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Saturday on Dover Beach: Ian McEwan, Matthew Arnold, and Post-9/11 Melancholia

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Abstract: This essay revisits Ian McEwan's extremely successful novel *Saturday*, and interrogates its exemplary assessment of the British cultural climate after 9/11. The particular focus is on McEwan's extensive recourse to the writings of Matthew Arnold, whose melancholy outlook on culture and anarchy McEwan basically translates into the 21st century without much ideological fraction. This relapse into Victorian liberal humanism as consolation for a Western world besieged by the contingencies of terrorism is extremely problematic. Not only does it wilfully ignore the transcultural realities of modern Britain, it also promotes an ahistorical and apolitical mode of critical inquiry which may be called reductive at best in view of the global challenges that the novel addresses.

Dear Reader

Few post-9/11 novels have received praise as lavish as Ian McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday*, to an extent that it is tempting to say that there is an early critical consensus that McEwan's book about one day in the London life of neurosurgeon Henry Perowne marks one of the first masterpieces of 21st-century English literature. A few representative reviews in the leading papers and journals may suffice, here, to sustain this: the *Times Literary Supplement* enthusiastically praised McEwan as "the most admired English writer of his generation"; *The Guardian* claimed that "McEwan has the swagger ... of a novelist who can do almost anything"; renowned German weekly *Die Zeit* insisted that "Ian McEwan ist einer der größten Könner unserer Tage, und sein neuer Roman *Saturday* ist ein Bravourstück"; and with all the pathos of academic prophesy, Robert McCrum proclaimed in *The Observer*: "There is no doubt that the international voice of contemporary English fiction is Ian McEwan's. In 2105, readers will turn to his work to understand Britain's painful years of post-imperial transition". The odd choice of year in McCrum's exuberant review, 2105 – i.e. 100 years after the publication of *Saturday* – is a deliberate reference. Relatively early in the narrative, Perowne buys a book by Fred Halliday on September 11, and browsing through the first pages, reads: "The New York attacks precipitated a global crisis that [will], if we [are] lucky, take a hundred years to resolve" (32-33). It is nothing less than this crisis of a century which *Saturday* sets out to explore in minute yet representative form, and it is this exemplary

exploration of British sensibilities in the age of post-9/11 anxiety that most reviewers and critics apparently found extremely compelling.

This essay is essentially geared by my bewilderment about this critical consensus. While I do find *Saturday* aesthetically brilliant, it seems to me utterly problematic on an ideological level, and particularly so in view of its intertextual dimension. More precisely, I find it extremely difficult to come to terms with McEwan's extensive recourse to Victorian poet, literary and social critic Matthew Arnold in a post-9/11 context, not only with regard to pervasive references to Arnold's treatise on *Culture and Anarchy*, but especially in view of the role of Arnold's famous poem "Dover Beach" in *Saturday*, which plays a crucial part in the climactic showdown of the narrative and is even reprinted, as a kind of epilogue, on the last page.

In the following, I will attempt to trace and more clearly place the intertextual interplay between McEwan and Arnold. My point will ultimately be that the consolations McEwan has to offer for a world in perceived crisis are the dubious certainties of a distinctly Victorian liberal humanist moral universe. More specifically, I will argue that with *Saturday*, McEwan translates what Paul Gilroy has identified as a Victorian "imperial melancholy" (Gilroy 2004, 98) – marked by a distinct sense of disillusionment with a world that slips into chaos (not least due to the exploits of Empire) and a concomitant retreat into the more endearing sphere of the bourgeois household – into the 21st century without much ideological fraction. According to Gilroy, there is something symptomatic and indeed endemic about this type of response to the uncertainties of a new world order in British mainstream cultural production today. In my reading, then, McEwan's *Saturday* is a representative case of a pervasive post-9/11 "melancholia" (ibid 98) which is conspicuously oblivious to the postcolonial realities of contemporary British culture.

Share One Day in the Life of Henry Perowne and His Distinguished Family

If indeed in a 100 years time readers will turn to *Saturday* "to understand Britain's painful years of post-imperial transition," as McCrum predicts, this is what they will find: In the tradition of *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*, *Saturday* follows a single day in the life of its protagonist. The man in question is Henry Perowne, a 48-year-old successful neurosurgeon in London, and the day, of course, is not just any day, but 15 February 2003 which saw the largest British demonstration since WWII against the imminent invasion of Iraq. *Saturday* uses fixed internal focalisation, so that readers will follow the events of that day exclusively

through the perspective of Perowne, a professional overachiever driving a lush Mercedes with cream-coloured upholstery up and down town, yet also a true family man. Family, in this case, is again not just any family, but a rather elaborate assembly of culture and genius – Perowne’s now demented mother was a member of the Olympic swim team once, his wife Rosalind is a respected lawyer, his son Theo a brilliant aspiring blues guitarist, his father-in-law, John Grammaticus, a great British poet living in Southern French exile, and his daughter Daisy, who lives in Paris, just published her first volume of exciting poetry with a major press.

The novel begins with an unmistakable 9/11 reference when Perowne wakes up unaccountably in the middle of the night and watches a burning plane fly toward the London Post Office Tower from his bedroom window. It later turns out that it was only a Russian cargo plane forced to an emergency landing in Heathrow. Perowne returns to bed, makes love to his wife, gets up and chats with his son in the kitchen, and later sets out for the tasks of the day. These involve a game of squash with a colleague, the purchase of seafood from his favourite fishmonger, a visit to his mother in an old people’s home, a brief appearance at his son’s band rehearsal, and the preparation of dinner for the grand family reunion with poets John Grammaticus and Daisy coming from France.

Anarchy, however, for the first time interrupts Perowne’s day already on his way to the squash game. Having just made his way past the hordes of demonstrators on their way to Hyde Park, his Mercedes hits a red BMW in a deserted lane that is nominally closed because of the anti-war protests. Fate has it that the Beamer belongs to the underprivileged criminal Baxter, who physically attacks Perowne with two of his cronies. Realising that Baxter suffers from a form of Huntington’s disease, Perowne manages to hold Baxter at bay after the first punch by confronting him with his diagnosis, revealing his own profession as neurosurgeon, and offering some fake ideas for possible cures. Baxter swallows the bait, and Perowne manages to jump into his car and escape.

This, of course, is not the last we have seen of Baxter. After the remaining day went rather smoothly, Baxter, together with one of his sidekicks, crashes the family dinner party. He enters the mansion with a knife held to the throat of Perowne’s wife, creates havoc, breaks Grammaticus’s nose, and finally settles on Daisy. Threatening to kill her mother, Baxter forces Daisy to undress, yet when it transpires that she is pregnant, his sexual arousal falters. Instead, his eyes fall on her brand new volume of poetry on a nearby table. It is here, finally, that the novel reaches its unquestionable climax with Baxter asking naked, pregnant and infinitely vulnerable Daisy to read from her work, and it is here also that Matthew Arnold

comes in with a vengeance, in full-blown *deus-ex-machina* style. Instead of reading from her own poetry, Daisy only pretends and recites, from memory, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" – and Arnold saves the day. Baxter's resolve slackens, Daisy has to "read it again," and after the second round, Baxter is overtaken by the melancholy beauty of it all, exclaiming "you wrote that. You *wrote* that!" (231) He eventually agrees to have a look at new research on his disease that Perowne claims to have in his upstairs study, and is overpowered at last by Perowne and Theo, who knock him down the stairs. Baxter ends up with a fractured skull and some *real* serious brain damage, which Perowne later generously takes upon himself to repair in the operation theatre to save the man's life. Late at night, Perowne's day ends in the bosom of his bourgeois family, and the final act is a second round of lovemaking to his beautiful wife.

To Find Out More About How Lowly Anarchy Then and Now

Even without the climactic showdown where "Dover Beach" of all poems ultimately consoles, sustains, and rescues the Perownes from the horrors of anarchy, the intertextual presence of Matthew Arnold is unmistakable in McEwan's novel. It is vital to remember, for instance, that the direct motivation for Arnold's treatise on *Culture and Anarchy* were the so-called Hyde Park Riots of 1866, when more than 10,000 demonstrators marched towards Hyde Park to protest in favour of the Reform Bill, a bill that Arnold was sceptical about as he thought that the extension of democracy in itself is an invitation to "do as one likes" in society, and will lead to anarchy rather than social health. The gates of middle class Hyde Park were closed to the protestors, and the marchers had to continue to Trafalgar Square. A section of the group, however, stayed behind, tore down the railings and trampled the flowerbeds. It is probably not accidental, therefore, when Perowne remembers operating on the brain of a Hyde Park gardener of all people first thing in the morning while looking out of his bedroom window (8); and it is certainly deliberate that the day on which the novel is set, another several hundred thousand people march toward Hyde Park (which incidentally the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport at first ruled out as an assembly space, among other things, allegedly, to spare the grass and flower beds).

In *Saturday*, Perowne is ambivalent about the marchers, whose sight at first fills him with "an intimation of revolutionary joy" (72), which he, however, keeps in check. Having once treated an Iraqi academic who was tortured under Saddam's regime, he accuses the

marchers of betraying no sign of criticising Saddam. In a fight with his daughter Daisy, who claims that this critique is “a given,” Perowne responds angrily:

No it is not. It's a forgotten. Why else are you all singing and dancing in the park? The genocide and torture, the mass graves, the security apparatus, the criminal totalitarian state – the iPod generation does not want to know. Let nothing come between them and their ecstasy clubbing and cheap flights and reality TV. (191)

Dominic Head points out that there is a deliberate echo of Arnold's rhetoric against “worship of freedom” and “blind faith in machinery” (Arnold 1993, 84) in Perowne's outburst, yet immediately tones it down as a “pale echo” since “the class consciousness that colours Arnold's view no longer applies” (Head 2007, 184). Inversely, I cannot remember reading another novel in recent years in which class division, here between Baxter and the Perownes, was so starkly exposed, and in which moral agency was almost exclusively reserved for the cultured and affluent elite. In the only overtly hostile review of *Saturday*, fellow novelist John Banville accordingly states in the *New York Review of Books*: “Overall, [...] *Saturday* has the feel of a neoliberal polemic gone badly wrong; if Tony Blair [...] were to appoint a committee to produce a ‘novel for our time,’ the result would surely be something like this” (Banville 2005). On a similar note, one of the very few critical voices in secondary writing takes issue with McEwan's wholesale adoption of “Victorian liberalism.” For Elaine Headley, this adoption engenders a “predictable shift of attention away from the persistent ‘ebbs and flow of human misery,’ or from class oppression in the marketplace of goods, to the beautiful drama of moral agency” (Hadley 2005, 99). This of course brings us to Arnold's poem “Dover Beach,” and the central place that it is given in the novel.

Shall Be Overcome by a Fine and Cultured Victorian Poem

McEwan's choice to set “Dover Beach” against the anarchy of Baxter and the world needs to be read as programmatic, as the poem really encapsulates the ideological movement of *Saturday* as a whole. Arnold's poem is undoubtedly one of the most famous 19th-century meditations on the erosion of certainties – religious, historical and political – in a progressively industrialised (as well as colonised) and increasingly alienating world that offers “neither joy, nor love, nor light, / nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (ll.33-34). Addressing a female companion, Arnold's speaker turns from melancholy observations of the nightscape at the beach of Dover in clear view of the French coast (Britain's main imperial rival) to the “turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery” (ll. 17-18) in Sophocles and on to the

loss of a global regiment of “faith” in the modern world. However, there remains a space for consolation and redemption in Arnold’s poetic vision, which is, of course, the space of the domestic. Thus the fourth stanza famously opens: “Ah, love, let us be true / to one another!” (ll. 29-30) With our backs to the world, Arnold’s speaker implies, the sincerity of bourgeois family relations and of true moral affection still promises at least some sort of happiness in life, even if there is only chaos outside, “[s]wept with confused alarms of struggle and fight” (l. 36).

For McEwan, it seems, there is nothing problematic about the ideological scope of Arnold’s poem. What, however, if we read Arnold with the benefit of postcolonial hindsight? Certainly, at least one way of approaching “Dover Beach” is to read it in the context of the dramatic expansion of the British Empire in Victorian times, as Paul Gilroy seminally does in his 2004 study *After Empire*. Gilroy writes:

By staging his famous poetic reflections on Britain’s modern predicament at the frontier of Dover Beach, where today’s asylum seekers fear to tread, he [Arnold’s speaker] made it clear that proximity to the French had helped him to concentrate his mind with regard to the country’s historic responsibilities as well as its relationship to the classical world that had supplied the template for its global imperium. The historic mission to civilize and uplift the world was England’s unavoidable destiny, but he sensed that it would bring neither comfort nor happiness. That imperial mission re-created the national community in a modern form but then drew it immediately into a terrible web of war and suffering, polluting its beautiful dreams, confusing and destabilizing it. [...] His apprehensions were aligned with those of the larger social body, but, as he heard and felt the shingle start to move beneath his feet, he opted to turn away from those public concerns and seek consolation in the private and intimate places where romantic love and fidelity could offset the worst effects of warfare, turbulence, and vanished certitude. (Gilroy 2004, 98-99)

Gilroy’s assertion that the melancholy of “Dover Beach” is really an “imperial melancholy” helps to put Matthew Arnold’s, and by extension, Ian McEwan’s, cultural anxieties into perspective. The obvious thing to note, here, is that when Arnold famously defines culture in “The Function of Criticism” as “the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics and everything of the kind” (Arnold 1993, 36), he does not really mean ‘world’. Products of culture, for Arnold, are universal and timeless, but of course also founded on a distinct racial pedigree which combines the “sweetness” of the Hebraic moral impulse with the “light” of Hellenistic intellectual reasoning. It goes without saying that in its practical implications, Arnoldian ‘Culture’ is accordingly inherently Eurocentric.

One of the major ironies and blind spots in “Dover Beach”, on these grounds, is that the horrors of imperial warfare turning the world into a “darkling plain [...] where ignorant armies clash at night” (ll. 35-37) are in fact inextricably intertwined with, and in part a consequence of, the Victorian assumption that the blessings of Western culture are universally valid, and by extension also a blessing to all the subject races of the Empire. In short: By programmatically excluding “practice, politics and everything of the kind” from the critical inquiry of culture, Arnoldian liberal humanism is not only incapable of theorising the multiple transcultural dynamics of inequality and difference then and now, but more than that, it has been complicit with various forms of cultural imperialism.

McEwan’s intertextual infatuation with Arnold is thus hardly innocent. The allegorical propagation of Arnoldian Culture with a capital C as a remedy against the contingencies of the Western world after 9/11 is inherently problematic in an ever increasingly globalising postcolonial Britain where culture, with a small c, can at best be described as a rhizomorphic web of transcultural relations far beyond the Hebraic and Hellenistic spheres, a web that is partly an immediate consequence, of course, of Britain’s imperial exploits. The nostalgic recreation of a Victorian chimera of cultural identity and integrity that is wilfully ignorant of the more unpleasant 19th-century realities of gender, class and race, is, to put it mildly, a rather unproductive response to the challenges of the 21st century, and one indeed wonders how serious McEwan could possibly have been in his intertextual forays.

Because Only the Veracities of True Liberal Humanism Shall Save Us

My first impulse while reading *Saturday*, and especially the sequence involving Arnold’s poem, was accordingly to look for markers of authorial irony. If there is much ideological fraction between the intertextual, narratorial and (implicit) authorial level of *Saturday*, though, I must have missed it. Surely, there are ironic elements in the climactic showdown of Daisy’s recital of “Dover Beach”. The main irony is that not only Baxter, but also the focalising character Henry Perowne do not recognise that Daisy recites an all-English classic, but associate the content of Arnold’s poem with the performer rather than with the author. On a more subversive note, one might conclude from this that the cultured powers of “sweetness and light” are more affecting if associated with an attractive pregnant woman in the nude rather than with a middle-aged Victorian with enormous whiskers.

This aside, however, all irony is almost exclusively directed at Perowne’s philistinism – again, a term which Matthew Arnold coined for English usage in *Culture and Anarchy*.

Perowne generally finds it hard to make sense of literature, and *Saturday* is thus not only about culture and anarchy, but more specifically aspires to be an allegorical meditation on C.P. Snow's *Two Cultures* and anarchy. At the end of the day, *Saturday* pleads for the mutual interdependence of both scientific knowledge and humanistic knowledge to keep anarchy in check. It is Perowne's superior scientific knowledge that allows him to trick Baxter during the car incident and escape, trick him once again in the London family home, and which quite conveniently saves Baxter's life in the operation theatre to keep bad conscience at bay. But it is Daisy's superior grasp on "the best that is known and thought in the world" in literature, founded on her grandfather's teachings and encouragement, which crucially transforms Baxter. Again, the novel's allegorical propositions about anarchy and Snow's two cultures uncannily mirror Matthew Arnold's Victorian visions. In "The Study of Poetry", Arnold after all famously wrote:

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. (Arnold 1967, 161-62)

The overall recourse to Arnold's liberal-humanist world-view is indeed stunning, and there is little evidence that McEwan is not dead-serious about the role and function of literature. *Saturday* envisions for a post-secular society under the siege of terrorist contingency. Not only are there hardly any overt textual markers of ironical distancing, there is also contextual evidence which suggests that McEwan swallowed Arnold whole. In a rather fascinating passage from an article McEwan published in the *Guardian* as an immediate response to the events of 9/11, for instance, he wrote about the terrorist hijackers:

If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.

The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination. (McEwan 2001)

McEwan's evaluation of the problem of terrorism, here, indeed betrays all the tenets of liberal humanism, and throws Matthew Arnold's role in *Saturday* into sharp relief. As phrases such as "the core of humanity," "the essence of compassion" and "human instinct" imply, McEwan's assessment is apparently predicated on the belief that human nature is unchanging,

and that individuality is based on a unique essence. In other words, the subject antecedes, and transcends the forces of society, experience, and language, and it is only logical and legitimate, therefore, to investigate literature or culture – here, the phenomenon of terrorism – by investigating “the object as in itself it really is,” as Arnold famously put it (Arnold 1993, 29). What is blatant in McEwan’s statement is that there is apparently no need to approach the hijacker’s actions in context. Neither the socio-political dimension of the terrorist acts, nor their historical dimension, nor the hijacker’s individual biographies really matter for our proper understanding. In a rather dramatic sweep, the socio-historical complexities lurking behind the attacks are ignored in favour of a fairly straight-forward scenario of moral agency. The crisis of terrorism, we learn, is essentially a crisis of the imagination, and who else but the poets and writers are there to redeem us?

From the Postcolonial Contingencies of These Our Melancholic Lives

It remains to be asked why McEwan gets away with all this nonsense. Why is it that among an exalted chorus of critical appraisal, next to John Banville, only Elaine Hadley has so far wondered: “Are other readers as taken aback as I am by this use of ‘Dover Beach’ in a post-9/11 novel? Does it seem to others that McEwan, the Homeland Security Chief of the Novel, has offered up duct tape and plastic sheeting as a response to the unknown agents and unpredictable consequences of the new world order?” (Hadley 2005, 97). In line with what we have somewhat provokingly called a “white backlash” in the title of this issue, I believe it is reasonable enough to suspect that the novel and its overall reception confirm a larger pattern of “postimperial melancholia” in contemporary British culture. Surly, McEwan is one of the greatest stylists of our time, and *Saturday* is no exception; some of its passages have a mesmerising intensity and quality of voice which is quite stunning and may deflect some readers from the silliness of some of its ideological propositions. Yet it seems very unlikely to me that the neo-Victorian consolations offered by McEwan would have been received so enthusiastically were it not for the fact that they are also deeply complicit with the anxieties and ideological disposition of a post 9/11 Middle Britain at large and its academic elite in particular. Unwilling and unable to work through the horrors of her imperial past, melancholic Britain, Gilroy argues, tends to nostalgically recreate a past that is strangely untroubled by the uncertainties brought about by transcultural flows of people, goods, technologies and ideas. After 9/11, the consolation offered by such fantasy structures is amplified at a time when the immigrant population of Britain no longer only signifies the traumatic decline of Empire (in

Gilroy's reading), but additionally comes to serve as a constant visible reminder of the global terrorist threat. It is difficult not to see how such melancholia has informed McEwan's allegorical tale about a bourgeois family under siege from below, his seemingly unrefracted intertextual recourse to Arnold's liberal humanism as guidance in times of anxiety, or the disavowal of historical, political and cultural analysis in favour of 'the thing itself', in favour of the sweetness and light of the autonomous artistic imagination. And it is stunning to see how eagerly the academic and journalistic elite received such propositions as a triumph and a 'novel of our times'. These are not the times that I find myself living in. *The Velvet Underground* once sang "Sunday morning, praise the dawning," closely followed by the line "watch out, the world is close behind you".

Amen

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