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Dichotomous Images in Ian McEwan's *Saturday:* In Pursuit of Objective Balance

ABSTRACT

Saturday sets out to depict the contemporary world with its ambiguities and paradox. In the novel, like in a mirror painting, every event, character and conflict is highlighted from diverse, often contradictory, angles by the narrator's extensive commentary, flashback and reference to other books. The prevailing happiness of mass protests against the war on Iraq is countered by the recollection of mass graves, an element of Saddam's callous regime, the real terrorist threat is contrasted with national paranoia, and the Prime Minister's performance of truthfulness is scrutinized by means of Paul Ekman's study of micro-expressions.

The technique of dualistic depiction is further used in order to describe the characters. Reworking the idea of two sides of the same coin, McEwan offers the novel as a metaphorical study of the intricacies of human personality. Therefore, Baxter becomes simultaneously an offender and a victim, John Grammaticus turns from a successful poet into an alcoholic womanizer, and Lilian Perowne's physical and mental disintegration is contrasted with her past as a champion swimmer.

McEwan's dichotomous description of the world echoes Barthes's binaries, not only in the duality itself, but also in the fact that the juxtaposition of contradictory images constitutes a more complete depiction of an event or a person. The contrast between the opposing ideas is further accentuated by the use of different jargons: the language of medicine, media, upper-class, working-class, and the like. The use of language throughout the novel seems to repeat the notion that by means of jargons people control and exclude others, highlighting their authority and constructing their position of supremacy.

Saturday, which captures acutely the events of a single day in the life of a renowned neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, presents issues, such as the terrorist threat or the creation of media reality, that appear international in consciousness. The essay illustrates how, with admirable

artistry, McEwan incorporates meaningful images, visually complex descriptions and different kinds of language into a diary account, for readers to enjoy a more objective comment on the contemporary world.

ABSTRACT

McEwan in his stream-of-consciousness novel *Saturday* introduces a single third person narrator, Henry Perowne. And it is the extensive retrospections, discerning commentaries and meticulous descriptions of Perowne that endow his depiction of reality with a sophisticated even-handedness. Important are also his personal qualities. He is a 48-year-old renowned neurosurgeon, the devoted husband of Rosalind and the proud father of two children, Daisy and Theo. His professional training and predilection for logic influence his way of perceiving the world. Unlike Mrs. Dalloway or Leopold Bloom, Perowne delineates the external reality in an unemotional, analytical and organized way. He illuminates two oppositional views of the same issue without passing judgment. This brings to mind Barthes's binaries. According to the French theorist, a word acquires its meaning when juxtaposed with its binary opposition because the clear difference between the opposing ideas allows for an interpretation (Bonnycastle 245). *Ipso facto*, a word can be elucidated by comparison with its opposition, by defining "what it is not." McEwan's depiction of the world in *Saturday* echoes Barthes's dichotomy as events and characters in the novel are presented through contrast by means of digressions.

Depiction of the reality in terms of binary oppositions introduces, more or less successfully, objective balance to the narrative. The term objective balance, not to be mistaken with objectivism, is used in this essay to denote the narrator's ability to describe the events that he witnesses or even participates in with detachment, and his aptitude for detecting the ambiguities of the outside world, being aware of his own biases and emotions. Consequently, the moral judgment is left to readers.

For it is readers who have to decide, for example, whether the invasion on Iraq is just. On Saturday 15 February 2003, Perowne, on his way to a squash match, watches people preparing for a mass protest against the war on Iraq. He is perplexed by the happiness and excitement of the assembling crowd. People are hugging each other, cheering and clapping. He watches them taking out placards, banners, whistles, football rattles, funny hats and cartoonish rubber masks of politicians.

> From the impatient pavement crowds, some dry runs with the noise-makers—a trombone, a squeeze-ball car horn, a lambeg drum. There are ragged practiced chants which at first he can't make out. Tumty tumty tum. Don't attack Iraq. Placards not yet on duty are held at slope, at rakish angles over shoulders. Not in my Name goes past a dozen times. (71)

The cheerful atmosphere of the protest is underlined by the rhythm of passages describing the march with its short, onomatopoeic words, arranged in simple sentences. These sentences include political slogans, *Don't attack Iraq, Jews against the War, Down with this sort of Thing*, the names of associations participating in the event that also carry the quality of political catch phrases, *British Association of Muslims, Swaffham Women's Choir* and the names of towns, *Stratford, Gloucester, Evesham* in order to imitate a lively beat of the march and its ambience. Behind Perowne's description, however, lurks criticism of the protesters' attitude and their ignorance towards the regime in Iraq. His immediate reaction to what he sees in the streets is a recollection of Miri Taleb, an Iraqi professor in his late sixties whom he once treated. The academic was subjected to torture for an unspecified crime, and he never discovered what the charges were against him. Commemoration of his imprisonment is permanent damage to both shoulders and scars of thorn bush on his thighs. Perowne reminisces the academic's story:

> The torture was a routine—Miri and his companions heard the screaming from their cells, and waited to be called. Beatings, electrocution, anal rape, near drowning, thrashing the soles of the feet. Everyone, from top officials to street sweepers, lived in a state of anxiety, constant fear. (62)

In Henry's account of the professor's imprisonment the language of violence and terror prevails, devoid of any sentimentalism, as befits a surgeon. While Perowne enumerates plain facts, the emotions, introduced mostly through describing the procedures of the system, are confined to pain and fear. The factual and dry tone of these passages highlights the terror of Saddam's regime, and stands in stark contrast with the scene of the march, emphasizing the impropriety of emotions binding the mass protest. Watching the crowd on the news, Henry reflects upon his ambivalent and conflicting feelings about the invasion: "All this happiness on display is suspect. . . . If they think—and they could be right—that continued torture and summary executions, ethnic cleansing and occasional genocide are preferable to an invasion, they should be sombre in their view" (69). Perowne recapitulates two sides of the pro- and anti- war conflict, but resists consenting to either of them as both groups advance tenacious arguments.

Saddam behaves like a spoilt, "overgrown boy with a pudgy hangdog look, and dark eyes" who "feels a wish and its fulfilment as one" (39). He makes use of torture and murder as a means of maintaining his power, getting personally involved in ethnic cleansing or violent interrogations. Blair, on the other hand, is faced with a deadlock but he conceals his anxiety about the aptness of his decision. While Henry is watching Blair's speech in Glasgow, his thoughts wander back to his brief encounter with the Prime Minister at the Tate Modern where Blair mistook him for an artist, and having realized his mistake, cut the conversation short and moved on. Henry detected in Blair's hesitation a hairline crack. Now referring to a study by Paul Ekman, a renowned psychologist, who has reported that microexpressions betray lying, Henry tries to scrutinize the Prime Minister's face on TV screen but in vain, and as a result, there emerges a paradoxical image of Blair as a sincere liar.

This kind of depiction extends to many other characters in *Saturday.* For example, the portrayal of Lilian Perowne, Henry's mother, suffering from vascular dementia and living in an elderly home, is contrasted with the surgeon's recollection of his mother as a champion swimmer; John Grammaticus, Henry's father-in-law, used to be a successful poet but turned into an alcoholic womanizer; and Baxter, the intruder who terrorized the Perownes, is portrayed as a gene's victim.

Baxter's introduction into the novel as his red, series-five BMW collides with Perowne's luxurious Mercedes S500 already suggests both the class conflict and Henry's ambiguity in perception of the young man. The surgeon's first glance at the BMW evokes his associations "for no good reason with criminality" and "drug-dealing" (83), while the driver's posture emanates physical violence. As they shake their hands, Perowne tries to appraise Baxter:

> Baxter is one of those smokers whose pores exude a perfume, an oily essence of his habit. Garlic affects certain people the same way. Possibly the kidneys are implicated. He's a fidgety, small faced young man with thick eyebrows and dark brown hair razored close to the skull. The mouth is bulbously, with the smoothly shaved shadow of a strong beard adding to the effect of a muzzle. The general simian air is compounded by sloping shoulders, and the built-up trapezoids suggest time in the gym, compensating for his height perhaps. . . . He gives an impression of fretful impatience, of destructive energy waiting to be released. (88)

Thus, from the very beginning of the encounter, Henry realizes that if he does not consent to Baxter's demands he will receive savage beating, but his pride outweighs his reason. As the violence nears eruption, Perowne detects that the attacker suffers from Huntington's disease, and

mentally he lists the symptoms: "sudden uncontrollable alternations of mood, to the helpless jerky dance-like movements, intellectual dilapidation, memory failure, agnosia, apraxia, dementia, total loss of muscular control, rigidity sometimes, nightmarish hallucinations and a meaningless end" (94). From the moment of diagnosis, Henry begins to perceive Baxter partly as a thug and partly as a neurologically-conditioned being not fully responsible for his own behaviour. McEwan's use of medical language in this passage, and throughout *Saturday,* echoes the notion that by means of language people control and exclude others; that with professional jargon and idiolects, they highlight their authority and construct their position of supremacy, and Perowne is fully aware of the power of language as he interrogates Baxter: "He surprises himself. This fussy, faintly archaic 'indeed' is not generally part of his lexicon. Deploying it entails decisions; he isn't going to pretend to the language of the street. He is standing on professional dignity" (89). The surgeon uses his knowledge and medical terminology to gain dominance over the attacker and escape the beating. However, Baxter feels humiliated and in retaliation, he invades Henry's house and terrorizes his family, using a knife. The transcendental power of poetry when Daisy recites Arnold Matthew's poem "Dover Beach" and Henry's promise of a new Huntington's disease treatment distract Baxter and the family is able to overpower him. In the fight, Baxter sustains a head injury and is taken to hospital, and although it might seem implausibly coincidental, Perowne is called for his surgery. The roles change and now it is Henry holding a knife, which symbolizes dominance, to incise Baxter's skull. Once Perowne is inside his brain, he ponders about the workings of human mind:

> Just like digital codes of replicating life held within DNA, the brain's fundamental secret will be laid open one day. But even when it has, 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. Could it ever be explained, how matter becomes conscious? He can't begin to imagine a satisfactory account, but he knows it will come, the secret will be revealed. (262)

This fragment is only one of Henry's countless digressions on the medical progress whereby McEwan creates in *Saturday* neurologically determined world and his characters are biologically-conditioned beings. In this world, Perowne exercises some degree of power due to his profession, but not unlike Mrs. Dalloway who feels guilty and ashamed that because of her privileged life she has not shared the suffering of a shell-shocked veteran of World War I, Perowne blames himself for abusing his authority

towards Baxter. In this violent, young man, he recognizes a gene's victim, behind whose insanity is a deeply unhappy individual. Henry thinks himself into the mind of Baxter and experiences "many contradictory impulses" (271) as he simultaneously pities his fate, and hates him for threatening his well-being. With the appearance of Baxter, the symbol of violence, Perowne's life is marked with an unanticipated shift from the public to the private terror. Before the encounter, Perowne's experience of violence was an abstract concept, limited to the knowledge from the news coverage:

> He takes a step towards the CD player, then changes his mind for he's feeling a pull, like gravity, of the approaching TV news. It's the condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to generality, to a community of anxiety. The habit's grown stronger these past two years; a different scale of news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes. (29)

Thus, when at the crack of dawn, Perowne notices a plane coming down over the Post Office Tower, trailing a fireball from its wing, he associates it with a terrorist attack. Echoes of news and its language woven throughout his narration, which Katie Roiphe, an American book critic, regards for McEwan's reflections upon the world, might, in fact, denote Henry's involuntary entrapment in the media reality. As the novel, although historically framed, aims more at explaining how history is created rather than mirroring the events of a particular period. McEwan reveals this intention by drawing a direct connection between *Saturday* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children,* which explores the ways in which history is given meaning through the telling of individual experience. For Saleem Sinai, born just as India gains independence from Britain, life becomes inextricably linked with the political, national, and religious events of his time.

Although Perowne prefers to have the world explained rather than to have it reinvented by magic realism, his role in *Saturday* resembles in many ways the function of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children.* Henry epitomizes England during the squash match with his American friend, Jay Strauss, and he describes history-in-the-making, using fragmented information from the media. He is aware that news is subordinated to image manipulation, that the dissemination of basic information is distorted by business interests, and that even horrifyingly immediate events have become in some way just dramatized media events which take place on TV in scenes manufactured for political purposes:

> Does he think that his ambivalence—if that's what it really is—excuses him from the general conformity? He is deeper in than most. His nerves, like taunted strings, vibrate obediently with each news "release."

> He's lost the habits of scepticism, he's becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn't thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses, he isn't thinking independently. (185)

But it is Henry's ambivalence that directs his panic-stricken thoughts from the plane crash to the Schrödinger's Cat experiment, which he first learnt about on a physics course. The paradoxical experiment attempts to illustrate the problem of quantum mechanics; a cat is placed in a box with a bottle of cyanide connected to a detector. Depending on the state of the subatomic particle (spin up or spin down electron, it has either characteristic at random), the bottle might release the gas and kill the animal or it might stay intact. Ten minutes later an observer opens the box to see whether the cat is alive or dead. But between trapping the cat in the box and the end of the experiment, the cat is neither dead nor alive. The paradox of the Schrödinger's Cat experiment mirrors ambiguous state of Perowne's mind as he equally strongly believes that the plane crash can be either a terrorist attack or an unfortunate mechanical failure. Both of the possibilities are equally probable until one of the instances actually comes true.

Henry's lack of certainty about the nature of the plane crash, but also about the war on Iraq or Baxter and other conflicts in *Saturday*, is an important trait of Henry's personality continually returned to by McEwan throughout the novel: "He saw the fire in the sky and changed his mind about it twice" (13). "He had shifting ideas about this coming invasion"(61). "Opinions are a roll of a dice" (72). "Henry experiences his own ambivalence as a form of vertigo, of dizzy indecision" (143). "The certainties have dissolved into debating points" (287). Other numberless examples can be traced on almost every page of the novel as indecision is the key to Henry's reliability as a narrator.

In his moral realism and rejection of easy certainties, the surgeon emerges as the figure who attempts to convey a true message by analysing contradictions and ambiguities that exist in himself and in the outside world. McEwan divulges this ability of Perowne at the very beginning of *Saturday* quoting an excerpt from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* as a kind of motto to his book. The passage describes the man in the bleakness and isolation of the modern world, who is trying to come to some kind of conclusion about his own life and about the ambiguous world around him. In an interview for *The Guardian*, McEwan explains his choice of the book and the fragment: "Herzog reflects on the way the entire world presses in on him, and Bellow seems to set out a kind of manifesto, a ringing checklist of the challenges the novelist must confront, or the reality he must contain or describe." McEwan sets a similar task for Perowne, who has to depict the world with its ambiguities and paradox. Therefore,

every event, character and conflict that occurs on this particular Saturday is illuminated from multiple, often contradictory, points of view by Henry's extensive commentary, flashback and reference to other books. The mass protest is impugned by Perowne's recollection of Miri Taleb's torture, the real terrorist threat is contrasted with national paranoia, the certainty of the Prime Minister is negated by a flashback of Henry's brief encounter with Blair, and Baxter becomes an offender and a victim at once. The contrast between the opposing ideas is emphasized by different kinds of language, for example language of medicine, media, violence, slogans, upper-class or working-class, and by symbols and metaphors like the knife or the Schrödinger's Cat experiment. This dichotomous depiction of the world echoes Barthes's binaries not only in the duality itself but also in the fact that the juxtaposition of contradictory images constitutes a more complete description of an event or a person. Familiarized with different aspects of a conflict, readers are asked to pass moral judgment. This is how McEwan engages his readers in the narrative, and introduces objective balance into his stream-of-consciousness novel.

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