WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD DISORDER: CONFLICT AND TRANSFORMATION IN IAN MCEWAN'S *SATURDAY*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* deals with the complex issues of conflict and transformation in the age of terrorism. The plot presents one internal dilemma and several interpersonal altercations that occur within a mere twenty-four hours: a) Perowne (the protagonist) *vs.* himself, in face of his ambivalent thoughts regarding British military participation in the war in the Middle East; b) The protagonist *vs.* Baxter, a ruffian from East End, in the context of a car accident; c) Perowne *vs.* a fellow anaesthetist, Jay Strauss, during a squash game; d) Perowne's daughter, Daisy *vs.* her grandfather, John Grammaticus, both poets and rivals; e) Perowne's family *vs.* Baxter, who intrudes the protagonist's house. In this paper, I exemplify, analyse and discuss how: a) Understanding the causes of what we call evil constitutes an important step towards mutual understanding; b) Both science and arts (which Perowne considers, at first, irrelevant) are important elements in the process of transformation; c) Both personal and interpersonal conflicts are intrinsic to human nature — but they also propitiate healthy changes in behaviour and opinion, through reflection. In order to do so, I resort to *Saturday*, and to the work of several specialists in the field of conflict management.

Resumo

O romance *Saturday*, de Ian McEwan, aborda as complexas questões do conflito e da transformação na era do terrorismo. O enredo apresenta um dilema interno e várias altercações interpessoais que ocorrem em apenas vinte e quatro horas: a) Perowne (o protagonista) *vs.* ele próprio, perante opiniões ambivalentes acerca da participação britânica na guerra do Médio Oriente; o protagonista *vs.* Baxter, um rufia de East End, no contexto de um acidente rodoviário; c) Perowne *vs.* um colega anestesista, Jay Strauss, no decorrer de uma partida de *squash*; d) Daisy, a filha de Perowne *vs.* o avô, John Grammaticus, ambos poetas e rivais; e) A família de Perowne *vs.* Baxter, que invade a residência do protagonista. Neste artigo, exemplifico, analiso e debato como: a) Compreender as causas daquilo a que chamamos o mal constitui um passo importante para uma compreensão mútua; b) Tanto a ciência como a arte (que Perowne considera, inicialmente, irrelevante) são elementos importantes no processo de transformação; c) Os conflitos pessoais e interpessoais são intrínsecos à natureza humana, mas também propiciam saudáveis mudanças de comportamento e ideias, através da reflexão. Para tanto, recorro ao romance *Saturday* e ao trabalho de vários especialistas no campo da gestão de conflitos.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, conflict management, mediation, arbitration.

Palavras-chave: Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, gestão de conflito, mediação, arbitragem.

1. "The eternal note of sadness"[1]

We have seen it in Palestine, Israel, Bosnia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, India or Darfur; we watch it on TV every night, imagining we are safe simply because we can switch to another channel and forget about it; we see it on the streets, in killing fields, and in the hidden shame of our homes; we perceive it in the silence of healthy minds, and in the roaring thoughts of psychopaths. Violence is omnipresent, and conflicts are intrinsic to human nature, as Walt Whitman notices in *Ah Poverties, Wincings, and Sulky Retreats*, "For what is my life, or any man's life, but a conflict with foes / — the old, the incessant war?" (Whitman, 1986: 489).

To be sure, all sorts of internal and interpersonal altercations pervade our world, are a constant part of anyone's existence, and require bargaining skills. The first type of conflict I mentioned (internal) constitutes a fight within oneself, a mental struggle, derived from problems of conscience, and/or moral, religious or political dilemmas. The second type (interpersonal) originates from a real or *imagined* opposition of needs, values, attitudes, interests or perceptions of reality; from antagonistic actions or projects; from an attempt to gain access to power, or to remain in power; and from the diverse political, ethnic, religious, professional, economic and sexual differences in our kaleidoscopic world (Giddens, 2002: 669, 681). These differences may and frequently *do* result in cleavages, which generate antagonism against a specific idea or ideology, consensus in favour of a cause and, ultimately, *transformation* (Cavalcanti, 1995: 231-232).

Conflict and *transformation* are, in fact, two keywords in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, a novel thesis that deals with multifaceted issues of communication and disagreement. The plot of this impeccably structured narrative presents an internal dilemma and several interpersonal altercations, occurring within a mere twenty-four hours:

[1] The titles of some sections of this paper are taken from "Dover Beach", a poem by Matthew Arnold (1867), fully quoted by Ian McEwan in *Saturday*.

a) Perowne (the protagonist) *vs.* himself, in face of his ambivalent thoughts regarding British military participation in the war in the Middle East;

b) The protagonist *vs.* Baxter, a ruffian from East End, in the context of a car accident;

c) Perowne *vs.* Jay Strauss, a fellow anaesthetist, during a squash game;

d) Perowne's daughter, Daisy *vs.* her grandfather, John Grammaticus, both poets and rivals;

e) Perowne's family *vs.* Baxter, who intrudes in the protagonist's house.

I argue these conflicts are juxtaposed in such a way that one incident worsens another, cascading in a crescendo of violent actions and reactions. In this paper, I exemplify and discuss how: a) Understanding the causes of what we call evil constitutes a step towards mutual understanding; b) Both science and arts (which Perowne considers, at first, irrelevant) are important elements in the process of transformation; c) Personal and interpersonal conflicts are intrinsic to human nature — but they also propitiate healthy changes in behaviour and opinion, through reflection.

I will address these issues by resorting not only to McEwan's novel *Saturday* and to excerpts from some interviews he granted along the years, but also to the work of specialists in the field of conflict management. I will use concepts like mediation, arbitration or promise, from a Sociological and Psychological perspective, in order to analyse the different altercations that occur in the novel.

2. "Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!"

> *It's 3.45 a.m., 15 February, 2003 — a day that will not change the world, but will definitely transform the lives of several individuals, through a series of accidents and coincidences; conflicts and disagreements; mistakes and choices. In the first lines of Ian McEwan's Saturday, Dr. Henry*

> *Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, watches the night sky, through one of his bedroom windows. Suddenly, he beholds an airplane in flames blazing across the London skyline in the direction of the Heathrow airport. This sight can be interpreted as an ominous sign, like the comets which, in the Middle Ages and before, were thought to be harbingers of imminent disaster (*Sagan*, 1980: 64). In this specific case, the observer fears that it may be the result of a terrorist action perpetrated by radical Islamists, given the world "disorder" after September 11th with the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre Towers. Unbeknown to the fact that it is simply a cargo plane, a Russian Tupolev on its way from Riga to Birmingham, with mechanical problems, Perowne returns to bed.* (McEwan, 2006: 35)

This seemingly inconsequent retreat is not bereft of significance in the general context of the novel — much on the contrary. I argue that the three windows in Perowne's bedroom are symbolic, each representing a possible position towards reality. An individual can: a) Intervene in the world on an ethical and political level; b) Accept with indifference the tumultuous march of the human species; c) Opt for a strategic reclusion. Perowne chose to maintain a comfortable distance between him and the real world, where new conflicts emerge daily. He defines this life perspective by using the word *anosognosia*, "a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one's own condition" (McEwan, 2006: 74).

Even though Perowne is aware of the internal and interpersonal discrepancies that pervade our world, he thinks prosperity and status, social and scientific progress, protect him from the sordid reality of the daily life. Could it be he is wrong? Will he change his perspective, and adjust to the way society *really* is? If so, to what extent will he be transformed by the events that occur on February 15th? As a novel thesis, using the dialogical space of fiction, *Saturday* addresses these

and other interrelated issues, almost always in a successful manner.

3. Perowne *vs.* Perowne

The first conflict of the novel — of an internal nature — resides in Perowne's ambivalent feelings regarding the war. On one hand, he agrees with it, though reluctantly, as the only way to free the Iraqi people from a political regime of terror. His opinion is clearly influenced by a personal experience: the treatment of Taleb, a professor who had been imprisoned and tortured by the police of the dictator Saddam Hussein, simply because he declined to join the Ba'ath Party — or for some other reason never made explicit by the authorities (McEwan, 2006: 63-64). Therefore, Perowne disagrees with the 200,000 demonstrators who, during that Saturday, rally against the support given by Tony Blair to the military intervention in Iraq:

> *Opinions are a roll of the dice; by definition, none of the people now milling around Warren Street tube station happens to have been tortured by the regime, or knows and loves people who have, or even knows much about the place at all. It's likely most of them barely registered the massacres in Kurdish Iraq, or in the Shi'ite south, and now they find they care with a passion for Iraqi lives.* (McEwan, 2006: 73)

On the other hand, Perowne thinks that though the marchers may have been manipulated by rhetoric, their arguments are not unreasonable: the impending invasion may present unpredictable results, and cause Al-Qaeda to seek revenge on the western allies, endangering our ways of life:

> *They [the demonstrators] 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.* (McEwan, 2006: 73)

In an interview granted to Benedict Page, titled "A Happy Man in Wartime" (25 Nov. 2004), McEwan explains the artistic reasons that led him to the creation of this internal conflict:

> *I tried to give one man, Perowne, a kind of ambivalence that caught several people's view on the war in Iraq: he's for the war but against it; he senses it's going to be a disaster but he thinks it's also a humanitarian opportunity; he has some admiration for Tony Blair but also a profound scepticism. It seemed to me more useful novelistically to have that encapsulated within one mind, rather than have a lot of people within the novel take up positions.* (Byrnes, 2006: 59)

Though this internal conflict preoccupies Perowne, he seeks refuge in his *anosognosian* attitude and, instead, concentrates on what he thinks will be a pleasant day — until he suffers a car accident, and the disturbing events of the day are set in motion.

4. Perowne *vs.* Baxter

A second type of conflict occurs shortly after Perowne leaves his luxury home. In a hurry to get to a squash game, he collides with another car, transporting three individuals, who return from a lap-dancing club. This slight accident, a result of the lack of attention of both drivers, symbolically occurs at the junction of two roads, and puts the neurosurgeon in direct confrontation with Baxter, a ruffian

(McEwan, 2006: 79). The two opponents diverge in personality and social background, a narrative strategy designed to increase tension: Perowne is cultivated and calm, while Baxter is edgy and provocative. Even the cars they drive — Perowne has a Mercedes, and Baxter a BMW, a vehicle the neurosurgeon associates with criminality — suggest the differences in their lifestyle.

Perowne is now involved in what Sociologists call a *bargaining situation*, described by Thomas C. Schelling, in his remarkable study *The Strategy of Conflict*, as:

> *(...) situations in which the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make. The bargaining may be explicit, as when one offers a concession; or it may be by tacit manoeuvre, as when one occupies or evacuates strategic territory. It may (...) seek arrangements that yield positive gains to both sides; or it may involve threats of damage, including mutual damage, as in a strike, boycott, or price war, or in extortion.* (Schelling, 1997: 5)

In this bargaining situation, Perowne believes, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he is right, and Baxter wrong, as it is implied in his claim that: "The rules of the road aren't suspended" (McEwan, 2006: 73). It seems that the power he feels does not originate only from road rules, but also from the conscience of his social and cultural status, visible in his attitude and discourse. For instances, Perowne turns down Baxter's offer for a cigarette, therefore missing an opportunity to create a friendly atmosphere of negotiation. Also, he states: "I am indeed sorry that you pulled out without looking". And immediately realizes that the "fussy, faintly archaic 'indeed' is not generally part of his lexicon. Deploying it entails decisions; he isn't going to pretend to the language of the street. He's standing on professional dignity" (McEwan, 2006: 87).

They cannot agree upon a satisfactory solution: the young man demands for money in compensation; in turn, Perowne suggests a legal way out. In cases like this, a useful strategy, known as *mediation* or *alternative dispute resolution*, can be applied: an impartial third party, committed to the effective management of issues, is invited to solve the problem (Ungerleider, 2008: 225). However, with the exception of Perowne, Baxter and his two friends (Nigel and Nark), the streets are desert — and no mediator can be found.

It becomes clear this dispute will not be easily or quickly solved, for another reason: Baxter's strange and violent behaviour borders on the pathological. He trembles, twitches, shouts and changes moods unexpectedly. Any faithful reader of McEwan's fiction will nod and smile at this character, for the author enjoys creating dangerous *personae*, who experience some sort of mental disorder. Using his wide experience as a neurosurgeon, Perowne suspects that Baxter suffers from Huntington's disease, also known as *chorea*. This is a serious genetic and degenerative neurological disorder, usually detected when the patient is in his/her mid-forties, with a series of physical, cognitive and psychiatric symptoms. It affects psycho-motor functions, abstract thinking, cognitive flexibility, memory and self-censorship, and despite the fact that symptoms can vary between individuals, aggressive behaviour is to be expected (Seymour, 1980: 288-89). In accordance to his medical condition, the ruffian reacts exaggeratedly to the accident:

> *Despite Baxter's impaired ocular fixation, and his chorea, those quick, jerky movements, that blow that's aimed at Perowne's heart and that he dodges only fractionally, lands on his sternum with colossal force, so that it seems to him, and perhaps it really is the case, that there surges throughout his body a sharp ridge, a shock wave, of high blood pressure, a concussive thrill that carries with not so much pain as an electric jolt of stupefaction and a brief deathly chill that has a*

> *visual component of blinding, snowy whiteness.* (McEwan, 2006: 92)

Baxter's companions grab Perowne and slam him against a door, far from the sight of any casual passer-by. Out-numbered and believing his life may be in danger, the neurosurgeon changes his strategy. Though he is no longer in control of the situation, he has the power of *knowledge* — and he uses it, like a magic charm, simply by saying: "Your father had it. Now you've got it too" (McEwan, 2006: 94). Perowne is, of course, referring to Baxter's disorder, in a clever move to surprise the opponent and buy the time needed to plan an escape.

While Nigel and Nark return to the car and give the now doctor and patient — a new form of hierarchy — some privacy, Perowne tricks Baxter into believing there is a possible treatment to his problem. Thanks to this promise, and to a distraction of the adversary, Perowne returns to his car and escapes, avoiding further injuries. (McEwan, 2006: 98). In most conflicts, making a promise like the one Perowne presented — with or without the intention of keeping it — is a common tactic in the mechanics of negotiation. As Thomas Schelling notices: "The promise is a commitment to the second party in the bargain and is required whenever the final action of one or of each is outside the other's control. It is required whenever an agreement leaves any incentive to cheat" (Schelling, 1997: 43).

In this context, critic Bernie Byrnes ingeniously draws a parallel between the incident that opposed Perowne to Baxter, and the first Gulf War:

> *Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait with superior military strength. Baxter backed up by two of his henchmen, threatens Perowne with assault. Perowne uses his sophisticated professional knowledge against Baxter, humiliates him in front of his companions and withdraws, after making vague*

> *promises that he has no intention to keep. The US, with the support of the International Law, used their vastly superior military technology and wealth to enforce Iraq's compliance. Having achieved a victory they withdrew after dropping vague hints of support for a popular rising of the Shiites and the Kurds, which proved as false as Perowne's promise of a new cure for Baxter's Huntington's disease.* (Byrnes, 2006: 85-86)

5. Perowne *vs.* Strauss

After the accident, caught in a spiral of friction where there is little room for reason and wisdom, Perowne is searching for a way to reassert his dominance (Byrnes, 2006: 87). A squash match between him and his colleague Jay Strauss provides the ideal scenario, and results in the third conflict of the novel. Sportive activities present a clear example of positive or *functional* conflicts — as opposed to *destructive* confrontations, which involve physical and verbal violence. There are several reasons for this being a healthy conflict: rules are established prior to the game; there is an arbitration recognized by both parties; the emphasis is placed on fair play, team work or personal development. The clash derives, therefore, from the *competition* itself, and not from any disagreement or hatred between the teams (Brathwaite, 2004: 119).

This does not mean that sportive activities are exempt from violence — to the point of being comparable to wars, as Keith Wilcock notices:

> *Athletics provide expressions of the warrior archetype. Warriors must develop their strength through exercise, so they run, lift weights, and practise their evolved swordplay with various racquets, bats, golf clubs, and hockey sticks. Those who excel receive great praise and admiration from their*

> *tribes, whether they be schools, nations or cities. They are our modern gladiators. (...) The hours modern men and women spend watching modified war rituals such as football and soccer games on TV further emphasizes the point. How is it possible that an activity which provides no apparent survival advantage consumes so many millions of spectator hours? When one considers the wild headdresses and war painted faces on the more exuberant football fans, and the occasional brawls that break out between opposing spectators, the reality that major sports events are evolved tribal war rituals becomes clearer.* (Wilcock, 2003: 42)

Perowne's squash game with Strauss can be read within the martial context described by Wilcock. The neurosurgeon transfers his road rage from the recent episode, into a match where winning acquires a paramount importance. On the court, Strauss and him battle, disagree, vent their anger, and even risk their lives, pushing their bodies to the limit:

> *Oblivious to their protesting hearts, they hurl themselves into every corner of the court. There are no unforced errors, every point is wrested, bludgeoned from the other. (...) There's only an irreducible urge to win, as biological as thirst. And it's pure, because no one's watching, no one cares, not their friends, their wives, their children. It isn't even enjoyable. It might become so in retrospect — and only to the winner.* (McEwan, 2006: 113)

By the end of the match, the argument becomes heated, as each man claims victory, and there is no referee or, in conflict terms, *arbitration*, a third party with the authority given by the players to issue a decision concerning how the conflict can

be settled (Ellis and Anderson, 2005: 113). Unable to resolve this dispute, they play again, and Perowne, exhausted, loses that point and the next three. After having fled from a conflict with Baxter, he loses another, against Strauss — but the worst is yet to come.

6. Daisy *vs.* Grammaticus

At home, after having shopped for dinner, Perowne prepares himself for his daughter's return. What now worries him is the resolution of another conflict: a reconciliation between his daughter and her grandfather, "three years on from what Theo has named, in honour of various thrillers, The Newdigate Rebuff" (McEwan, 2006: 196).

Since she turned thirteen, John Grammaticus had been Daisy's literary tutor, suggesting authors, praising her talent, seeing himself as an example to be followed by the young poet. Nevertheless, when Daisy wins the Newdigate Prize — awarded to students of the University of Oxford —, her grandfather realizes he may have produced a rival poet. At dinner, nearly drunk, he attempts to reinstate his power, by harshly criticising his disciple's victorious poem. He dismisses it as too long, with a convoluted metaphor and, worse, argues it is a plagiarism of a Pat Jourdan's text, "Hampstead Laundresses" (McEwan, 2006: 137).

Daisy remains cold and remarkably in control: "Perowne was pleased to see that his daughter wasn't crushed. She was furious. He could see the pulse in her neck throbbing beneath the skin. But she was not going to relieve her grandfather with any sort of outburst" (McEwan, 2006: 137). By maintaining control, Daisy uses a sensible strategy to be followed in most conflicts, since losing it is the equivalent to losing power over the adversary. In fact, any disputant who does not bring old issues, is not rude, and presents himself as a reasonable person, increases exponentially his chances of winning the conflict (Potter, 1996: 156).

This unpleasant incident deteriorates Daisy's relationship with her

grandfather, and the young lady presents excuses to avoid visiting him in the next two Summers, resorting to a form of silence treatment, that perpetuated the latent problem. As Lee Raffel states: "(...) Such an interminable breakdown in communication leads to a loss of contact for years on end. The incessant waiting tests the limits of our patience because there is no closure, making the ensuing grief extremely difficult to endure" (Raffel, 2008: 244).

After an initial discomfort, the conflict is solved in a symmetric (also called integrative) "win-win" approach — the ideal outcome of any dispute (Ellis and Anderson, 2005: 62). Daisy had dedicated her first collection of poems, titled *My Saucy Barks*, to John Grammaticus, acknowledging, therefore, his influence on her education; solving the long conflict that had separated them; and showing her moral fibre.

When Daisy wonders if she should have dedicated the book to her parents, instead, Perowne squeezes her arm, proud of her decision, and says: "He put you on the path, it makes perfect sense. He's going to be very happy. We all are. You did the right thing" (McEwan, 2006: 203).

7. The Perowne family *vs.* Baxter

At the climax of the novel, street violence invades the doctor's bourgeois comfort, in a scene full of adrenaline. Bent on vengeance because of the car accident, Baxter and a friend enter Perowne's home. He threatens the entire family with death; forces Daisy to strip, and breaks Grammaticus's proud nose, when he tries to intervene.

This step of the narrative illustrates McEwan's capacity to generate unique situations with a touch of the macabre. Ever since his first fictional work, *First love, Last Rites* (1975), the author has ventured through areas such as incest, obsession, or paedophilia. It is not about wanting to scare for scare sake, though. In an interview with Jonathan Noakes, McEwan asserts:

> *If violence is simply there to excite, then it's merely pornographic. I think treating it more seriously — which means doing it without sentimentality — you're always going to bring it to a certain quality of investigation, so it's not only the violence you show, you are writing about violence. (…) you are bound to place the reader in some form of critical attitude towards the circumstances. There is always a larger intent.* (Reynolds and Noakes, 2002: 22)

I believe that if McEwan confronts the reader with certain situations, associated to our deepest fears and anxieties, it is to show the illusion of safety; the impossibility of indifference; but also the sovereignty of love.

In face of Baxter's medical condition, how can any member of the Perowne family alter the course of events, not by resorting to aggressiveness, but by communicating with him? Apparently, it is the magic of art that saves this defenceless group. In a moment which is so sensitive and yet so implausible, naked Daisy moves Baxter, by reciting by heart the poem *Dover Beach* written by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), pretending it is hers:

> *Ah, love, let us be true*
> *To one another! For the world, which seems*
> *To lie before us like a land of dreams,*
> *So various, so beautiful, so new,*
> *Hath neither joy, nor love, nor light,*
> *Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;*
> *And we are here as on a darkling plain*
> *Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,*
> *Where ignorant armies clash by night.*
> (McEwan, 2006: 281)

Like the speaker of the poem, who is caught between two worlds — "a land of dreams" and the "struggle and fight" —, so Perowne balances his comfortable routine against the violent events that occur during that Saturday (Childs, 2006: 146). On the other hand, Baxter faces, for a few moments, a rupture between the opacity of his search for power and the fire of poetry, which enlightens his sensitive side.

> *He [Baxter] says again 'You wrote that.' And then, hurriedly, 'It's beautiful. You know that, don't you. It's beautiful. And you wrote it.'*
> *She dares say nothing.*
> *'It makes me think about where I grew up.'*
> *Baxter finds nothing extraordinary in the transformation of his role, from lord of terror to amazed admirer.*
> (McEwan, 2006: 222)

As I stated previously, one of the keywords of the novel is *transformation*: the recognition of the stimulating quality of the external reality, no matter how strenuous, in the case of Perowne; and of the variety of the internal world, energized by poetry, in the case of Baxter. The narrator of the novel asks: "Could it happen, is it within the bounds of real, that a mere poem of Daisy's could precipitate a mood swing?" (McEwan, 2006: 221). Of course, it is impossible to determine the precise cause of the ruffian's transformation. Was it Arnold's text? Could it have been the context: a fragile girl, in peril, reading a moving poem? Or was it simply one of Baxter's constant mood swings, a common symptom of Huntington's disease? I argue the ruffian's change of behaviour resulted from a mixture of all these external and internal circumstances: both the poem and the reader moved him, triggering a sudden reaction. If we accept this hypothesis, this

transformation becomes not the work of a writer resorting to a *deus ex machina*, but an acceptable change, within the borders of a psychiatric condition.

To be fair, a transformation of some sort was not entirely unexpected in the course of the narrative. In the architecture of McEwan's literary work, there are no futile hints, and epiphanies both from poetry and from the violent streets are carefully planned. When Daisy was thirteen, her grandfather, Grammaticus, offered her the famous novella *Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka (1883-1924) (McEwan, 2006: 113). It was also the first book Daisy recommended her father — described as a "coarse, unredeemable materialist" — hoping to broaden his horizons as a person (McEwan, 2006: 134). Kafka's novella, first published in 1915, deals with the *transformation* of a salesman, Gregor Samsa, into a gigantic insect. Similarly, *Saturday* is a book about personal growth, involving the development of qualities such as empathy and mercy.

After dominating the intruder, Perowne shows his true power not only by rejecting any possibility of revenge, but also by operating him in the hospital where he works (McEwan, 2006: 278). After the surgical procedure, the narrator acknowledges a personal transformation close to an epiphany: "He feels calm, and spacious, fully qualified to exist. It's a feeling of clarified emptiness, of deep, muted joy. Back at work and, lovemaking and Theo's song aside, he's happier than at any other point of his day off, his valuable Saturday" (McEwan, 2006: 258).

By the end of the novel, closing the circle, in a symbolic denouement, Perowne watches, once again, the world through one of his bedroom windows. The observer has evolved, due to the disturbing events he and his family faced: he placed more faith in himself and in others; found the communicative and bewitching power of poetry; and realized that sometimes logic is not enough to face violence. In general terms, aware of the insecurity of the world, he became a *preoccupied* man, distant from his anosognosian approach. Therefore, the altercations of this almost endless day produced a positive outcome, proving that not all conflicts are entirely destructive. As Michelle LeBaron states:

> *Conflicts are much more than bad or good, desirable or deniable. They are the stuff of our dreams, nudging us toward who we can become. They are the sand in our oysters, calling us to immediacy and exquisite attention to alignment — alignment with our purpose and with what breathes meaning into our lives. They are the insistent tapping of what we know but have forgotten or of what we do not know but need to imagine if we are to extricate ourselves from the knots that confine us.* (LeBaron, 2002: 286)

8. "And we are here as on a darkling plain"

Like a neurosurgeon delicately dissecting a human brain, McEwan intelligently explored the complexity of conflicts, resorting to a careful work of research and to his literary imagination. He showed the difficulty in dealing with terror in a civilized fashion; he forced the reader to reflect on human frailty, and concomitantly to value love; finally, he proved that evil is not purposeless, but has logical causes, even if they are lodged in the most recondite regions of the mind.

In this context, indifference or reclusion can never improve our society, and do not provide more than an elusive security in "the darkling plain" — to quote Arnold's poem — where we live. No individual can exclude himself or herself from life and history, because, as American journalist Dorothy Thompson (1893-1961) once stated: "peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict — alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence" (Ungerleider, 2008: 211).

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