative's commitment to homeostasis also mark the novel's engagement with affect, a broad term that encompasses a range of

11. A *New Yorker* reviewer notes, "The portrayal of familial contentment in *Saturday* was meant as a *provocation*" (Zalewski 2009, emphasis added); the same could be said of the tendency toward equilibrium in *Saturday*.

bodily experience extending beyond the brain. As the social theorist Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007: 2) has argued, “affectivity” can be understood as a “substrate of potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, in excess of consciousness . . . linked to the self-feeling of being alive.” Formally and thematically, *Saturday* attends to the ways that “the self-feeling of being alive” is importantly double: suspended between the material of the body and the capacities of the mind. Feeling emerges from the neurological substrate of consciousness working in tandem with the narrative underpinnings of human action, engagement, and belief.

Serious forays into contemporary neuroscience are, for both novelists and literary scholars, relatively recent occurrences.<sup>12</sup> (McEwan’s abiding interest in brain science has in fact distinguished him from literary friends and colleagues, such as Martin Amis and Julian Barnes.)<sup>13</sup> Alan Richardson (1998: 43) has observed that scholars in the humanities have tended to look for textual moments of epistemological impasse rather than focus on the narrative and indeed physiological structures that enable understanding: “Work in the humanities . . . has tended of late to highlight the breakdowns, aporias, ‘vertiginous’ aspects of cognition and linguistic activity.” Because of an analytical emphasis on misprision, error, and indeed disaster, literary critics have tended “to ignore the ordinarily smooth functioning that allows us to drive to the office, arrange to meet a friend, and mutually resolve a problem predictably enough that losing one’s way, missing an appointment, or talking at cross purposes seem exceptional rather than paradigmatic events” (ibid.). The daily activities Richardson itemizes offer a rough plot summary of *Saturday*, which follows Henry Perowne as he has a fender-bender but still makes his squash game; quarrels with an American colleague about the merits of military intervention in Iraq but then graciously reconciles with him; shops for dinner then squeezes in a visit to his mother; hits traffic yet arrives in time to hear his son’s jazz band record its new song; has a tipsy argument with his daughter but makes up; fends

12. Psychoanalytic critic Norman Holland has taken up the task with gusto, arguing that neurology helps to explain why readers experience literature as “‘out there,’ in a not-me when patently the only way it occurs to us, is as electrochemical pulses, action potentials, in our neurons, in me” (2002: 23). Adopting a historicist methodology, two recent scholarly collections, *Neurology and Literature, 1860-1920* (Stiles 2007) and *Neurology and Modernity: A Cultural History of Nervous Systems, 1800-1950* (Salisbury and Shail 2010a), argue that “neurological conceptions of the self” have been a central component in the literature and culture of “‘modernity’—or the historical period usually seen to stretch from 1850 and 1950” (Salisbury and Shail 2010b: 1).

13. For details on McEwan’s relationships with these writers, as well as his apprenticeship with a neurosurgeon and correspondence with the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, see Zalewski 2009.

off an intruder; performs surgery; and falls into contented sleep. Pugnaciously, McEwan takes up the literary gauntlet thrown by Leo Tolstoy (2003 [1878]: 1), that “happy families are all alike,” and therefore poor stuff for literature, and proposes to rewrite the postmodern novel in terms of nineteenth-century realism: to discern, in the ultimately successful day in the life of one London family, the entwined narrative and neurological structures of human contentment. From the moment each individual wakes up in the morning, McEwan affirms, human beings negotiate the quotidian world with surprising skill, largely unaware of the immense scaffolding that underlies the simplest of movements. It is the project of *Saturday* to shed light on the narrative and neurological foundations of everyday life.

### Waking Up and Making Up

In its attentiveness to the entanglements of narrative and neurology, *Saturday* raises the question of visibility. How can we see the stories unfolding around us? And, more difficult, how can we see the stories unfolding *within* us? Somewhat paradoxically, as Kay Young and Jeffrey L. Saver write in their essay “The Neurology of Narrative,” a focus on literary works can obscure the centrality of storytelling to everyday thinking:

When we choose to be in the company of narrative by reading a novel or seeing a film, the narrative sets itself off as narrative, not as part of our lives; we stand in relation to it as audience to its “performance” as an aesthetic work. However, the storytelling we experience as an event in life can lose its appearance as narrative by virtue of its integration in life. (2001: 72)

Novels, because they are such elaborate and explicit instantiations of narrative, can eclipse the quotidian stories, such as news reports, correspondence, and conversations that reverberate through daily life. Intricate narrative constructions, moreover, can obscure the small, unspoken stories—projections of myriad actions and outcomes—that occupy our minds, inform our most minute decisions, and collectively make up a life.

At a number of levels, *Saturday* takes up the challenge of bringing *narrative*, along with its affective components, to light. First of all, it includes some of the most graphic descriptions of neurosurgery—a practice that routinely opens up a space sealed to everyday eyes—to be found in a novel, thus literalizing the “making visible” of the processes of mind. (Pewne, for instance, recalls drilling through a patient’s skull to remove a tumor: “it lay exposed, the tentorium—the tent—a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer, where the dura is gathered and parted

again. Below it lay the cerebellum" [2005: 9].) Second, the narrative centers in the consciousness of a man professionally attuned to reading bodily signs: he has decades of experience diagnosing pathologies of the brain through physical tics, affective lability, and disordered thinking. Moreover, because his mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease, Perowne worries about his genetic predisposition to dementia and continually observes his own cognitive processes and lapses ("He's a dreamer sometimes. Like a car-radio traffic alert, a shadowy mental narrative can break in" to his thoughts [ibid.: 19]). Third, McEwan situates the novel during a cultural moment of dueling narratives on an international stage: the lead-up to war in Iraq, when differing positions over the presence of weapons of mass destruction fueled arguments for and against attacking Saddam Hussein's regime. Henry Perowne, a middle-aged man with a son at the prime age for military service (or antiwar activism), follows these conflicting accounts with parental vigilance. Fourth, Henry has a father-in-law who is a famous literary figure and a daughter who is a poet, both of whom badger the neurosurgeon about the existential centrality of narrative: "people can't 'live' without stories" (ibid.: 67), his daughter, Daisy, proclaims. McEwan establishes Henry, in short, as the equivalent of a narrative seismograph: aware of and deeply ambivalent about the arguments for and against going to war with Saddam Hussein; watchful for signs of neurological damage and continuously reflecting on the workings of his own mind and moods; intrigued by the importance that others—his daughter, in particular—vest in "stories."

Though the novel details the disintegration of brain function (in Henry's mother and a man named Baxter), it begins with a nonpathological instance of integration. The very first sentence tracks the emergence of human consciousness in the process of waking up: "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" (ibid.: 1).<sup>14</sup> The character's sentient body is already moving; it feels "easy . . . pleasurable . . . strong, [but] it's not clear to him when exactly he became conscious" (ibid.). Something has affected Henry Perowne, rousing him before the alarm clock rang, prompting a muscular response and causing him to approach the window. Motion, feeling, consciousness: Antonio Damasio (2003: 80), explaining the evolutionary emergence of complex human reasoning, explains that "in the beginning was emotion, but at the beginning of emotion was action." This emergence

14. For an excellent account of this scene as McEwan's virtuoso attempt to "narrate non-verbal, preconscious events," see Slimak's (2007: 56 and *passim*) unpublished thesis.

is recapitulated in Perowne's waking up. The experience of his affected body approaching the window marks the beginning of what neuroscientist Gerald Edelman has termed "primary consciousness," the process by which human beings and many animals integrate sensory perception with memory to form an unfolding awareness of one's surroundings and body. "Reflective consciousness"—which entails the specifically human abilities to be "*conscious of being conscious*" and to "report on our experience" (Edelman 2006: 14, emphasis added)—comes later, in both evolutionary time and in Perowne's experience of awaking. Reflective consciousness emerges slowly for Perowne, as he "wonders about his sustained, distorting euphoria" and thinks "perhaps down at the molecular level there's been a chemical accident while he slept" (McEwan 2005: 4).

The first paragraph of *Saturday* contains what looks like a small post-modern joke: Henry "feels he has materialized out of nothing," McEwan's sly nod to the fact that he is, of course, a fictional character. But the feeling of emerging from "nothing" speaks not just to the making up of narratives but to the waking up of consciousness, an event that happens to most people on earth at least once a day. William James, the late-nineteenth-century theorist of embodied mental states (and one expressly invoked in *Saturday*),<sup>15</sup> once described consciousness as that "stream of thought" that we inhabit, with "warmth and intimacy and immediacy," when we wake up (1992a [1892]: 158). In the first sentences of McEwan's novel, we witness the conditions under which both works of fiction and consciousness as such unfurl: first as motion, then as feeling, and finally as active awareness.

Henry Perowne's first action as he awakes is to move to his window. Henry James (whom Perowne refers to as "the fussy brother" of William James [2005: 56]), famously used the metaphor of a "watcher" looking out his own particular "window" to describe the formal centrality of the artist's point of view in literary expression. Here is Henry James's (2003 [1908]: 43) gloss of his metaphor: "The spreading field, the human scene is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist." McEwan thus begins his novel by literalizing both of the Jameses' metaphors (of waking and of watching). A newly awakened man named Henry with a daughter named Daisy—her "namesake" (McEwan 2005: 56) is James's fictional Daisy Miller—begins

15. Reflecting on his lapses of memory, Perowne thinks, "He should look out what [*sic*] William James wrote on forgetting a word or name; a tantalizing, empty shape remains almost but not quite defining the idea it once contained" (2005: 56–57).

McEwan's novel at an actual window, looking out and getting his bearings. Not just works of narrative fiction, this opening scene cleverly affirms, but everyday consciousness emerges from a situated, embodied, affectively charged point of view.

The first question of the novel, of the character Henry, and frankly of anyone aroused suddenly from sleep is, simply, *What's going on?* From its outset, McEwan's narrative depicts the fine details of perception, especially the mind's astonishing ability to feel its way into the world and negotiate the uncertainties of salience and scale. When Henry Perowne sees a bright flare in the morning sky outside his window, he first thinks *meteor*. "But surely meteors have a darting, needle-like quality," so, "in an instant, he revises his perspective outwards" to *comet* (ibid.: 12). When a rumbling sound reaches his ear, he "revises the scale again, zooming inwards" toward earth, now perceiving that the "comet" is in fact an airplane in flames on a flight path to Heathrow (ibid.: 13). The novel thus traces Henry's multilevel perceptual process of noting and identifying the bright celestial object, as the information provided by his senses reverberate with an array of small stories (meteor, comet, plane). Henry's mind then ranges over alternate outcomes—a successful emergency landing, a deadly inferno—and weaves into his solitary vision a looming cultural narrative: the plotline of 9/11, of benign-seeming airplanes turned, sickeningly, into weapons of terror. Because "everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed," Henry spins out another, now more dramatic story: "a fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against fanatics" (ibid.: 15).

Whereas Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* focalized the narrative through the consciousness of different characters, McEwan keeps it tightly with Perowne, who—himself like a novelist—extends his point of view to imagined others. (Recall Henry James's metaphor of the watcher at the window as the "consciousness of the artist"; here, it is also the consciousness of a neurosurgeon.) The simplest act of perception, such as registering a dazzling light in the sky, produces a cascade of small stories. He sees the plane, infers passengers, and projects himself into their (imagined) viewpoints: Henry not only narrates to himself the passengers' confusion and fright, he even imagines their reflective consciousness, their own assessment of their panicked actions: "Is it pathetic folly to reach into the overhead locker for your bag?" (ibid.: 16). His thoughts also zoom to others who are watching the plane's flight from the ground: "medics will be pulling on their clothes with no idea what they face" (ibid.).

Emotion catalyzes, and is present at every stage of, Henry's thinking: in his first arousal, in his groping to make sense of what is happening outside

his window, and in his vision of others' fear and anxiety. Henry affirms an objective relationship to the events he is witnessing—an “unredeemable materialist,” he reverently believes that “a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery” (ibid.: 135, 18). He does not, however, watch the plane dispassionately; he “wishes it, wills it” to come to ground safely (ibid.: 17). In William James's (1992b [1897]: 496–97) terms, a “philosophic neutrality” about whether the plane has crashed or managed to land may be a “safe enough position *in abstracto*” but “agnostic positivism” is unsatisfactory, indeed “unrealizable”: even at a distance the unfolding narrative in the sky is ripe with contingency and possibility, and knowing what is happening is bound up with the human impulse to hope.

The narrative of *Saturday* has a stitching motion: it moves inward to Henry's thoughts and feelings and then outward to objects and events transpiring around him. This has the effect of situating the reader within the character's mind as well as the world he inhabits; it also mimes the work of everyday consciousness busily suturing mind to world. The question of what transpired in the sky structures the novel's plot: it follows Henry throughout the day, as he (inwardly) reflects on and sifts through what he knows and feels and imagines, and (outwardly) talks to others and assimilates the bits and pieces of “breaking news” reported throughout the day. Just as Henry continues to calibrate “his own story” (2005: 68)—his solitary sighting, through the frame of his bedroom window, of a burning plane—with public events, so the news stories that flash on the television are constantly being amended as new information about the plane is discovered. The philosopher Lynn Rudder Baker (2009: 17, 15) has argued that “revisability of belief on the basis of experience is a hallmark of the empirical” and that “we are all empiricists without any special scientific training.” The central character, as everyday watcher as well as neurosurgeon, practices a situated empiricism: individual awareness is tested against both private feeling and public spectacle, as character, news media, and the reader apply themselves to the business of making out what was happening as Henry was waking up.

### Damaged Brains, Disordered Stories

With a neurosurgeon at its center, the novel's governing consciousness is exquisitely aware that the ability to negotiate a quotidian range of experiences—to be an effective empiricist—is rooted in the structure of the nervous system. The brain equips human beings not only with primary consciousness—what neuroscientist Gerald Edelman (2006: 14) calls the

moment-by-moment awareness of the present—but also with reflective consciousness, the ability to plan, hope, regret, solve problems, and above all, to be aware of our own minds. Human beings are biologically blessed (and sometimes cursed) with the peculiar ability to notice when something is not quite right, and to seek out assistance: this is what brings patients to Henry Perowne.

As we have seen, a focus on the quotidian event of waking up illuminates the workings of everyday consciousness. If integration in life obscures how narratives are woven into daily human existence, *disintegration* becomes a way to make them visible. Nowhere are the brain's coherence-making mechanisms on more vivid display than in their absence. In *Saturday*, Henry Perowne reflects that, when meeting with potential patients, “everything is stripped down to the essentials of being—memory, vision, the ability to recognize faces, chronic pain, motor function, even a sense of self” (McEwan 2005: 85). Attending to the ways that human beings persevere despite impairments, Edelman observes, can “demonstrate quite clearly *the constructive aspect of brain action* in the face of severe loss” (2006: 111, emphasis added). The physician and researcher Oliver Sacks has made an art of the instructive, often poignant neurological case study in collections such as *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985).<sup>16</sup> In populating *Saturday* with characters suffering from brain disease—Henry's elderly mother is afflicted with dementia; a man named Baxter is diagnosed with Huntington's disease—McEwan extends Turner's (1996: 12) dictum, that “only a neurobiologist is likely to notice the constant mechanisms of vision that create our visual world.” A neurobiologist would notice—or a novelist.

McEwan emphasizes the constant mechanisms of story that create our narratable (and therefore livable) world. After a series of strokes have damaged her capacity to retain memories, Lily Perowne lives in perpetual surprise verging on terror: “I've never been out this way before,” she tells the son she does not recognize, while “he guides her into the corridor, reassuring her all the while, aware that she's stepping into an alien world. She has no idea which way to turn as they leave her room. She doesn't comment on the unfamiliar surroundings, but she grips his hand tighter” (McEwan 2005: 164, 170). For Lily, the most rudimentary action—entering the hallway of her long-time residence—is existentially fraught; hers is the existence described by the weeping philosopher Heraclitus, where she, in her

16. Novelists, too, have been interested to probe the question of neurological impairment: some notable recent instances include Parkinson's disease (Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* [2002]), Alzheimer's disease (Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* [2007]), autism (Mark Hadden's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* [2003]), and Capgras syndrome, the belief that a familiar person is actually an imposter (Richard Power's *The Echo Maker* [2006]).



“existential bewilderment” (ibid.: 283), is forever stepping into a different “river.”

Edelman's seemingly oxymoronic conception of the “remembered present” provides a neurobiological understanding of consciousness that helps to give shape to the difficulty Lily has orienting herself even in her radically circumscribed environment. Building on William James's (1992a [1892]: 153) assertion that consciousness is not a “thing” but a process, Edelman emphasizes the temporal nature of the most immediate-seeming act of perception. Our experience of “now,” of the conscious moment, is dependent both existentially and neurologically on the reconciling of current sensations with what we have stored of the past: the “remembered present” is a complex sensory, muscular, and cerebral process that provides an “integrated awareness of this single moment” (Edelman 2004: 8). In this account, memories dynamically enable and condition perception, a process that coalesces in a conscious awareness of a unified-feeling, unfolding present. Strokes can harm brain structures devoted to memory: patients such as Lily can have severely truncated memories, limited to about a minute. So, “having failed to remember its existence, Lily isn't surprised to find herself in her room. She instantly forgets that she didn't know about it” (McEwan 2005: 165). T. J. Grabowski and Antonio Damasio (2004: 2) describe dementia as “an acquired and persistent impairment of intellectual faculties, affecting several cognitive domains, that is sufficiently severe to impair competence in daily living, occupation, or social interaction.” Unable to integrate past experiences into perception, Lily suffers from a narrative disability that unravels her sense of self, compromises her memory of others, and disrupts her moment-to-moment existence.

From the perspective of neuroscience, this distressing experience is not simply a failure of “intellectual faculties” narrowly understood, but an inability to coordinate bodily feelings with memories and concepts to produce a small story. An “experience of emotion,” Barrett (2007: 386) writes, “is a state of mind whose content is at once affective (pleasant or unpleasant) and conceptual (a representation of your relation to the world around you).” McEwan's novel dramatizes how even a minor accident involves the creative coordination of fact and feeling. In his response to a fender-bender, Perowne recognizes the emergence of “a peculiarly modern emotion—the motorist's rectitude, spot-welding a passion for justice to the thrill of hatred, in the service of which various worn phrases tumble through his thoughts, revitalized, cleansed of cliché: just pulled out, no signal, stupid bastard, didn't even look, what's his mirror for, fucking *bastard*” (2005: 82).

Perowne's small story about a scraped car is an almost comedic instance

of the interdependence of narrative, consciousness, and emotion, while Lily's dementia marks the tragic fragility of these collaborative capacities. The neurosurgeon's response to visiting his mother goes further, expressing the ethical centrality of such stories. The son's mind works overtime, spinning small stories that, collectively, situate him within the heartbreaking experience of being with a parent who no longer recognizes him. Henry observes Lily's tidy outfit and slim legs, alights on memories both close and distant (his last visit, his mother's athletic past), imagines others' perspectives (the cautious concern of the hovering attendant, Lily's anxiety at her forever unfamiliar world), pictures the microphysiology of her condition (high blood pressure, tiny ruptured vessels, damaged synapses) and plans his own quotidian resistance to developing dementia himself—no more eggs, less coffee, for “he wants his prodigiously connective myelin-rich white matter intact” (ibid.: 169). He loves his mother, though she can no longer participate in cultivating their bond; the son, then, performs both parts, weaving these sustaining narratives around and through his diminished parent.

Without this complex network of stories, Henry would find these visits not just emotionally unbearable but illogical, for his mother neither anticipates nor recalls his visits, and takes scant pleasure in his presence. She is unable to miss her son. When a staff member tells him, “She's waiting for you” even though “they both know this to be a neurological impossibility” (ibid.: 162), they collaborate in “making up” Lily Perowne, supplying the sense of self and significance that Lily's injured brain cannot. Stories, in Turner's (1996: 19) account, are intimately linked to action and therefore agency: we move through the world “executing small spatial stories; getting a glass of juice from the refrigerator, dressing, bicycling to the market.” These are precisely actions that Lily cannot perform without assistance. Because the stories that circulate around Lily are both sustaining and efficacious, they can aptly be termed *prosthetic*. Like an artificial limb, these prosthetic stories are “made up” yet have real material effects, supporting both Lily and the caregivers as they provide the emotional and material resources she needs.

In its depiction of Lily's curious colloquies with her son, the novel further affirms how, even in the face of neurological damage that makes it impossible for Lily to communicate, she uses storylike structures to convey feeling if not sense. Lily retains the ability to “confabulate”: to spin out sentences that retain some narrative elements—including characters, dialogue, and a familiar syntax—but which do not quite cohere. “I told him anything that's going for a liberty,” she tells Henry, “and he said, I don't care. You can give it away, and I said don't let it waste in the fire. And

all the new stuff that's going to be picked up" (2005: 169). She concatenates clauses and seems to recount a story: "the structure of her sentences are intact" (*ibid.*: 166) but not quite. Young and Saver (2001: 76) observe that "confabulating amnesic individuals offer an unrivaled glimpse at the power of the human impulse to narrative." Even in their fractured form, Lily's "nonsense monologues" leave open tiny affective doors for interaction: "the moods which inflect her various descriptions make sense"—conveying suspicion, or anxiety, or amusement—and "it pleases her if he nods and smiles" (McEwan 2005: 166, 169).

The damage to Lily's brain has left what Barrett (2007) calls "core affect" intact: she feels fear when someone walks in her room, pleasure at a friendly gesture, anxiety about an object. But the strokes have damaged her capacity to discern salience, the neurological process by which objects in the world take on affective importance in particular contexts, because "damage from the small-vessel clotting . . . destroy[s] the mind's connectivity" (McEwan 2005: 166). She cannot correlate her moods of pleasure or displeasure with time, place, and events that would help her recognize a face, reciprocate a compliment, or identify a thing. In Barrett's (2007: 386) account, reflective consciousness emerges when an individual's core affect "is bound to a particular situational meaning, as well as a disposition to act in a particular way." Because of her dementia, Lily has no prior knowledge by which to situate herself, no sense of how to act. Entering her room, "she dithers, uncertain of where she should sit"; she "recoils" when Henry hands her an orchid, having "lost her grasp of the concept of a gift" (McEwan 2005: 165). Her son observes that "she unravels in little steps" (*ibid.*), as her moods float free of the small stories that would tether them to her surroundings and give Lily her bearings.

The neurosurgeon supplies the emotional coloring to redirect Lily's moments of agitation toward pleasure: he will "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 then will be happier" (*ibid.*: 169). Henry tells her stories about his work, knowing she'll respond to "the emotional tone of a friendly conversation" (*ibid.*: 166). When a nurse enters the room, Henry notices his mother's tension and supplies a prosthetic emotion in the form of a character sketch—"What a lovely girl she is. Always helpful"—and this is enough: "His emotional cue is irresistible, and she immediately smiles" (*ibid.*: 167). Devoid of memory and therefore lacking the capacity for creating meaningful narratives to situate herself within her ever-surprising milieu, Lily takes her emotional prompts from others.

While the root of Lily's disability lies in the damage to parts of the brain responsible for integrating affect and memory, other neurological dis-

orders can leave memory intact but disrupt an individual's ability to regulate affective response. Unlike Lily, Baxter is aware that he suffers from an inherited condition called Huntington's disease, which first affects muscle coordination. As Henry reflects, Baxter is stuck in a narrative generated by his genetic makeup: "*It is written*, spelled out in fragile proteins" (ibid.: 217) that the man's bodily movements and feelings will become increasingly disordered until he loses all motor and cognitive integration. After a car accident brings Henry and the impaired man together on an ominously quiet street, the neurosurgeon's eye makes out Baxter's "chorea"—a medical term for jerky, unregulated movements—and notes that "there's no obvious intellectual deterioration yet—the emotions go first" (ibid.). Huntington's disease results from a defect in a single gene, which causes the "signature of so many neurodegenerative diseases—the swift transition from one mood to another, without awareness or memory, or understanding of how it seems to others" (ibid.: 96). The character's miscoded string of genetic material has enormous significance in the novel's plot, for the ailing man is neurologically primed to lash out at the rich doctor who bashed his car and his rage proves tenacious, prompting a malicious visit later in the day to Henry's house in Fitzroy Square.

In their initial encounter over their damaged vehicles, Henry recognizes and manages Baxter's aggression. Whereas Henry supplies emotion content to his mother, channeling her arousal toward pleasure; in Baxter's case, he supplies an alternative narrative—hinting his disease could be cured—in an effort to redirect the man's "spooky uncontrollable emotions" (ibid.: 276). Drawing on his neurological knowledge, the surgeon makes a few quick declarative statements—"Your father had it. Now you've got it, too" (ibid.: 95)—to arrest his attacker's attention. Henry pulls him into the catechism of doctor and patient, asking the man questions about his symptoms and intimating that, like a "witch doctor" or "shaman," he had access to treatments for Baxter's incurable illness (ibid.). The proffered narrative deflects the man's labile anger into a "transitional phase of perplexity or sorrow" (ibid.: 99), with just enough time for Henry to escape to his car and drive away.

Severe damage to the neurological structures that regulate emotion, as William James (1992b [1897]: 495) noted, can make the world itself seem labile and unpredictable; for such individuals, events appear as "mere *weather* . . . doing and undoing without end." Baxter is such a figure, and McEwan (2005: 99) echoes James in describing the man's disordered consciousness and chaotic sense of the world around him as "mental weather." The character's "mood front[s]" unravel the small stories that allow him to navigate the world and, even more fundamentally, provide the sense of

a durable identity: "It's of the essence of a degenerating mind, periodically to lose all sense of a continuous self, and therefore any regard for what others think of your lack of continuity. . . . In the sudden emotional rush of his mood swing, he inhabits the confining bright spotlight of the present" (ibid.: 232).

The character of Lily reveals what happens when the capacity to make links—between causes and effects, feelings and happenings, memories and objects—is forever compromised by a bleed in the brain. Baxter's disintegrating mind makes visible how the most essential story of all, the feeling of a continuous self weathering the vicissitudes of time, is rooted in the delicate neurological structures that mediate one's actions and beliefs. Disease or injury can disrupt this network, causing the most simple of human accomplishments (from identifying a bright object in the sky, to not killing a stranger who scratches your car) to become fraught and even impossible. The ability to wade into and make sense of the world of human affairs depends—so the characters of Lily and Baxter confirm—on the neurological coordination of narrative, consciousness, and emotion.

### Cooking, Constructivism, and 9/11

*Saturday* is preoccupied with the small stories that succeed (in the case of Henry) or do not succeed (in the cases of Lily and Baxter) in coordinating mind and world. Yet the novel also addresses one of the paradigmatic "big" stories of the twenty-first century: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As we've seen, it does so through the lens of one man's consciousness: a burning plane in the London sky from Henry's bedroom, the massive crowd of antiwar protesters from the interior of his Lexus, and the military speeches of Tony Blair from the neurosurgeon's well-appointed kitchen. The novel's blending of small and big stories is notable: in *The Mind and Its Stories* (2003), Patrick Colm Hogan makes the case for distinguishing between important, paradigmatic plots that have "sustained interest within their respective traditions" and "ephemeral stories (for example, what I tell my wife about how I had to go to three shops to get a particular spice)" (ibid.: 6). In his withering review, John Banville (2005: 14) argues that *Saturday* shirks the big story, observing that "think small" might be "the motto of McEwan's book."

Yet *Saturday*'s potentially dissonant concatenation of paradigmatic plot and small story—the horrors of terrorism, the selection of spices—carries with it a philosophical premise. It is only from a particular position—from within an embodied self, which feels, acts, and thinks from an attitude of agency—that one pilots oneself through the world, casting objects and

happenings and other people into unfolding stories that provide a means of feeling one's way through the day. That said, in threading together world-historical events and an emotional domestic occasion, McEwan's novel involves a bravura act of orchestration, both exemplified and allegorized through the practice of *cooking*.

Toward the end of the novel, Henry Perowne prepares the meal that his far-flung family—three generations, gathering for the first time in over a year—will share that evening around the dinner table. The scene is precisely balanced, with depictions of chopping and sautéing interlarded, sentence by sentence, with a television news report on the anti-Iraq-war demonstrations that have provided the background hum of Henry's day. Here's a sampling of the narrative's rhythm (which follows the cadence of the character), alternating between cooking and newscasting:

Into his palm he empties several dried chillies. . . . *The TV news comes up. . . .* Onto the softened onions and garlic—pinches of saffron, some bay leaves. . . . *On the big Hyde Park stage, sound-bite extracts of speeches. . . .* Into a stockpot he eases the skeletons of three skates. . . . *A senior police officer is answering questions about the march. . . .* From the green string bag of mussels Henry takes a dozen or so and drops them in with the skate. . . . *An establishing shot shows the United Nations building in New York, and next, Colin Powell getting into a black limousine. . . .* They'll eat the stew with brown bread, salad and red wine. *After New York, there's the Kuwait-Iraq border, and military trucks moving in convoy along a desert road.* (2005: 181, 183, emphases added)

This extended passage is a tour de force, alternating the quotidian details of Henry's improvised fish recipe with televised shots of the then uncertain (and later inexorable-seeming) preamble to the century's first major war. McEwan set his fictional narrative on February 15, 2003, a day marked by antiwar protests worldwide. Readers in 2005 would be aware that the United States, supported by Great Britain, indeed went to war in Iraq (though they may be less aware that the bombs started dropping just four weeks after the day the novel is set). The story of Henry Perowne touches, obliquely yet crucially, on the real-life story of the lead-up to war, of fallen towers, weapons inspectors, speeches to the United Nations, and the deployment of troops. What the neurosurgeon calls the "problem of reference" (*ibid.*: 18) is foregrounded: How do the stories match up with things and events in the world?

As readers of *Atonement* know, McEwan is interested to mine the tension as well as the consanguinity between fiction and worldly events: the plot of the earlier novel, after all, turns on the tragic consequences of a false accusation of rape. The first three sections of *Atonement* tell the roman-

tic story of a young couple who fall in love, are parted (after the woman's younger sister Briony gives false testimony that sends the man to prison), yet are soon reunited. The fourth and last section, set half a century later, reveals that the now elderly Briony is in fact the extradiegetic author of the prior sections, and that in reality the lovers (whose story inspired Briony's novel) were never reunited and died separately, soon after the accusation. Thus, from one perspective, *Atonement* uncomfortably links lying and novel writing through the fictional author. However, as an excellent profile of McEwan notes,

More than anything, the structure of "Atonement" resembles one of those psychological studies which McEwan so admires. If the reader becomes fully invested in the drama—to the point of resenting the revelation that the story is Briony's invention—then, according to McEwan, the experiment worked. "I'm still often asked, 'What really happened?'" he said. "I don't tire of it, because I think that to ask that question of me means I succeeded in something." He explained, "We can't retreat to the nineteenth century. We now have a narrative self-awareness that we can never escape, but we don't want to be crushed by that, either. 'Atonement' was my attempt to discuss where we stand." (Zaleski 2009)

In both *Atonement* and *Saturday*, McEwan prompts such "narrative self-awareness": both works serve as canny reminders of the ways that our story-loving minds, for all their success in steering our beliefs and actions (and making us think we know what's going on in a novel), are susceptible to misprision, error, and indeed manipulation. "McEwan plays on the complacency of readerly expectation, whereby, with the help of detailed verisimilitude, readers tend to turn fiction into fact" (Wood 2009). The postmodern awareness of the storied nature of human existence meets a realist imperative to come into meaningful contact with an empirical world.

Finally, the question raised by *Saturday* is this: What is the relationship between events unfolding in the world and our neurologically rooted, narratively structured capacity to know them? Henry Perowne's touchstone William James (1987 [1907]: 574) offers a clue: "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verif-ication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*." McEwan sets his exploration of the biological human propensity for narrative in a heightened political context that hinges on questions of verification and validation: Was the pro-war account—that the government of Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction—true?

Henry Perowne reflects that the prime minister presents the decision as a question of evidence: he “has suggested in the past that if we knew as much as he did, we too would want to go to war” (2005: 142). But there’s another question to be asked: “Is this politician telling the truth?” (ibid.). Henry reflects that, though the science of facial expression has offered techniques for discerning a knowing falsehood through signs of feigned feeling, it can offer no proof against “a dedicated liar” who has “persuade[d] himself he’s sincere”:

Does this man sincerely believe that going to war will make us safer? Does Saddam possess weapons of terrifying potential? Simply, the Prime Minister might be sincere and wrong. He could be on the verge of a monstrous miscalculation. Or perhaps it will work out—the dictator vanquished without hundreds of thousands of deaths, and after a year or two, a democracy at last. . . . Henry experiences his own ambivalence as a form of vertigo, of dizzy indecision. In neurosurgery he chose a safe and simple profession. (Ibid.: 143)

Henry’s uncertainty is also playing out at the level of the population, where “there’s a fair degree of anxious support in the country along with the dissent” (ibid.: 147).

At stake is the difficulty of knowing what course to take in an unfathomably complex and contingent context, where many competing and more-or-less compelling narratives vie (“The Iraqis might use biological weapons against the invasion force. Or, as one former inspector keeps insisting, there might no longer be any weapons of mass destruction at all” [ibid.]). Edelman (1989: 266) writes, “There are no infallible or incorrigible mental states in the operation of normal brains. We can even be in error about a phenomenal state. . . . Moreover, we have already discussed the tendency of brain action to find closure, to produce filling in, and to confabulate if necessary.” But, when Henry looks at the PM’s face on the television, “all he sees is certainty” (2005: 147). William James (1992c [1897]: 1046) describes “mental vertigo” as the “belief of a thing for no other reason than that we conceive it with passion. . . . What evidence is required beyond this intimate sense of the culprit’s responsibility, to which our very viscera and limbs reply?”

By 2005, the publication year of McEwan’s novel, it had become clear that the United States and Great Britain went to war on the basis of two stories passionately held and imperfectly validated: the presidential administration’s tale of Saddam Hussein’s stockpiled weapons of mass destruction and the “sinister nexus” that Powell described between the 9/11 terrorists and Iraq (DeYoung 2006). The evidence, to use the metaphor adopted by myriad news reports, had been “cooked.” Many commentators, such as



the *New York Times*, have laid the blame at Vice President Dick Cheney's door, whose "rigid thinking" relied on "preconceived notions" and "helped propel us into an invasion" (Mitchell 2004). John Kerry described Dick Cheney's quest to take revenge for the 9/11 attacks as "a recipe for disaster in Iraq" (Geiger 2007). Other commentators referred to the White House's bellicosity, insularity, and paranoia as a "recipe for cooking intelligence" (McGovern 2007); one Web site in 2005 went so far as to write a "Neocon Cookbook" with sardonic recipes, such as Dick Cheney's devilled eggs, with instructions to "season lightly with red, white and blue peppercorns and holy water. Break many more eggs than necessary to make the meal, the more broken eggs the better" (Zingh 2005). The Bush administration clung fervently, its critics argued, to a simple and disastrous recipe.

In setting the novel at this particular moment, McEwan raises the specter of relativism: in an uncertain world, one might ask, are not all stories equally speculative and therefore equally valid? Were not Cheney and others operating on "gut instinct"? We can address this question by thinking through the constructivist links among feeling, thinking, action, and corroboration. Though irreverent, the metaphor of Cheney "cooking the evidence" can be brought into fruitful contact with a model of affect that conceives of emotion as importantly *constructed* and not merely instinctual. Because "cognitions about the world are not separate from and do not cause emotion—they constitute it" (Lindquist and Barrett 2008: 899), a zealous commitment to a course of action feels self-confirming. Crucial to an individual's understanding of the world is his nuanced "recipe file" of emotion knowledge that produces something akin to affective expertise:

In our view, you might conceptualize an unpleasant, highly aroused state in a self-focused way and label it as fear in some instances, but as anger in others. In still other instances, you might experience world-focused emotion and take your core affective state as evidence that the world is threatening or that your boss is a jerk. In each instance, core affect combines with conceptual knowledge about emotion, much in the same way that ingredients in a recipe combine. (Ibid.)

A paucity of ingredients produces a thin gruel; Henry's fish stew, tellingly, mixes spices from around the world with myriad vegetables and at least six different species of ocean life. His "conceptual knowledge about emotion" is equally rich, based on a lifetime of close observation, neurological training, (reluctant) literary reading, and rewarding relationships.

In the final scenes of *Saturday*, the exuberant cook, loving parent, skilled neurosurgeon, and imperfect reader are all on display. Together, they provide a model of expertise that emerges from specialized training, teamwork, practice, and oversight, while also making the case for the rewards

of careful reading, of expanding the “ingredients” in one’s “pantry” of narrative and emotional knowledge. Awareness is distributed: when Henry’s daughter, Daisy, proudly presents him with the manuscript proof of her collection of poems, “she moves closer to him to see her book through his eyes. He sees it through hers, and tries to imagine the thrill” (McEwan 2005: 209). After weathering Baxter’s breaking into their house and threatening violence, Henry’s family goes over and over what happened,

They want to have it all again, from another’s point of view, and know that it’s all true what they’ve been through, and feel in these precise comparisons of feeling and observation that they’re being delivered from a private nightmare and returned to the web of kindly social and familial relations, without which they’re nothing. They were overrun and dominated by intruders because they weren’t able to communicate and act together; now at last they can. (Ibid.: 238)

Because of the human tendency to enjoy the comforts (at times solipsistic) of satisfying and familiar narratives, *Saturday* makes the simple case for conversation, calibration, and corroboration: for opening up one’s narrative and emotional “kitchen” to others.

Reading is presented in *Saturday* as a practice that models both the impulse toward certainty, with its myriad satisfactions, and the indispensability of doubt and corrigibility.<sup>17</sup> McEwan presses this point by making the climactic home invasion—when Baxter holds the family hostage and forces Henry’s daughter, Daisy, to strip—into a striking moment of reading and interpretation. When Baxter insists that Daisy read one of her poems, she wisely avoids her own erotic lyrics and instead, taking her grandfather’s hint, recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” In extreme duress, Henry hears in the poem elements of what he takes to be his daughter’s erotic autobiography: “Perowne sees a smooth-skinned young man, naked to the waist, standing at Daisy’s side” (ibid.: 229). In Hogan’s (2003: 68) terms, Henry’s initial response is childlike: “We could see aesthetic response, then, as a development out of the childhood tendency to appropriate a work entirely to one’s own autobiographical concern.” When Daisy recites the poem a second time, her father realizes he’s misconstrued much of it, having “missed first time the mention of the cliffs of England” and “discover[ing] on second hearing no mention of a desert” (McEwan 2005: 230). It is not, he recognizes, autobiography, and reconstructs his under-

17. Critics have tended to read *Saturday*’s scene of poetry recitation in disparaging terms, as a return to a nineteenth-century British jingoism and Arnoldian sentimentalism. For example, Rebecca Carpenter (2008: 154) writes that “British tradition . . . saves the day, and tuggish terrorism is put down by the keepers of the British spirit of fairplay.” For an excellent overview of these accounts, see Kempner (2009: 58).

standing accordingly. Later still, Henry learns that the poem is not even by Daisy but by Matthew Arnold. McEwan leaves his protagonist with this improved but still limited enlightenment. He bequeaths to readers versed in literary history the task of enhancing Henry's interpretation, to see the poem as a commentary on the contemporary moment where, once again lacking "certitude," England (and the United States) is "swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night" (Arnold 1867).

Such explicit moments of construal and correction in the novel condense and illuminate the processes of mind that are everyday and ongoing. As the neurosurgeon passes through his day, literally as well as mentally weaving in and out of the protesters who occasionally block his path, he engages in meta-commentary on his own position as a reader of the unfolding events. He absorbs the question of war into his day, even as he ruefully acknowledges that events have in turn assimilated *him*: Henry reflects that, following the story of the burning plane and the war protest, he's "been only too happy to let the story and every little nervous shift of the daily news process colour his emotional state . . . His nerves, like tautened strings, vibrate obediently with each news 'release'" (McEwan 2005: 184–85). In the morning, he had seamlessly imagined his way into the panic of passengers on what might have been (but was not) a doomed plane; in the evening, he reflects—critically—on the labile motions of his own faltering understanding of the terrifyingly consequential political narratives circulating but as yet unresolved in February 2003.

*Saturday*, both using the example of neuroscience as a discipline and importing its wisdom about the human mind, makes the case for a constructivist making-up, for the necessary creation of stories and the equally necessary methods of reflection, calibration, and revision. It also offers a critique of a dogmatic account of truth, one that is immune to the insights provided by narrative wisdom, scientific integrity, and collective oversight. Matt Steinglass (2009) attributes this immodest, anti-empirical mode to what he calls "The Neocon Mind," describing it as

an inability to cope with the ambiguity of information; or, to say the same thing, the ambiguity of reality; or, to say the same thing, the multiplicity of human subjectivity. The neocon mind is binary: Saddam either does or does not have WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. If he has WMD, we must invade. . . . They don't work with a good theory of mind that allows for comparing unreliable info (from Curveball, say) to reliable info (from Hans Blix, say). And because they don't recognize the ambiguity of the underlying info, they have no room for accepting the fact that different people have different perceptions of that info, and that actions have to adjust to the reality of varying perceptions.

The focalizing point of view for *Saturday*—an aging, increasingly conservative doctor, averse to narrative fiction and a bit self-satisfied—provides a compelling alternative to the “neocon mind.” *Saturday* takes up a question that preoccupies contemporary writers, that of how the human mind collectively and individually mediates the external world, yet does so without undermining an essentially realist commitment to observable relations of cause and effect, the tendency of human events to conform to rules of probability, and the need for ongoing verification and revision. With empiricist zeal, the novel probes how the neurologically rooted human mind employs emotion-rich narratives to pilot individuals—largely successfully—through their days. It is precisely this success, however, that can make the storied texture of experience invisible; just as it takes an effort of attention to become aware of the air that we breathe or the firmness of the ground we walk on, so the neurological novel helps us see the stories circulating around, through, and within us. Finally, McEwan’s novel proposes to explore what a scientific perspective, passionately and knowledgeably held, can contribute to a constructivist understanding of how our minds work and the deeply embodied human appetite for narrative creation.

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