

SATURDAY BY IAN MCEWAN OR THE RESURGENCE OF 9/11 IN ALLEGORICAL FORM

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1. A number of British novelists have registered the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in September 2001 as a form of disaster which marked a significant change in their ways of perceiving and representing the world. Martin Amis, for instance, declared that, after September 11 2001, it seemed that “all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation” (Amis 2002). Ian McEwan, for his part, admitted in an interview he gave a few months after the attacks, that he now found it “wearisome to confront invented characters”. “I wanted to be told about the world” he said. “I wanted to be informed. I felt that we had gone through great changes and now was the time to just go back to school, as it were, and start to learn.” (Donadio 2005)¹

2. McEwan’s novel *Saturday* appears as an attempt to come to terms with the sense of crisis the author experienced in the wake of 9/11: the novel uses the symbolic medium of the allegory in order to translate the attacks into a domestic plot of the rich and the safe intruded upon by the rogue. If *Saturday* engages the 9/11 issue only indirectly², in the form of the London demonstrations which preceded American and British military intervention in Irak in 2003, I would like to contend however that this indirect form of representation is the literary device Ian McEwan comes up with to confront the thorny problem of representing and understanding the singularity of 9/11 as disaster (Badiou 1993, 76)³: given the fact that a disaster is an event which has been unduly generalised to a situation where it did not apply, if an event is always the product of a subsequent discourse (Arquembourg 80-85), isn’t disaster best represented by means of the textual politics of indirection? It has become a commonplace

¹ The quotation comes from a talk given by Ian McEwan on “The Charlie Rose Show” in March 2005, and is reported in *The New York Times*, Aug 7, 2005, in “Truth is Stranger than Fiction” by Rachel Donadio.

² As opposed to McEwan, American writers such as Eisenberg deliberately take sides. Eisenberg uses a reproachful tone in her short story “Twilight of the Superheroes” to evoke the disabusing of bohemian New Yorkers who have moved, just before 9/11, into an expensive downtown apartment with a glittering view of the city's skyline.

³ According to Alain Badiou, a “disaster” is a figure of evil disguised as event which is the product of the extreme belief in the power of a truth, inducing a reaction of numbed bewilderment in those who witness it. In the case of 9/11, the “truth” which the terrorists held as absolute was of a religious nature, and led to the destruction of thousands of lives.

to dwell on the illusion of immediacy given by TV images of 9/11. In *Saturday*, images, in particular TV images, have the power to “make [reality] real at last” (35). For all that, they begin to make sense of the event only when accompanied by a story: “only then is it explained” (35). But the story can make sense of disaster only when it probes into its “point de réel” (Badiou 2003, 72)⁴ through the mediated form of the allegory, which, according to its Greek etymology, “speaks otherwise”, ie produces both a surface and an under-the-surface meaning. This capacity for indirection allows for *Saturday*'s grasp on the real without any voyeuristic complacency, and involves the reader in a process of making sense of the event through active allegorical decoding.

3. *Saturday* takes place on Saturday February 15th, 2003, against the background of the demonstrations organised to protest against British support of military intervention in Irak by 200,000 people⁵ who gathered together in London. Apart from an explanatory flash back which takes place in France, the plot unfolds in London, where brainsurgeon Henry Perowne, the main protagonist, lives, just North of Oxford Street. Interestingly enough, in spite of the novel's anchorage in British reality, the narrative opens up to the heritage of American fiction as early as its epigraph, which is taken from Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, and strikes a remarkable echo with the condition of *Saturday*'s main protagonist. Characteristically enough, Saul Bellow's novel, which was written at a time of American support of South Vietnam, is preoccupied with the trajectory of an individual and the definition of his identity against the background of American involvement in a colonial enterprise. Through this epigraph, *Saturday* is programmed to resonate with the sense of individual experience against a controversial political experience which shapes Bellow's *Herzog*. *Saturday*'s main focus lies indeed on individual experience: the 9/11 attacks appear as marginal in a story which focuses on the main protagonist's perceptions of the world around him and on the many errands he has to run on that Saturday. The mixture of interior monologue and free indirect speech (Clark Hillard 188)⁶ which constitutes his discursive identity as a character induces the reader to sympathize with the protagonist to the point that it becomes quite tempting to identify his voice with McEwan's own. Yet, Perowne's views concerning 9 /11 do not coincide with the author's, as the allegorical treatment of the attacks demonstrates in the novel.

⁴ The notion of the “point de réel”, borrowed from Lacan, refers to the horror of the real which appears when the layers of the symbolic and the imaginary have been peeled.

⁵ 200 000 according to the authorities, two million, according to the demonstrators.

⁶ According to M. Clark Hillard, the novel has repeatedly been described as the “yoking of the modernist stream of consciousness and the characteristically free and indirect discourse of an omniscient narrator”.

9/11 as event

4. *Saturday* translates the terrorist attacks which threatened “our whole ways of life” (35), into the main protagonist’s private experience of momentous change in the reality around him. Perowne’s sense of unease, his repeated misinterpretations of the various situations he finds himself in, converge to form an allegory of a post-9/11 world where disaster is no longer a mere possibility in people’s lives, but a double lining, a virtual reality always at the ready to getting actualised. The novel’s focus on the main protagonist’s unease and discomfort in his everyday life creates an allegory of a post 9/11 world where the rupture induced by the events has been disseminated and transformed into a feeling of impending disaster. *Saturday*’s literary treatment of 9/11 is remarkable in that it allows the events to change regimes; it decenters, deterritorialises them and lets them percolate in the narrative, so as to make them intelligible to the reader by linking the main protagonist’s trajectory on that Saturday with America on 9/11: the experience of radical rupture brought about by the attacks is converted into a virtual continuum of violence which can be actualised at any moment. When the novel’s plot represents the protagonist’s family as being intruded upon by two street mobsters who threaten to kill and rape, it proposes an allegorical transposition of the sense of intrusion the travellers in the planes on their way to the towers must have felt, when their planes were hijacked by the jihadists.
5. In its climactic scene where the narrator’s snug world is brutally intruded upon, the protagonist’s enduring sense of unease appears as a fictional equivalent of Western bad conscience and possible sense of guilt after 9/11. Even though the novel does not present itself as a forum for international politics, its “politics of the quotidian” (Brown 83) therefore formulates a political statement about 9/11 and the way it should be understood: its fictionalization of 9/11 transforms the amazed feeling of shock and surprise experienced by the Western world after the attacks, into an individual’s trajectory which harbours a universal inquiry into the causes of apparent gratuitous violence and our responsibility in it.
6. In *Saturday*, McEwan is interested in exploring the way the world has been shattered by 9/11, and the role literature may play in representing the events. In par with McEwan’s own conception of the political novel as “an open-ended voyage of exploration of experience” (McEwan 1989, 12), *Saturday* explores 9/11 *qua* event through the resonances of the attacks in the life of an individual and his family. If the novel represents 9/11 only indirectly (the anti-war demonstrations held on Saturday, February 15th, are relegated to the background), the

world which the novel depicts is definitely post-trauma: an event has taken place which has transformed culture and society in a radical way. From the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that the protagonist's predicament, his obscure sense of unease, his repeated misreadings of the world around him, are consequences of the attacks whose impact is recorded in the protagonist's difficulty in making sense of the post 9/11 world. Significantly, Henry Perowne misreads a good number of situations he is confronted with because he systematically interprets them in the light of Fred Halliday's assertion that "the New York attacks precipitated a global crisis that would [...] take a hundred years to resolve" (32-3). His grid of understanding reality has taken on board the idea that disaster is now immanent, no longer a possible reality, but a virtual one, always caught in the process of being actualised⁷. Thus, when he sees a burning plane streaking through the sky outside his window, in the small hours of the morning, he misinterprets it as a terrorist attack on his whole way of life, a case of overinterpretation he later condemns as irrational:

It's at this point he remembers the source of his vague sense of shame or embarrassment: his readiness to be persuaded that the world has changed beyond recall, that harmless streets like this and the tolerant life they embody can be destroyed by the new enemy—well-organised, tentacular, full of hatred and focused zeal. How foolishly apocalyptic those apprehensions seem by daylight, when the self-evident fact of the streets and the people on them are their own justifications, their own insurance. The world has not fundamentally changed. Talk of a hundred-year crisis is indulgence. There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate change, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger, poverty and the rest (77)

His apocalyptic misreading of the world appears as symptomatic of the fact that the 9/11 attacks have transformed people's ways of making sense of the reality around them.

7. The attacks have obviously disrupted the symbolic network which helps Perowne understand the world. Indeed, the protagonist repeatedly insists on the idea that the attacks have altered language and the signifying process: "There's to be a new look—there's always a new look—at the hospital's Emergency Plan. Simple train crashes are no longer all that are envisaged, and words like 'catastrophe' and 'mass facilities', 'chemical and biological warfare' and 'major attack' have recently become bland through repetition" (12). The changes which the dignified neurosurgeon records in the linguistic texture of his professional life designate 9/11 as an event which has transformed people's way of speaking because it has

⁷ According to Gilles Deleuze, the virtual differs from the possible in so far as the virtual is real, whereas the possible is not (it may happen; equally, it may not).

altered their perception of things and events:

It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed (16)

8. 9/11 has changed people's grids of interpreting the world because it has radically altered the reality around them: "Against his own inclination, he's adapting [...] No going back. The nineties are looking like an innocent decade, and who could have thought that at the time? Now we breathe a different air" (32). Perowne's own frequent misinterpretation of the reality around him is a symptom of the momentous impact of 9/11 on reality and language, and his numerous misreadings and misunderstandings turn him into an emblem of the Western World's bewilderment and numbed disbelief in the aftermath of the attacks:

This past hour he's been in a state of wild unreason, in a folly of overinterpretation. It doesn't console him that anyone in these times, standing at the window in his place, might have leaped to the same conclusions. Misunderstanding is general all over the world. (39)

9. Thus, Perowne begins his day in the small hours of the morning mistaking a burning plane about to perform an emergency landing in Heathrow, for a terrorist attack on his "whole way of life". He then escapes a street beat by using his medical knowledge to humble down his aggressor in front of his accomplices, which he regrets when the aggressor takes his revenge on him by intruding into his house and threatening to kill his wife and rape his daughter. In a gesture of self-defense, Perowne nearly kills the intruder by throwing him down the stairs after which he spends the end of the novel trying to make up for it in the operating theatre, performing the surgeon's healing touch on the man's brain. His very incapacity for adequately reading the situations he has to face appears as a symptom of a post-disaster world where our capacity to make sense of reality has been challenged. Perowne's difficulty in reading the world, the fact that his days are "baffled and fearful" (4) derive from his incapacity, as a scientist, to make rational sense of the attacks which seem to have defeated reason. Thus, Perowne feels "unhinged and unreasonable" (24) throughout the novel, because he believes in the power of reason to confront such an event, but his conclusion is that reason has obviously failed there: "Perowne held for a while to the idea that it was all an aberration, that the world would surely calm down and soon be otherwise, that solutions were possible, that reason, being a powerful tool, was irresistible, the only way out; or that like any

other crisis, this one would fade soon [...]. But lately, this is looking optimistic” (32).

10. Resisting rational appreciation, the attacks defy political judgement. Perowne’s difficulty in positioning himself clearly when it comes to discussing military intervention in Iraq is quite telling in that respect. Perowne’s ambiguous position vis-à-vis the support of American troops by British ones and his critical appraisal of the anti-war demonstrations in London on that Saturday contribute to representing the protagonist’s position as indecisive. 9/11 seems to have cancelled the possibility of adopting a moral vantage point from which to take a clear-cut ideological position, when it comes to discussing international relations and possible retaliation after the attacks. Thus, Henry Perowne’s lack of enthusiasm for the peace demonstrations in London does not voice McEwan’s own viewpoint as regards international politics so much as it embodies the difficulty in making political sense of the disaster. When Perowne reduces the anti-war demonstrations, which take place on that Saturday in London, to an outburst of carnivalesque enthusiasm, regretting the lack of seriousness of the marchers, his debunking of their cause is not to be taken at face value but appears as a fictional symptom of the post-traumatic world characterized by the crumbling down of the Western World’s dominant political and ideological certainties:

There’s no shortage of happiness [...]. Placards are already piled high, and folded banners and cards of lapel buttons and rubber masks of politicians—Bush and Blair in wobbling stacks, the topmost faces gazing blankly skywards, ghastly white in the sunshine. [...]. The joyous cheerfulness Perowne finds baffling (61).

11. Filtered through Perowne’s sceptical eyes, the anti-war demonstrations which form the background to the novel seem to lack any serious political agenda: the demonstrators have come with masks, music and banners. They are described as being full of “revolutionary joy” (72) rather than being “somber in their views” (70) the way Perowne thinks they ought to be, and their march appears to be born of the desire to preserve the comfort of British consumption society rather than the life of innocent civilians:

Not-in-My-Name goes past a dozen times. Its cloying self-regard suggests a bright new world of protest, with the fussy consumers of shampoos and soft drinks demanding to feel good, or nice. [...] They have good reasons for their views, among which are concerns for their own safety. Al-Qaeda, it’s said, which loathes both godless Saddam and the Shi’ite opposition, will be provoked by an attack on Iraq into revenge on the soft cities of the West. Self-interest is a decent enough cause, but Perowne can’t feel, as the marchers themselves probably can, that they have an exclusive hold on moral discernment (73).

12. In Perowne's eyes, the demonstrators' positions are hypocritical: they are ironically polluting the streets with the packaging of the meals they've bought at McDonald's, even as they are marching against British and American intervention. One cannot but taste the text's irony when Perowne rather heavy-handedly opposes a street sweeper intent on doing a good job, and the anti-war demonstrators carelessly littering the streets with the symbolic remains of American capitalism:

What could be more futile than this underpaid urban scale housework when behind him, at the far end of the street, cartons and paper cups are spreading thickly under the feet of demonstrators gathered outside McDonald's on the corner (74).

Perowne's condemnation of the demonstrators comes from his desire to see Saddam Hussein removed from power. Yet, when confronted with overtly pro-war colleagues of his, Perowne finds himself an advocate for peace:

[Jay] is a man of untroubled certainties, impatient of talk of diplomacy, weapons of mass destruction, inspection teams, proofs of links with Al-Qaeda and so on. Iraq is a rotten state, a natural ally of terrorists, bound to cause mischief at some point and may as well be taken out now while the US military is feeling perky after Afghanistan; And by taken out, he insists he means liberated and democratised. The USA has to atone for its previous disastrous policies—at the very least it owes this to the Iraqi people. Whenever he talks to Jay, Henry finds himself tending towards the anti-war camp (100).

13. Perowne's lack of certainty as to the right policy after the attacks is rooted in his belief that political and ideological positioning after 9/11 depend on circumstances and coincidences rather than on the possibility to give a thorough rational analysis of the situation. Had Perowne not operated on an Iraqi who became his friend and told him about Saddam Hussein's regime of torture, he would probably have sided with the anti-war camp:

Perowne knows that when a powerful imperium—Assyrian, Roman American—makes war and claims just cause, history will not be impressed. He also worries that the invasion or the occupation will be a mess. The marchers could be right. And he acknowledges the accidental nature of opinions: if he hadn't met and admired the professor, he might have thought differently, less ambivalently, about the coming war. Opinions are a roll of the dice (73)

14. Significantly, the novel fails to provide any consistent counterdiscourse to Perowne's ambiguous attitude concerning the war and disparaging description of the marchers, turning this ambiguity into the very significant consequence of 9/11 and the challenge on thought and reason the attacks represented. If the demonstrations are the butt of Perowne's critical irony,

Perowne's daughter Daisy, although a self-declared pacifist, does not significantly contribute to voicing arguments against the war, too busy or too tired as she is to join the demonstrators. The fact that she reduces the outcome of the war to something she can bet on, much in the way she used to bet on her successful entrance exam to Oxford University, is quite significant in that respect:

[This is Henry Perowne speaking] My fifty pounds say three months after the invasion there'll be a free press in Irak, and unmonitored Internet access too. The reformers in Iran will be encouraged, those Syrian and Saudi and Libyan potentates will be getting the jitters'.

Daisy says, 'Fine. And my fifty says it'll be a mess and even you will wish it never happened.'

They had various bets after arguments during her teenage years, generally concluded with a mock-formal handshake. After an exam seemed to go badly for her, seventeen-year-old Daisy angrily put twenty pounds on never getting into Oxford; To cheer her up he raised his side of the deal to five hundred, and when her acceptance came through she spent the money on a trip to Florence (192).

15. Similarly, Perowne's son, a guitarist, prefers practising for his next blues concert, rather than joining the demonstrators, although a mild sympathiser to them. His own attitude as regards the world situation is to "think small" (35) and to focus on his own individual comfort rather than start worrying about international politics. The post 9/11 world is a world he takes for granted: "International terror, security cordons, preparations for war—these represent the steady state, the weather. Emerging into adult consciousness, this is the world he finds" (32). His deliberate attitude of denial and lack of ideological commitment do not contribute to presenting any political alternative to his father's position, and appear as a symptom of the post-traumatic society general mood of bafflement. All in all, the protagonist's disorientation and lack of clear ideological positioning convey the idea that 9/11 *qua* event seriously challenged people's established categories for apprehending the world, preventing them from grounding political and ideological statements into moral and rational truths.

16. Through the novel's focus on the main protagonist's quotidian and the way this quotidian reflects post-trauma disorientation, Mc Ewan therefore represents the magnitude of the change brought about by 9/11. The novel converts the radical rupture of the attacks into the protagonist's persistent mood of existential malaise, into his sense of unease and immanent disaster. By translating 9/11 into the allegorical form of personal bafflement, the novel converts the incomprehensible into meaning, the terrorist attacks into an individual's

fear. The main protagonist's experience on that Saturday—his preparation of a dinner party, his squash game with his colleague, his visit to his aging mother, his narrowly avoiding being beat up in the streets and the intrusion into his house of two threatening street-mobsters—reads like a metaphor of a world where a radical type of rupture has taken place. The most routine moments of the protagonist's life which he apprehends with suspicion are rendered suspicious to the reader who interprets them as pregnant with symbolic meaning. By referring to 9/11 as having introduced a radical break in people's quotidian, McEwan therefore uses his main protagonist as a lense through which he can gauge the magnitude of the changes brought about by the attacks, in order to analyse and understand them. By translating the attacks into an allegory of immanent disaster, *Saturday* transforms them into a continuity of unease which makes sense of disaster in retrospect.

The role of the allegory: to give disaster “a local habitation and a name”

17. The contrast between Perowne's everyday life of bourgeois comfort and the sense of threat he experiences when perceiving and interpreting the world around him suggests that a change in meaning has taken place after 9/11, and that disaster has become immanent, present under the form of a continuous threat that things might turn out for the worst. When the main protagonist comes back home after visiting his aging and rapidly declining mother, and finds that the dinner party cum family reunion he has prepared is spoiled by the irruption of the same street louts who nearly beat him up earlier in the street, Perowne's enduring sense of menace and unease takes on an actual shape and the plot seems indeed to be taking a turn for the worst. Emplotted and fictionalised in the form of the gansters' violent intrusion into Perowne's well-groomed life, 9/11 is allegorically translated into the possibility for virtual disaster to be actualised as a form of retribution for the protagonist's social advantages:

Perowne can't convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family and have broken his father-in-law's nose. Perowne himself is also responsible. He humiliated Baxter in the street in front of his sidekicks, and did so when he'd already guessed at his condition. Naturally, Baxter is here to rescue his reputation in front of a witness (210).

18. The climactic scene where Baxter intrudes into Perowne's house and threatens to kill the protagonist's wife and to rape his pregnant daughter gives an interpretative key to the general mood of unease that has percolated through the narrative until then, and to the

reader's matching sense of doom. It appears as an actualization of Perowne's fear of a disaster that was only virtual (the episode of the burning plane Perowne took for a terrorist attack proved to be a mere emergency landing after all), and shows that the virtual is different from the possible, in that the virtual is real, ie always on the ready to being actualised, provided the right trigger is pulled. In *Saturday*, the trigger is indeed pulled by Perowne's miscalculations and misreadings of his original confrontation with Baxter and his gang, during which he uses his social and medical superiority to gain the advantage over his assailants and escape a beating:

Why could he not see that it's dangerous to humble a man as emotionally labile as Baxter? To escape a beating and get to his squash game. He used or misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse. The responsibility is his; Grammaticus's blood is on the floor because Baxter thinks the old man is Perowne's father (211).

19. The main protagonist's handling of his own social superiority leads him to humiliate the emotionally unstable gangster who seeks to take his revenge over the brain surgeon by intruding into his house. In the light of the symbolic convergence which has been wrought since the beginning of the novel between the protagonist's individual situation and the post-9/11 world, the reader easily decodes the scene where Baxter takes his revenge over Perowne's bourgeois world, as an allegorical transposition of the hijackers' deeds on 9/11:

Before Baxter speaks, Perowne tries to see the room through his eyes, as if that might help predict the degree of trouble ahead: the two bottles of champagne, the gin and the bowls of lemon and ice, the belittlingly high ceiling and its mouldings, the Bridget Riley prints flanking the Hodgkin, the muted lamps, the cherry wood floor beneath the Persian rugs, the careless piles of serious books, the decades of polish in the thakat table. The scale of retribution could be large (207).

20. The allegory induces the reader to interpret the climactic scene where the two street thugs hold the Perownes hostages in the light of Perowne's sense of immanent disaster. On reading the scene, the reader feels inclined to opt for the worst possible scenario, and anticipate the slaughter of Perowne's wife and the rape of his pregnant daughter as a form of retribution for the Perownes' self-satisfied social superiority. However, the worst does not take place and the Perownes escape unscathed thanks to the magic intervention of Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach" which Perowne's daughter recites as if it were her own creation. Even as the mobsters' intrusion into the protagonist's life seems to call for the hair-raising

irruption of the real onto the stage of fictional representation, Arnold's poem allows for a complete change in situations: it is powerful enough to move the leading gangster into abandoning his plan to rape the young woman. Baxter, who, like Perowne, thinks it is the daughter who has written the poem, is put under the spell of the poem's "mellifluous lines" (220) and "melodiousness" (222) which create an alternate world in his mind, reminding him of his childhood, in an epiphanic moment which proves lifesaving to the protagonist's family. The poem's call for love and faithfulness as an alternative to a sea of horrors and human misery is recontextualised in the post 9/11 context. It becomes a call for love in a loveless and violent world where terrorism has become a daily threat, which works on the gangster's own violence like a powerful sedative. Thus, Baxter abandons his projet to kill and rape and decides to get on the trial in the hope of getting cured from Huntington's disease which he suffers from.

21. Interestingly, the poem's recontextualisation is made possible through its images, which remind the gangster of his childhood, and are powerfully evocative to Perowne too, who describes the visual and aural effects they create on him as he listens to the poem. Even though the reader is not offered a full version of the poem in the narrative, only a running commentary of it by Perowne as he listens to his daughter's recitation, the reader can easily construe the source of the poem's effect and epiphanic quality, thanks to Perowne's description. The actual poem is to be found at the end of the novel, as part of the paratextual apparatus of the novel, like the epigraph and the acknowledgments. In the body of the narrative, however, it is presented only through its momentous impact and its capacity to transform the situation. Recorded in their effect onto the gangsters and onto Perowne, the poem's rhythmic images and their evocation of the ebb and flow of the sea conjure up an alternate world of mutual love. In spite of his terror, Perowne thus "feels himself slipping through the words into the things they describe" (220). The magic of making sense which the poem makes possible is attributed to the evocative power of its poetic images, which Perowne describes as visual: he "sees Daisy on a terrace overlooking a beach in summer moonlight [...] and sees a smooth-skinned young man, naked to the waist, standing at Daisy's side" (220). The magic of Arnold's poem is also aural: "she calls to her lover [...] to come and look, or, rather, listen to the scene. [...] Together they listen to the surf roaring on the pebbles, and hear in the sound a deep sorrow which stretches right back to ancient times. [...] But this evening the lovers hear only sadness and loss in the sound of the waves breaking and

retreating from the shore” (220-1). The poem’s epiphanic dimension is thus conveyed as the synesthetic combination of powerful poetic images and rhythmic sounds which mimic the scene they are evoking, that of a call for a sea of love against the sea of human misery and war.

22. Contrary to the poem’s magic and momentous visual and aural images, TV images fail to convey any sense of reality to the main protagonist. As Perowne looks for explanations for the burning plane he has seen streaking across the London sky earlier on in the morning, the images he sees on TV fail to give him any satisfying explanation about the plane. The three different interpretations which are given in the news all fail to convey any sense of the real situation. If the 9/11 images on TV were characterized by a hallucinatory sense of unreality (they were not shot at man’s level, they were redolent of the destruction of buildings in big council estates before reconstruction), McEwan’s treatment of the media in his novel emphasises the incredulity and hypnosis felt by the main protagonist: he keeps returning to them by switching on TV but gets no sense of what happened. For instance, the images which fail to confirm his misinterpretation of the burning plane reveal the limited capacity of the media to give a satisfying answer to his need of a rational explanation for the state of the post 9/11 world. This representation of the failure of TV images to convey some sense of the real induces the reader to wonder about the underlying causes of 9/11: “Since the language of images does not teach the spectator about the spectacle of the world, the spectator start[s] to question the intentions of those who had turned the world into images” (Jost 70). Thanks to the oblique representation of the event which McEwan’s allegory provides, the novel eschews the pitfall of voyeurism in dealing with terror on a large scale. Moreover, its allegorical mode increases the reader’s participation by constantly appealing to his or her talent for symbolic decoding. What the epiphanic scene of the life-saving poem suggests is that only when the conditions of production of the event are met with the conditions of its interpretation can the event begin to be understood: thus, the momentous poetic event in McEwan’s novel is left for the reader to decode as a felicitous encoding of the darker and sinister event which 9/11 represented.

23. Through its progression from the main protagonist’s sense of unease to the impending disaster which threatens his family, to a self-reflexive conclusion which foregrounds the power of words, the novel builds up an allegorical framework of the way Western upper-middle class consciousness was affected by 9/11, and of the possibility for words to

apprehend and comprehend the event. Like a blues chord, the novel can be read as “one of those cases of a microcosm giving you the whole world” (27), and its focus on individual experience reads like an allegory of the way 9/11 *qua* event affected society at large. *Saturday*'s transposition of 9/11 into an allegory which demonstrates the power of poetry poses the problem of the adequate representation of the event through its representation of the poetic event.

24. The obscure impression that the terrorist attacks were both totally unexpected and in some sense also totally foreseeable or at least intelligible, very adequately translates into McEwan's now well-known literary technique of establishing an underlying current of virtual disaster, which the reader expects to be actualised at any moment. The sense of impending doom, even of immanent terror, which we identify with a McEwan novel pervades *Saturday* where it is emblematic of the post 9/11 world, when set in resonance with the allegory of immanent disaster. It allows disaster as incomprehensible rupture to yield meaning by changing regimes. The momentous quotation of Mathew Arnold's poem “Dover Beach” by Perowne's daughter, provides the reader with an epiphanic and positive version of radical change. As the pace of the protagonist's hectic day slows down until it is finally suspended on the brink of disaster and the reader gets an even tighter grip on his book, wondering what will happen next, the novel celebrates its own fictional and representational powers, in a scene of magic suspension where the recitation of Mathew Arnold's poem is powerful enough to trigger a mood swing in the violator's mind which turns him into his hostages' victim. The sense of relief experienced by the reader at the magic intervention of the poem foregrounds the fictional space as a locus where disaster can be apprehended vicariously without hysteria nor voyeurism⁸, so as to be thought. If “allegory names the rhetorical process by which the literary text moves from the phenomenal, world-oriented to a grammatical, language-oriented direction” (de Man 68), then it is this very process which is foregrounded in *Saturday*, as a means of getting a literary grip on the complexity of the event. The magic intervention of Arnold's poem may appear as somewhat implausible, a *deus ex machina* which is not quite meant to be taken at face value, yet, the novel as a whole blatantly celebrates its own power as fiction to seize on the “point de réel” of the attacks, on their power to transform people's

⁸ There is a good deal of voyeurism and complacency in for instance Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) which contains a great number of photos (of keys, of a tennis star, of the early man, etc), whole pages of numbers and finally a flipbook in reverse of a man falling from one of the towers. The narrator is a boy who lost his father on 9/11, and who, by flicking the book, might hope to resurrect his father, if only in imagination.

quotidians into a nightmare of uncertainty where traditional ways of making sense of the world have become obsolete. This allegorical work, in turn, constitutes a literary event which transforms the reader's habitual perception of language and meaning, if one is to believe that "allegory says one thing and means another. It destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words "mean what they say"" (Fletcher 2). In spite of the author's own misgivings as to the power of fiction to capture such an event, McEwan's novel seems to invent its own literary response to the major terrorist attacks, by successfully rewriting the event in resurgent allegorical form, eliciting literature as a felicitous locus to apprehend the irrationality of the attacks.

Conclusion:

25. In *Saturday*, Ian McEwan forces 9/11 to make sense, by translating disaster into a significant allegory. In the novel's climactic scene, McEwan arranges for his protagonist to be given an explicit example of the performative power of poetry, in order to force him to think of the real event in terms of an event in meaning. Yet Perowne is a poor reader, and a poor admirer of literature, let alone of poetry. His response to what he thinks is the quotation from one of his daughter's poem is fed by incredulity and interpretative failure: "Arnold who? Henry says, and makes Daisy and her grandfather laugh. Henry adds, but she doesn't seem to hear, 'you know, I didn't think it was one of your best'" (230). The reader, however, who has been guided thanks to the allegorical work into an understanding of Matthew Arnold's poem as "eventmental", understands the meaning of the miraculous transformation which the poem is able to perform, and sets it in parallel with *Saturday's* own fictional powers. Thanks to the poem, disaster is averted; a spell is cast on the scene. The poem as an epiphanic event which tones down the violence of the fictional world turns the novel into a fable of the power of fictional representation to think and possibly to tone down the violence of the real world.

26. Despite the carnivalisation of the London demonstrations and in the absence of the main protagonist's of his family's decisive arguments for or against the war, McEwan's novel can be said to engage therefore in a political literary enterprise which consists in creating an illusory bubble of bourgeois comfort around its characters the better to poke at their "happiness" with a critical finger, a way of foregrounding in allegorical form the

responsibility of Western capitalism in the 9/11 attacks. In its allegorical story of the disruption of self-satisfied bourgeois comfort, *Saturday* commits itself to confronting the problem of our possible responsibility in 9/11: its fictional variations on the attacks invite us to ponder over our own possible responsibilities in the way we think of the event. Yet, the novel's most salient insight probably lies in its foregrounding of literature as event, where the magic of Mathew Arnold's poem reads like an invitation to counter political evil with the performative power of literary creation.

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