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Consciousness and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*:

'What Henry Knows'

Abstract:

An essay is presented on the representation of consciousness in Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. It considers the ways by which McEwan explores the complexities of mental processing through the combined effects of characterisation, focalisation and conceptual metaphors. It offers an interdisciplinary analysis, using ideas from the cognitive sciences to view *Saturday* as a meta-text, inviting us to reflect upon the complementary roles of science and the arts in our efforts to understand the mind.

*To wander about in the world, then, is to wander about in ourselves.*¹

Ian McEwan's novel, *Saturday* (2005), is part of the new momentum between the sciences and the humanities giving rise to the interdisciplinary study of the mind – cognitive science. Instead of the traditional divisions, rivalries and even hostilities between the arts and science, exemplified famously in 1882 by the Matthew Arnold and T.H. Huxley debate, and in 1959 by C.P. Snow who coined the phrase 'two cultures' for the science/humanities divide, *Saturday* is representative of the merging of these parallel discourses. An exquisitely contemporary text, it reflects the interest of the arts in cognitive science and their common endeavour to explore the human condition.

McEwan's *Saturday* is consciously about consciousness, exploring different ways of knowing and positioning literature, in particular poetry, as a critical participant in the quest to understand the mind. *Saturday* demonstrates that literature is "the most dramatic and textured

¹ Auster, 166.

expression of the human mind”,² and that new insights from the sciences about such complex and intriguing subjects as consciousness can be used to enhance our understanding of and critical engagement with literary texts. Reciprocally, the study of the representation of consciousness by literary scholars is “one of the most direct and illuminating methodologies available to cognitive science”.³

As a primary aim of the novel is to reveal thought and to affect us, to represent what it “feels like to be alive”,⁴ the novel is uniquely placed to enable us to know ‘what it is like’ to experience the mind of another. Through the combined effects of conceptual metaphors structuring the narrative, characterisation and focalisation, *Saturday* represents a metafictional site of struggle between the arts and science for an understanding of the mind. *Saturday* presents the reader with different ways of knowing; the role of science and the arts as modes of investigation into what it means to be a human being are explicitly questioned and answered. While literature, with its capacity to create “felt life”⁵ and to profoundly move us, is shown to produce insights into human nature that science cannot match, a metaphorical convergence of science and literature, “these two noble and distinct forms of investigation into our condition”⁶ is what the novel *Saturday* achieves.

Structurally, *Saturday* relies upon conceptual metaphors to help us make sense of difficult, abstract concepts such as life, time and consciousness. Many cognitive scientists, including Daniel Dennett, believe that it is impossible to think about concepts like consciousness without metaphor. Metaphors are not ornamental extras but essential “tools of thought”,⁷ they are a “way to eff the ineffable”⁸ says Steven Pinker. The overarching conceptual metaphor of

² Turner, 16.

³ Steen.

⁴ Doody, 282.

⁵ Lodge, 74.

⁶ McEwan, “Literature, Science, and Human Nature,” 19.

⁷ Dennett, 455.

⁸ Pinker, 277.

LIFE IS A JOURNEY⁹ structures our response to *Saturday* in a subtle but significant way, encouraging us to unconsciously reason about our lives in terms of journeys. By mapping our conventional ideas about journeys to the conception of life, McEwan channels our way of thinking about consciousness, and the “myriad impressions”¹⁰ a mind receives, to make the complexity of consciousness accessible. As metaphors arise in thought, and are not just a function of language¹¹ we are able to interpret the narrative and the function of character through a number of correspondences between the conceptual domains of life and journeys. Our reading is guided by the conceptual tool of metaphor to see the central character of *Saturday*, Henry Perowne, as a traveller, whose self-theorising and series of objectives throughout his Saturday will involve complications and choices. So, metaphor functions as a tool that structurally and temporally shapes the narrative and its foregrounding of consciousness, enabling us to better comprehend and in turn reflect upon the richness of experience.

McEwan explained to Zadie Smith during an interview that he was interested in representing “what it’s like to be thinking”.¹² To this end, his metaphorical framing of *Saturday* with LIFE IS A JOURNEY, as well as the basic metaphor of A LIFETIME IN A DAY, suggests modernist experimentation with form, bringing to mind Woolf’s narrative structure in *Mrs Dalloway* and the arguments of her well-known essay “Modern Fiction,” where she explores the complexity of consciousness: “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions”.¹³ Yet Henry Perowne’s mind is not ‘ordinary’ – he is a reflective neurosurgeon – and the setting of *Saturday* on 15 February 2003 – the day of world-wide protests against the invasion of Iraq – is no ‘ordinary day’. The inclusion of a

⁹ Lakoff and Turner, 3.

¹⁰ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 9.

¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3.

¹² McEwan, “Zadie Smith Talks,” 50.

¹³ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 9.

prologue from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* establishes from the outset that McEwan is attempting to capture a moment in time, a moment of being and to represent a thinking human mind during that moment. The presentation of Henry Perowne, as a neurosurgeon, suggests the conundrum of attempting to understand the mind in terms of matter, the mystery that our thoughts can actually have an effect upon the physical world. The prologue not only anticipates Henry Perowne's puzzlement about himself and the limits of knowledge, but contributes to the sense of *Saturday* as the product of a literary and cultural journey, of a literary evolution. Voices of other texts are alive in *Saturday* – there is a literary connectedness and dependence. The prologue's questioning of "what it means to be a man. In a city... In transition... Transformed by science," suggests the inherent connectedness of humans with their environment – Darwin's metaphorical 'web of affinities',¹⁴ as well as Bakhtin's notion of the novel as fundamentally about the "incongruity of man with himself".¹⁵ The focus is firmly on the thinking, individual mind and the role of science and literature as distinct but complementary ways of knowing as Henry Perowne wakes to commence his journey into his new day.

Saturday's opening sentence – "Some hours before dawn Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion..." (3) – immediately plunges the reader into the world and into the scientific, enquiring mind of Henry Perowne. Henry's emergent consciousness on this Saturday, a day that will be "marked out from all the rest" (51), is a literary trope – a border crossing from sleep into the territory of consciousness, a space for new journeys and discoveries of self. Standing naked and staring out of his bedroom window, Henry's consciousness represents the constant interplay between the brain and its environment: the "luminous halo"¹⁶ complexity of consciousness. His mind is represented as

¹⁴ Darwin, 415.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, 37.

¹⁶ Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 9.

an interactive “object in a world of objects and its relationship to these objects needs to be understood”.¹⁷ Henry is acutely aware of his body, his feelings and his thoughts. A specialist in the brain, he observes himself closely and tries to make sense of his responses to his surroundings. His “skin tightens” (4) in the cold air which is “fresh in his nostrils” (38), there is “pleasurable” (3) movement in his limbs and he does not need to “relieve himself” (3). At the same time he wonders why he has woken so early and why he has moved with “no motivation at all” (3) to his bedroom window; “he thinks of sex” (38). McEwan is drawing the reader’s attention to the biology of awareness – that feelings and thoughts are physical functions¹⁸ and therefore firmly grounded in the body. Henry’s mind and his body are represented as engaging equally with the environment as “consciousness is, to an important extent *of* where the body is at”.¹⁹

The reader is presented with the “second-by-second wash” (78) of Henry’s thoughts. His cognitive processes are hybrid, integrating multiple sources of information simultaneously. Within any single moment, a “teeming multiplicity of objects and relations”²⁰ occurs; bodily experiences, an awareness of the immediate environment, memories, current thoughts, feelings and more are merging. Daniel Dennett describes this simultaneous processing of one’s experiences as “multiple drafts”, viewing the brain as a parallel processing computer.²¹ McEwan represents this chaotic, associative integration within the mind through the dialogic, overlapping thoughts of Henry Perowne. He “doesn’t want any thoughts” (37) because they possess a contradictory “reeling tenuous quality” (22), and he struggles with them in an attempt to know them. His thoughts and emotions are not separated and his consciousness is suffused with an awareness and inability to understand his elated mood on this Saturday

¹⁷ James, 99.

¹⁸ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, 236.

¹⁹ Tallis, *The Knowing Animal*, 52.

²⁰ James, 224.

²¹ Dennett, 111.

morning. An “habitual observer” (5) of his emotions; aware that he is in a state of “sustained, distorting euphoria” (5), he ponders the scientific cause, possibly a “molecular level... chemical accident” (5). He feels restless and wants to know exactly why. His thoughts drift from questioning why he has woken, a consideration of his current mood, a quick reflection on the book he is currently reading, selected by his daughter Daisy, who “scolds” him for his “insensitivity” (6) and is “guiding his literary education” (6), to his work the night before.

Deep in thought and gazing from his bedroom window Henry is an enworlded self: a part of London, this “biological masterpiece” (5), a finely integrated and interdependent environment of “fibre-optic cables” (5) and water pipes. On this day of the “biggest display of public protest ever seen” (69), Henry sees himself as “adapting” (32) to the “early-twenty-first-century menu” (34) of mass destruction. Henry can see his world and reflects on the changing times. He can see the Post Office Tower, an icon for the mass-communication age and emblematic of the public domain unavoidably infecting the private. As Henry journeys through his day he will be drawn to the TV news and its bleak announcements about the impending war. The mind cannot be understood independently of the world,²² and Henry’s mind is presented as deeply connected to the frenzied and intrusive world around him.

Henry’s default way of thinking is essentially unimaginative. When the thought crosses his mind that his early waking might be part of a dream, he knows he will be disappointed because “dreams don’t interest him; that this should be real is a richer possibility” (4). Henry responds to his world in terms of observable, measureable truth. He knows his world through science and ruminates about the “miracle[s] of human ingenuity” (44) he routinely performs as a neurosurgeon. Henry knows the brain, he feels comfortable and in control in the “enclosed world” (11) of his operating theatre where he is privileged to actually see inside the skull, to see the brain – “the most complex organ in the known universe” (86). He thinks of

²² Clark, 46.

last night's operation when he viewed the pineal gland, the place, according to Descartes, where consciousness resides.²³ Henry craves his work and "prides himself" (12) on his speed and accuracy. At forty-eight, he confidently sees himself as a "master of the art" (8), with a "super-human capacity" (11) for operational success. He marvels at the "brilliant contradiction" (44) of science, that it can end misery with a "remedy as simple as plumbing" (44). His thoughts roam to many years earlier when he first met his wife Rosalind when she was a patient in the hospital where he worked. Suffering from a tumour on her pituitary gland she feared blindness, and the loss of rich visual sensation such as the experience of the colour red. The matter of how we know, how we experience the world, and the value of what science can and cannot explain is implicitly and explicitly explored by McEwan.

Literature, as a richer way of knowing – with the capacity to transmit feeling and qualia, something that science cannot do – is largely represented by means of contrasting characterisation and sustained focalisation through Henry's consciousness. The distinctiveness of Henry Perowne's mind – his individual scientific way of viewing the world is the prime focus of *Saturday*. Henry likes facts and rational explanations – he likes answers. The reader is made aware of the paradox of Henry as the hero of a novel, a work of the imagination, needing his daughter to guide him on a literary journey when he doubts the very existence of "literary genius" (66). McEwan's use of free indirect discourse manipulates the border of narrator and character voice to create the effect of the reader simultaneously inhabiting Henry's mind while remaining critical and more knowing than him. The protean nature of free indirect discourse succeeds in aligning the narrator and character voice and in constructing a "continuum from pure narrative words to pure character words".²⁴ The slippage and blurring of voices builds a narrative flexibility, exhibiting the dialogical nature of consciousness and creating a "mental space in which the reader enters not just the physical

²³ Dennett, 34.

²⁴ Toolan, 128.

world of the novel, but its mental world”.²⁵ Sentences such as: “these diaphanous films of sleep are slowing him down – he imagines them resembling the arachnoid, that gossamer covering of the brain through which he routinely cuts” (57), or “finally it lay exposed, the tentorium – the tent – a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the whirl of a veiled ballet dancer...” (11) contribute to communicating the multi-layered nature of consciousness. The merging of narratorial voices makes it very difficult to know who is speaking – why would Henry be describing parts of the brain to himself when he would know them, and with such a figurative use of language? Or is this the narrator’s voice? We are not consciously aware of the effects of free indirect discourse; it is part of the overall narrative and aesthetic framing, guiding the reader’s response to Henry.

The effect of sustained focalisation through Henry, the scientist, emphasises the gulf between his way of thinking and an alternative but complementary way of knowing found through the arts. This disjunction is metaphorically presented through Henry’s interaction with others. Much of Henry’s thoughts intersect with the thoughts of others, illustrating the fundamentally intersubjective nature of subjectivity.²⁶ Henry does not see the world the way his two artistic children and his poet father-in-law, Grammaticus, do, and it bothers him that he does not understand their artistic way of knowing the world.

Henry contemplates modern genetics, “how the cards in two packs are chosen” (25) when he thinks how different his two children – Theo, a blues musician, and Daisy, a poet, are from himself. Both of his children embody a knowledge that Henry does not possess and act as guides to his life’s journey. Henry appreciates music – he listens to Bach while operating, but the purity of his son’s blues playing disconcerts him. Theo’s music makes him aware of

²⁵ Oatley and Djikic, 19.

²⁶ Butte, 24.

something that is missing in his life, a “buried dissatisfaction” (28) that he does not understand. Henry’s bodily reaction to Theo’s playing, the “constricting” (28) in his chest, is a paradoxical “pain” and a “worldly joy” (28), a Byronic form of consciousness where “the great object of life is sensation – to feel that we exist even though in pain”.²⁷ Martha Nussbaum believes that music has a more direct access to the depths of our emotions than literature,²⁸ and Henry is certainly receptive to music’s purity. He knows that for Theo, music possesses “certain licks that contain... the key to all mysteries” (26), and it is this indefinable way of knowing, “the ungraspable communion of music”,²⁹ that unsettles the rational Henry. Grammaticus, Henry’s “drunk poet” (195) father-in-law, and his aspiring-poet daughter Daisy are the chief means by which McEwan sets up alternative ways of knowing in the novel. Henry and Grammaticus, the scientist and the poet, can barely communicate – they are “bored by each other” (195). Daisy has been attempting to educate her father into an imaginative, literary way of knowing with reading “assignments” (6) comprising a biography of Darwin, *Anna Karenina*, *Madam Bovary*, as well as works of Jane Austen and George Eliot. “What Daisy knows!” (58) – a conspicuous allusion to Henry James’s novel *What Maisie Knew* – she fails to convey to her father. He is not receptive to the way fiction opens up meaning allowing us to enter another world. Henry does not experience a sense of what it is to be alive from literature. He can see neither beauty nor purpose in novels, and is frustrated by their posing of questions rather than the providing of explanations and remains “unmoved” (67) by them. He does not know that one of the key reasons that humans read fiction is to engage with other minds and to experience alternative realities. Henry, the scientist, values the “material world” (67), “it interests him less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained” (66). He understands and is an expert at the “clipping of aneurysm[s]”

²⁷ Quoted in Humphrey, 27.

²⁸ Nussbaum, 265.

²⁹ Wood, “Darkling Plain.”

(27), and appreciates the “wonder of minds emerging” through evolution because it is “demonstrably true” (56). It is the imaginative aspect of literature, its lack of empirical truth value that disturbs and alienates Henry; “This notion of Daisy’s that people can’t ‘live’ without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof” (68). That the need for stories is linked to our need for self-knowledge,³⁰ and that human consciousness is of an essentially narrative nature, is unappreciated by Henry.

The slippage and merging effect of free indirect discourse enables the reader to feel aligned and yet gently critical of Henry. Evolutionary psychologists believe that fiction helps to build and maintain the brain, allowing us to understand the inner lives of others and to make adaptively better choices in our own lives.³¹ Henry’s way of thinking restricts him from seeing literature as an important resource in the investigation of human nature; as constituting a kind of knowledge about consciousness that is complementary to scientific knowledge.³² Henry’s reflections and his opposition to literary ways of knowing encourage *Saturday* to be viewed as a meta-text – drawing our attention to the ways literature works and the ways we engage with its fictional worlds.

Henry admires Darwin’s thinking, appreciating the “grandeur in this view of life” (55), “that exalted beings like ourselves arose from physical laws” (56), as he observes the interconnectedness of London while journeying through the city streets, but he fails to see the point of literature in any evolutionary terms. If natural selection is “ruthlessly utilitarian”,³³ then literature must contribute to survival in some way. Henry’s dismissal of literature as a way of knowing, his rigid physicalism, “he knows it for a quotidian fact, the mind is what the brain, mere matter, performs” (65), reduces his ability to astutely notice aspects of life. The

³⁰ Dennett, 428.

³¹ Tooby and Cosmides, 10; Young and Saver, 78.

³² Lodge, 16.

³³ Tooby and Cosmides, 10.

skills literature can teach us – the “mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday”,³⁴ are exactly the skills Henry lacks in his encounter with Baxter. Henry, an expert on the brain, fails to empathise and predict how another might feel; he fails to read Baxter’s mind and this endangers his entire family.

Henry’s antagonist, Baxter, represents randomness, the environmental and genetic “random ordering of the world” (210), and is a serious impediment to the progress of Henry’s journey during his Saturday. Henry and Baxter’s chance encounter on the deserted University Street can be seen as a domestic struggle for survival, contrasting the global struggle for survival by the nearby peace marchers. McEwan’s military diction – “calculations” (84), “tactical” (84), “disadvantage” (84), “flanking” (90) and “manoeuvrings” (90) – highlights the ancient fight or flight dilemma – the need to predict the behaviour of the other. In the moments Baxter and Henry size each other up and power is negotiated, Henry’s thoughts tumble and freely associate. He thinks of the relation between the brain and the mind and compares this primal exchange with Baxter to his “elemental” (86) role as a neurosurgeon. McEwan skilfully presents Henry’s dual perception as the deductive clinician and the frightened man facing the primordial need to defend one’s self against an enemy. Henry’s “professional attention” (87), his scientific thinking, dominates and he thinks he “understands” (91) Baxter when, based upon shaking symptoms of his hands and head, he correctly diagnoses him as suffering from Huntington’s Disease, a neurodegenerative disease leading to continual involuntary movements, progressive dementia and death. Henry uses the body to read the brain but ignores the mind. Henry’s dominant scientific mode of thinking, his correct diagnosis of Baxter’s disease based on hard, physical, observable evidence, obscures for him any relevance of Baxter’s thoughts or emotions, his “secret shame” (94) and how this might affect his behaviour. Theory of mind, our chief means of knowing and navigating our social

³⁴ Pinker, *Mind Works*, 543.

environment, is not utilised by Henry. He does not display any empathy for Baxter suffering from such a genetically pre-determined fate. He does not project his consciousness onto Baxter's and does not try to understand his state of mind. In his subsequent squash game with his work colleague – another, albeit friendly, battle to win “as biological as thirst” (113), he thinks that he “knows exactly how Strauss is feeling” (110), but fails to do this with Baxter – a combination of superiority and arrogance, as well as a failure of imagination.

Hernadi argues that “those with an insufficiently developed imagination... will channel their awareness in a single direction”,³⁵ and this is exactly what Henry does. A fundamental human problem is the need to understand others and a close knowledge of the functioning of the brain does not reveal the life of the mind. Multiple possibilities – the kinds of truths contained in literature – represented through the motif of the plane, or the reference to Schrödinger's cat, the famous thought experiment where two equally real possibilities coexist, perturb and lack meaning for Henry because they require an “imaginative rationality”,³⁶ the ability to think in metaphors, and entertain “equally real” (18) ideas. The “safe and simple profession” (141) of neurosurgery cannot account for the complexity of the mind and this awareness nags at Henry's consciousness through his day, “what [was it] he got wrong [with Baxter]?” (102). Literature embraces openness and the complexity of the human condition, and this insight is what Daisy is trying to teach him. Through Henry, McEwan is exploring how we know and what it means to imagine and to fail to imagine. His son Theo sums up what the reader has already felt from witnessing Henry's escape from Baxter: “You humiliated him. You should watch that” (152).

It is only to Henry and not the reader that Baxter's revenge at the end of the day comes as a surprise. He realises only when Baxter forces his way into his home and threatens his entire

³⁵ Hernadi, 38.

³⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 193.

family that, “of course, [it is] logical” (206) that Baxter would want to “assert his dignity” (211) and take revenge for the public blow to his pride. Too late Henry asks himself why he could not see that it is “dangerous to humble a man as emotionally liable as Baxter” (211). Too late he appreciates the “vast ignorance of the brain, and the mind, and the relationship between the two” (86), and that there is obviously more to Baxter than the faulty “fragile proteins” (210) of his brain. Unable and unwilling to put himself in Baxter’s shoes earlier, only now, as Baxter invades his home, does he strain to see the room and his family through Baxter’s eyes as Baxter and his mate hold a knife to his wife’s throat and force Daisy to undress. This dramatic scene is a “web of partially interpenetrating consciousnesses”,³⁷ as the separate minds of Henry, Rosalind, Theo, Daisy and Grammaticus work together to communicate meaning to each other for their survival. Henry’s first attempt to read Baxter’s mind is “exactly wrong” (209) resulting in Grammaticus’s broken nose. Next, Henry tries to use his knowledge of Baxter’s brain disease to trick him, to appeal to the important sense of hope, “you’ve got more time than you think” (215), by lying about advances in medicine that can all but cure his condition.

But it is literature in the form of poetry, not Henry’s scientific knowledge, that thwarts violence and changes both Henry and Baxter’s way of thinking. Confused by Daisy’s pregnancy, made clear by her forced nakedness, Baxter makes her read one of her poems. Instead of one of her own, at Grammaticus’s insightful, gentle suggestion she recites “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold. McEwan is doing a number of things at this climactic point of the novel. Most noticeably he is deploying poetry within the novel to dramatise the power of art as a way of knowing, as a means of providing a “moment of precise reckoning” (156), something that Henry does not believe exists in real life. Matthew Arnold claimed that

³⁷ Butte, 28.

classical literature enables us to “know ourselves and the world”³⁸ and that without a knowledge of literature an individual is “incomplete”.³⁹ Arnold saw literature as strengthening and uplifting, facilitating a heightened and more serious awareness of the world, and necessary to “help us to relate the results of modern science to our need for conduct, our need for beauty”.⁴⁰ The imaginative power of literature over science and its relatedness to morals is primary for Arnold and as such “Dover Beach” was a potent choice for McEwan.

This climactic scene shatters Auden’s famous assertion that “poetry makes nothing happen”. “Dover Beach”, a “mere poem” (221), is a disruption to the urgent, linear discourse of the narrative and Daisy’s reading of the poem brings about a perspectival and behavioural shift. The genre of poetry is traditionally privileged and also feared. Aristotle saw poetry as a “great thing” but Plato feared poetry and banned it from his utopian Republic because it evokes powerful emotions.⁴¹ McEwan uses the compressed imagery of poetry as a tool for capturing the mystical, and as an invitation to reshape perceptions, redirect meaning and provoke an affective response. McEwan’s use of poetry, and in particular “Dover Beach”, functions as a meta-metaphor in the novel, to draw reader attention to the power of literature. The poem is rendered through Henry’s consciousness and the words lull him into a different experience and an alien way of thinking. He “feels himself slipping through the words into the things they describe” (220), perhaps fully responding to the rich embeddedness and suggestiveness of literature through poetry’s compressed “composite metaphors”⁴² for the first time in his life.

³⁸ Arnold, 56.

³⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁴¹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 190.

⁴² Lakoff and Turner, 70.

Jonathan Culler claims that “poetry presents human experience to us in a new way, giving us not scientific truth but a higher imaginative truth”.⁴³ Poetry, as a conventionally privileged discourse is exploited by McEwan. The lyricism of “Dover Beach” functions as a moment of resistance and incongruity in the narrative, asking us to “stop and muse... rather than to race on”.⁴⁴ The immortal longings in “Dover Beach”, with human lives imaged as a journey, battling the inexorable nature of Time, illuminates in this dramatic moment the conceptual metaphorical underpinning of the narrative as a whole. In this “pinprick” (129) of a moment, as Daisy reads for survival like Scheherazade, the beautiful pathos of humanity journeying through the “turbid ebb and flow” of time is realised. The poetic metaphors, rendered in prose, “the foot soldier of information”,⁴⁵ have the effect of slowing down the linear discourse and opening up meaning. The associative logic of the metaphors – the sea’s “melancholy, long withdrawing roar”, and the waves that “bring the eternal note of sadness in” – can be seen in Henry’s plural interpretations and subject positions. His thoughts slow and drift backwards and forwards in time with the melodic rhythm as he reconceptualises the images in his mind. At first he sees Daisy on a terrace with her lover overlooking the still sea, and with the second reading he sees not a terrace, but a window, and not Daisy but Baxter, standing alone listening to the plea to be “true to one another”. The poem’s images are organic and enable Henry to entertain two alternative possibilities at the one time. This Woolfian moment of being, where “art and reality become one in their mystery”,⁴⁶ makes Henry see and, thus, feel and imagine.

“Dover Beach” functions in *Saturday* as a metaphor for revelation, for a new way of thinking and knowing. It bursts through the narrative sequence by “explod[ing]... thought” (175). This moment in the text is a case of a “microcosm giving you the whole world... like... a single

⁴³ Culler, 213.

⁴⁴ Wallace-Crabbe, 48.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁶ Wood, *Broken Estate*, 116.

cell, or.... a Jane Austen novel” (27), endowing Henry with an awareness of the “lyric gift to see beyond” (168). The use of the poem demonstrates what Eva Kittay would describe as the “cognitively irreplaceable”⁴⁷ function of metaphor, that is, its interactive and instructive capacity to provide a way of understanding the world and ourselves within it by changing one’s perspective. “Dover Beach” is deployed in the narrative as a metaphorical tool for “trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally”;⁴⁸ as an essential tool for knowing. “Dover Beach” performs a catachretic move, bridging a gap in communication, presenting both an “event and a meaning”⁴⁹ within the narrative. Multiple truths and the way our truths construct our reality, as illustrated through the metaphorical use of “Dover Beach”, suggest survival value. This is seen in Baxter’s altered consciousness. No longer violent, his response to what he thinks is Daisy’s poem is one of wonder; “You wrote that?” he says repeatedly, “it’s beautiful... beautiful” (222). It’s not Henry’s skill as a neurosurgeon, as a scientist, that saves the day, but the beauty of poetry. Virginia Woolf claims “poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty”,⁵⁰ and John Tooby and Leda Cosmides claim that we are “designed”⁵¹ to respond to beauty in literature, that this is an adaptive skill making us better at feeling and knowing ourselves and our environment. Baxter, his face now “wet and beatific” (224), is full of hope for Henry’s fictitious medical trial.

Arnold’s poem represents the moral force he felt the genre embodied, a metaphor for a way of knowing, as well as a useful plot device. James Wood writes, “I suspect that McEwan is perfectly aware of... the over-allegorical turn his book takes”⁵² (2005) and David Amigoni views the scene as “a curious parody of literature’s civilising mission”.⁵³ McEwan believes

⁴⁷ Kittay, 301.

⁴⁸ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 193.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, 114.

⁵⁰ Woolf, “Poetry, Fiction and the Future,” 79.

⁵¹ Tooby and Cosmides, 18.

⁵² Wood, “Darkling Plain,”

⁵³ Amigoni, 162.

there “is something very intertwined about imagination and morals”,⁵⁴ and the recent discovery of mirror neurons is providing the neurological basis for our intuition that being moved, as Baxter was by “Dover Beach”, is the basis of morality.⁵⁵ Our capacity to know, what fiction can communicate, and what science can tell us through observable, measurable facts is explicitly questioned in the juxtaposing scene as Henry operates on Baxter’s brain.

Henry muses, if only “penetrating the skull [brought] into view not the brain but the mind” (243). That the mind is a function of the brain is the accepted view, but exactly how subjective awareness – the beauty and complexity of consciousness – arises from the firing of neurons is felt to be the last surviving mystery, and Henry ponders whether it can ever be solved. The music he chooses for Baxter’s operation, the Goldberg Variations, wafts from the fringe to the focus of his attention; the “wistful arias” (249), “as if from another world” (254), reflect his mood, his “pleasure of knowing precisely what he is doing” as he gazes at Baxter’s brain. Henry is in control. The brain is “familiar territory” (254) and he likens it to journeying through a familiar city – he knows which neighbourhoods to bypass to ensure a positive outcome. But he also thinks of how much he does not know about the brain, the limitations of knowledge, “the extent of his ignorance, and of the general ignorance” (254). This scene presents the convergence of literature and science as they work together to understand the mind. McEwan is using the novel to illuminate and transmit the wonder and complexity of the human mind that science alone cannot. Henry’s capacity as a neurosurgeon to view the living human brain, that it can actually be seen and its surface touched – its patent visibility, emphasises the largely invisible and private nature of so much of consciousness. We can look at the brain – which is the physical site of the mind – but we cannot see consciousness. Science deals with observables but it seems that physicalism – defining the mind only in terms of matter – is insufficient.

⁵⁴ McEwan, “Zadie Smith Talks,” 49.

⁵⁵ Iacoboni, 217.

There is much debate about whether consciousness will ever be completely understood. Philosopher John Searle maintains that “the whole notion of consciousness is at best confused and at worst it is mystical”.⁵⁶ Is the conceptual vastness of consciousness akin to the notion that “truth can be looked for but cannot be looked at?”⁵⁷ Is art, particularly the novel, the closest we have yet come to experiencing another mind, another consciousness? Henry’s experience of his work – the “dream of absorption that has dissolved all sense of time... even his awareness of his own existence has vanished” (258) – is also a description of the making of art. McEwan is using this scene to write about writing, implicitly drawing attention to the unique capacity of the novel to represent consciousness. Henry “feels calm, and spacious, fully qualified to exist; it’s a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy” (258). This metafictional moment illuminates the power of the novel to describe the unique ‘something it is like’ qualitative aspect of subjectivity, something that science cannot do. *Saturday* exposes and artistically plugs the ‘explanatory gap’ in knowledge. But Henry is optimistic that one day the “brain’s fundamental secret will be laid open” (254). He believes that, as with the discovery of the DNA code by Watson and Crick,⁵⁸ an “irrefutable truth about consciousness” (255) will be discovered, that we will come to understand how physical states in the brain give rise to sensation – to our sense of being, and the long journey of scientific discovery into the human condition “will be completed” (255).

Saturday closes with a slightly humbled Henry once again gazing out of his bedroom window with a sense that he is somehow “poised on a hinge of perception” (272). He imagines himself “turning on a giant wheel, like the Eye on the south bank of the Thames” (272), and he can see the vastness of time that has passed and the immeasurable course of time yet to

⁵⁶ Searle, 21.

⁵⁷ Wood, *Broken Estate*, 118.

⁵⁸ James Watson, who along with Francis Crick shared the 1962 Nobel Prize for their discovery of the structure of DNA, has told Ian McEwan that if he could start all over again he would like to investigate consciousness. See McEwan’s 2007 interview with Alok Jha and James Randerson.

come. Henry's arduous journey throughout this day has come to an end and he feels the day "dropping far below him, as deep as a lifetime" (273). Imagining himself omnisciently poised on the top of this wheel – a metaphor for time and life and change – Henry is in a sense out of Time and is rather inhabiting the extended, thick consciousness of the present. The wheel is an image that both his mind and our minds can 'see', assisting us to comprehend Henry's new way of knowing. Henry can 'see' things he could not see before. Henry's pausing on a "hinge of perception" is a metaphor for literature's capacity to reach beyond the literal, for his new clearer vision and hence way of knowing. He understands the Darwinian "grandeur in this view of life" (55) quite differently. Henry's 'view of life' now recognises the necessary interdependence of literature and science, viewing the literary as a crucial way of knowing. The day's journey, climaxing with Baxter's attack on his family, has provided Henry with a glimpse of the undefinable, the indeterminable.

Saturday can be viewed as a philosophical thought experiment supporting the knowledge argument. Henry, the "professional reductionist" (272), who knows all there is to know about the functioning of the brain, has learnt something new through literature – that "emotions [and sensations] generate our sense of being"⁵⁹ as much as our thoughts. It is not enough to know, you must feel in order to know.⁶⁰ "Dover Beach" made Henry see and feel. He was able to enter the consciousness of another and glimpse briefly the others' life as a narrative, something that novels have always allowed us to do. Yet he does not fully understand what he knows – it is more a feeling of knowing. Henry thinks Baxter understood, that he felt the "magic" (278) of literature that he never will. But Henry is subtly changed. He knows more than he did yesterday, all the yesterdays of his life so far; he has acquired a "new kind of representative state" and he will be able to "recognise, remember and imagine this state".⁶¹

⁵⁹ Fine, 48.

⁶⁰ Jackson, "Mind and Illusion," 253.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

His new knowledge is an understanding and acceptance that you must ‘feel’ in order to fully know and he has learnt this from literature. Closing the window at the end of this day’s journey, the window that has framed his way of knowing, he has attained a different, more encompassing, inclusive and imaginative view of the human condition. As the “door” of Henry’s “consciousness... begin[s] to close” (279), as his thoughts begin to fade, and with our sense that tomorrow he will wake a ‘wiser man’, the novel ends where it began, with “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and rise again”,⁶² of sleep.

With *Saturday*, McEwan has achieved a new form of science fiction, deploying the language and interests of science as narrative techniques, and promoting a cultural shift in ideas about consciousness. McEwan is successfully using the popular, accessible genre of the novel as a vehicle by which to communicate serious, contemporary concerns, thereby constructing *Saturday* as a meta-text to shift attention to exactly how it is that we know what we know – as well as to explore what we do not yet understand. McEwan utilises the “slippery openness”⁶³ of the novel as a vehicle to represent the power of literature to capture the “too sprawling” (68) nature of life and consciousness: to expose the unique capacity of the novel to embrace complexity and transmit feeling in a way that science cannot. *Saturday* self-reflexively enacts the conundrum that “that which we are trying to explain includes our explanations, and ourselves, the would-be explainers”.⁶⁴ The potency of the novel as a vehicle for the representation of consciousness is that novels asks us to imagine, and they facilitate our entry into another’s consciousness through the function of character.⁶⁵ In *Saturday*, the combined effects of conceptual metaphors structuring the narrative, characterisation and focalisation convey the white noise of Henry’s thoughts. The novel

⁶² Woolf, *The Waves*, 176.

⁶³ Doody, 481.

⁶⁴ Tallis, “Trying to Find Consciousness,” 2559.

⁶⁵ Doody, 479.

thereby represents the contribution that the arts, especially the new way of knowing afforded by poetry, can bring to the scientific understanding of the mind.

Saturday proclaims literature as holding the key to an understanding of sentient experience because it can communicate feelings and in this fundamental respect it is the antithesis of science. Henry may not be the “ideal scientist [who] thinks like a poet”,⁶⁶ but by the end of his long day’s journey he has experienced the capacity to embrace complexity, to hold plural points of view without a scientific desire for reductionism. Henry’s journey has been towards a new understanding of life and he now possesses a different way of knowing, with “Dover Beach” functioning as the allegorical twist in the narrative and in Henry’s consciousness.

Saturday continues the modernist’s aims to look at the world through individual perceptions, to see things differently, and McEwan has pursued this tradition, constructing an unimaginative scientist, a specialist in the brain, as a narrative technique to expose the nature of the artistic quest and, crucially, that the desire to know in the humanities and the sciences is the same, promoting a unified approach to investigating what it means to be human.

McEwan is suggesting that like Henry, intellectual endeavour is also “poised on a hinge of perception”, where traditionally disparate analytical disciplines can see the benefits of a synthesised, unified approach to the investigation of what it means to be human. McEwan believes that the sciences are entering into an “exhilarating phase”⁶⁷ and that with literature as our guide and our resource, a “Consilience”⁶⁸ between the arts and science can be made, and a greater understanding of the human condition – the ‘hard problems’ of consciousness, might be achieved. With *Saturday*, McEwan demonstrates exactly how this interdisciplinary way of knowing might occur.

⁶⁶ Wilson, 57.

⁶⁷ McEwan, “Literature, Science, and Human Nature,” 19.

⁶⁸ The biologist E.O. Wilson’s term for a unified body of knowledge.

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