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# Ian McEwan: A Novel Approach to Political Communication

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Ian McEwan: A Novel Approach to Political Communication

by

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A THESIS

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## Abstract

Since authors are skilled communicators, novels can help reimagine our communicative motivations and public sphere in a contemporary context. Their fiction can situate politically-conscious narratives in pertinent, culturally salient contexts to reflect and challenge our deepest convictions. In this work I consider three novels by British author Ian McEwan, which show his liberal-communicative thought: *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*. These texts exemplify his aesthetically accomplished and intellectually dense oeuvre.

Each novel explores one major theme. *Black Dogs* addresses historical narratives, concerned with how we integrate past events into our current identities. *Amsterdam* challenges the notion that expert elites can achieve greatness when their actions lack moral responsibility. *Saturday* undermines the deterministic conception of reason and science in light of political, economic and ecological insecurity and irrationality in today's post-9/11 world. In all three books, daily random events shatter the protagonists' worldviews. McEwan takes a liberal-pluralist approach, representing the contingent and irrational elements challenging classic liberalism.

Promoting individual autonomy, reason, and scientific progress, perfectionist liberal thinkers like John Locke and John Rawls presented fundamental moral entitlements that bind all human beings across time and place by virtue of their humanity. However, as different cultures interact, issues of legitimacy, stability and cooperation in democratic societies arise. Current political and communication theory addresses these concerns by seeking common ground from which to evaluate diverse political orders. Influenced by John Durham Peters's ethical-political communication theory, this study sets out a theoretical framework that combines political and communicative investigations, and sees today's liberal and communicative projects as similarly motivated. Within this space, I critically examine McEwan's contribution to a communicative and political moral code that can guide us through the fact of pluralism.

This moral code accepts the burden of reason, and the fragility of happiness in modern time, pointing to our psychological pathologies and contradictions in moral conscience. We can be skeptical about our moral, political and scientific convictions while avoiding moral relativism. We can celebrate individual autonomy, self-fulfillment and freedom of choice only if they come with empathic interest for the other. Any other possibility will diminish our greatest achievements.

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*To my son Ilai, the beginning of a whole new chapter*



## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One : Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Profile: Ian Russell McEwan .....	5
Outline of Chapters .....	10
<b>Chapter Two: The Aesthetic Turn .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Taking the Turn.....	13
Fiction and Politics.....	18
Methodology: A Quest for Understanding Texts .....	26
<b>Chapter Three: Understanding the Communication Terrain ....</b>	<b>38</b>
Information Theory: Shannon and Weaver .....	39
Defining “Communication” .....	41
Origins of the Public Sphere .....	43
The Public Sphere and the Frankfurt School .....	46
Media as Political: Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Harold Innis and Benedict Anderson .....	50
Communication and Literature: J. D. Peters .....	55
Dissemination vs Dialogue: The Lippmann-Dewey Debate .....	60
Summarizing the Communications Arc .....	67
<b>Chapter Four: Liberalism’s Divide: Between Perfectionism and Pluralism .....</b>	<b>69</b>
Introducing Two World Views .....	69
Liberal Perfectionism .....	70
Critique of Liberal Perfectionism .....	76

The will to Power: Morality, Conflict and Discipline .....	77
Value Pluralism .....	82
Value Pluralism and Liberalism: Can the Two Coexist? .....	86
Pluralist Critics of Liberalism .....	87
A Liberal Pluralist Approach .....	90
Summary .....	96
<b>Chapter Five: <i>Black Dogs</i> – Wrestling with the Ghosts of History</b> .....	<b>99</b>
Black Dogs and Historical Facts .....	102
History and Redemptive Narratives .....	105
Worldviews and Turning Points.....	109
The Rational, the Irrational and the Postmodern .....	116
The Symbol of Violence, and Collective Responsibility.....	121
<b>Chapter Six: <i>Amsterdam</i> – Delusions and Disharmony .....</b>	<b>125</b>
<i>Amsterdam</i> and the Baby Boomers .....	125
The Press: Forces and Motivations.....	129
Spectacle: Image and Reality .....	137
Aesthetics and Social Responsibility.....	142
<b>Chapter Seven: <i>Saturday</i> – Evolutionary Ethics, Public Reason and Morality .....</b>	<b>151</b>
Terrorism and Evolutionary Ethics .....	151
The Failure of Public Reason.....	157
Biological Materialism: Grandeur View of Life.....	166
Perowne: Autonomous and Self-contained.....	171
Imagination and Moral Empathy .....	175

<b>Chapter Eight: Ian McEwan and the 21st Century .....</b>	<b>181</b>
Modes of Experience .....	181
History.....	184
Communication .....	192
Human Nature: Science and Arts.....	197
<b>Chapter Nine: Conclusions.....</b>	<b>202</b>
The Power of Imaginative Literature .....	202
Communication and Politics: Two Sides of the Coin.....	203
Research Contribution .....	204
McEwan and Communications.....	205
McEwan: Author of Plural liberalism.....	208
Literature and liberal education .....	217
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>221</b>

## Epigraph

"How should we live?" someone asked me in a letter.

I had meant to ask him the same question.

Again, and as ever,

as may be seen above,

the most pressing questions are naïve ones.

Wisława Szymborska, "The Century's Decline"

## Chapter One : Introduction

The primary effort of my dissertation is to focus on the contribution of contemporary British author Ian McEwan to liberal thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, I wish to assert McEwan's place as an important thinker in the field of politics and communication. I wish to do so by offering an analysis of McEwan's novels. "A great image-conjuring storyteller,"<sup>1</sup> McEwan's literary canon engages with a wide range of modern-day issues: climate change and ecology,<sup>2</sup> feminism, male violence and gender relations,<sup>3</sup> child abductions,<sup>4</sup> wars and the proliferation of nuclear weapons,<sup>5</sup> religious fundamentalism, terrorism and millennialism.<sup>6</sup> My analysis of McEwan's novels aims to expose how the novels lead the reader through the changing of the millennium, while reflecting the challenges of our time and exploring the liberal experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I achieve this, in part, by examining the experience of McEwan's characters and their self-reflection as

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<sup>1</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan*, xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ian McEwan, *Solar* (Toronto: ON: Alfred A. Knopf, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 1st ed. (Anchor, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (Toronto: ON: L&OD, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (Toronto: ON: Vintage, 2001); Ian McEwan, *The Innocent* (Toronto: ON: L&OD, 1990); Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: England: Vintage, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (Toronto: ON: Vintage, 1997); Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (Toronto: ON: Vintage, 2005).

they cope with the emerging tensions between their private lives and the changing world.

As a provocative thinker in the field of politics and communication, McEwan's work implicitly ties the triangle of communication studies—text, audience and industry—to a range of democratic issues such as civic intelligence and participation, accessibility, representation and cultural worth. The three novels chosen to stand at the core of my analysis—*Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*—present the contours of workable associations between McEwan's storytelling, communication and liberal theory.

I approach McEwan's literary work through the lens of what is known in political theory as "the fact of pluralism."<sup>7</sup> Essentially, the fact of pluralism points to the observation that the world is composed of different value systems. This observation, and the reality, poses both theoretical and practical challenges to consensus-building in liberal democracies. The theoretical challenge focuses not on the existence of different viewpoints but on this question: Is there one overarching moral principle or a plurality of moral principles (based on different values such as happiness, friendship,

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<sup>7</sup> Barry, "In Defense of Political Liberalism"; Crowder, "Pluralism and Liberalism"; Kymlicka, "Two Models of Pluralism and Tolerance."

liberty etc.) according to which we are to orchestrate our lives? The practical challenge largely concerns the kinds of restrictions governments can employ on citizens so they adhere to the governments' value systems.<sup>8</sup> McEwan's novels, as a whole, speak directly to the fact of pluralism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the challenges of rational consensus-building in liberal democracies. While doing so, they also correspond directly with some of the prominent thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the major question this study asks is how the novels of Ian McEwan contribute to liberal attempts to understand and reach a rational agreement in a pluralist environment, as we move from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And what is the conceptual framework these novels offer us that helps us do this?

The nature of these questions as well as McEwan's novels requires this study to take an interdisciplinary approach. In doing so, I draw upon various thinkers and writers such as John Durham Peters, Harold A. Innis, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, among others. Their ideas provide a theoretical context for the analysis of McEwan's novels, as well as establishing the core premise of this work: that the project of communication and the project of liberalism ultimately share a similar

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<sup>8</sup> Elinor Mason, "Value Pluralism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/value-pluralism/> .

motivation, an innate human desire that touches upon the essence of our social wellbeing—to be fully understood and accepted by those around us.<sup>9</sup>

An examination of their seminal works reveals a profound understanding of the relationships between social action, communication and liberalism in a pluralist context. For example, both Rawls and Habermas, in their respective work on theory of justice and the theory of communicative action, presented principles of consensus-building in a pluralist context and attempted to achieve political consensus by restoring deontological reason and ethics. Peters and Innis presented constructivist historical narrations of communication theory that expand our understanding of communication beyond the scope of its technological applications. These works, contemporary foundations of political and communicative thought, seem to be motivated by similar hopes. These are moral hopes for human betterment, for finding ways to reconcile the self and the other and ultimately coming to agreement on what constitutes a good society.

Despite this dissertation's intense engagement with literature, and specifically English novels, this research is not a study in English literature. Beyond their literary and aesthetic merits, McEwan's novels are important

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<sup>9</sup> Peters, "The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made."; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.



texts to be studied seriously because there is an argument to be made *through them*. Not only are they the works of an internationally lauded author, but they may also be read as communicating a political message, a message about the challenges and limitations of liberal democratic societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other words, my study sets out to learn something about the *political world* we live in, not about the *novels* themselves. Nonetheless, at the core of this work lays the premise that great works of literature can help us to reimagine in contemporary context our public sphere. Without my strong conviction in the power of imaginary literature to depict and embed the real world into the imaginary one, this entire study would not be possible.

### **Profile: Ian Russell McEwan**

Given the important role that McEwan's novels play in this dissertation, a short profile of this writer is an essential first piece in this project. Ian Russell McEwan was born in the garrison military town of Aldershot, England on June 21, 1948. McEwan's father, David, was a Scottish sergeant major who lied about his age to join the army due to high unemployment rates in Glasgow in the 1930s. As a result, McEwan spent his early childhood years in military camps in England, Singapore and Libya. During his stay in Libya in 1956, the British and French invaded Egypt in "Operation Musketeer," to gain control over the Suez Canal. During the invasion, eight-year-old

McEwan witnessed his father, who carried a service revolver around his waist, gathering all British families into armed camps to ensure their safety. Years later, McEwan noted that this experience made him understand that "political events were real and affected people's lives—they were not just stories in the papers that grown-ups read."<sup>10</sup>

McEwan reports he was a dreamy, shy kid who was very attached to his mother. His parents encouraged him to read but gave him no literary guidance; instead he read "randomly and compulsively." After working a short period of time in London as a garbage collector, he pursued his bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of Sussex in Brighton, where reading Kafka and Freud made a big impression on him.<sup>11</sup> He graduated with honours in 1970 and spent the following year taking a creative writing course in modern fiction at the University of East Anglia, guided by novelists Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson.

He published his first story in the *Transatlantic Review* and started to be taken seriously shortly after. By 1972, Ted Solotaroff, the editor of *New American Review*, published his stories along with publications from Günter

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<sup>10</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Begley, "Ian McEwan," 34.

Grass, Susan Sontag, and Philip Roth. McEwan's early work received mixed critical reviews due to its disquieting subject matters and shocking prose. Nevertheless, less than ten years after his first publication McEwan was named one of the 20 best young British novelists by *Granta* magazine.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his 35 years of literary activity, McEwan has won much respect from both readers and critics, and his work has acquired considerable prestige. In 1975, he published *First Love, Last Rites*, a selection of short stories he had written for his Master's degree in East Anglia, and for which he received the 1976 Somerset Maugham Award. His second collection of stories, *In Between the Sheets*, and his first novel, *The Cement garden*, were published in 1978. He devoted most of the 1980s to writing screenplays and motion pictures. Nonetheless, he published two more novels during these years: *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and *The Child in Time* (1987), which won the Whitbread Award. In 1990, he published *The Innocent* and released a film adaptation for the *The Comfort of Strangers*. He was shortlisted again for the Booker Prize for Fiction for his 1992 novel *Black Dogs*. His novel *Enduring Love* (1997) was shortlisted for the James

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, "Granta's Class of 2013."

Tait Black Memorial Prize. In 1998, he finally won the Booker Prize for his novella *Amsterdam*.

In 2001 McEwan published *Atonement*, which was shortlisted for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Whitbread Novel Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the Booker Prize. *Atonement* won the WH Smith Literary Award (2002) and the National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (2003). In 2007, *Atonement* was released as a film adaptation and received seven Academy Award nominations. He followed this book with the novel *Saturday* (2005), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in the following year. His second novella, *On Chesil Beach* (2007), was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. His eleventh novel, *Solar* (2010), was awarded the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic writing.

The publication of McEwan's second novel *The Child in Time* in 1987 marked the beginning of a more mature stage in his writing. Still committed to controversial and disturbing plot lines, this stage in his writing is characterized by growing political awareness, moral complexity and

elements of psychological depth.<sup>13</sup> Dominic Head sees McEwan's work as "overtly political, more human" due to his attempt to connect narrative fiction with a quest for "an ethical world-view".<sup>14</sup> David Malcolm points out the balance that exists between irrationality, desires and emotions, and objectivity, reason and science in McEwan's work as well as its proclivity to address taboo matters.<sup>15</sup>

As one of the most important contemporary English authors, McEwan's appearance on the academic agenda should not come as a surprise. His work is valuable for this study for the great emphasis it places on the poetics of the individual.<sup>16</sup> The search for happiness and self-actualization, presented in his novels, shed light on our attempts to treasure this precarious individuality. It also points to the risks associated with such attempt. Along with a cross-cutting humanistic commitment the political prospect in McEwan's novels is of utmost relevance to the understanding of the liberal experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>13</sup> Hunter, "Ian McEwan (1948-)."

<sup>14</sup> Head, *Ian McEwan*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*.

<sup>16</sup> Nicklas, "The Ethical Question: Art And Politics in the Work of Ian McEwan."

## Outline of Chapters

Given my position that literature has a role to play in opening up understandings of the public sphere, I choose to open my discussion in Chapter Two with a consideration of the political dimensions of literature. The objective here is to assess the role of fiction as a medium of communication, and as an agent for social and political knowledge and change, and thus I begin by looking at the aesthetic turn in the Social Sciences. In this chapter I also present the methodological orientation of my study. A hermeneutic approach allows me to research shifts between the “close world” of each novel (micro-analysis) and its aggregated cohesive meaning as a trajectory and repository of political thought (macro-analysis).

In Chapter Three I provide an introductory survey of communication theory, so as to provide a clear foundation to the link between communication and politics, as well as to outline the theoretical context within which I fit McEwan’s thought. Drawing on J.D Peters’ *Speaking into the Air*, and other seminal works in communication, I argue that the project of communication is essentially a political and ethical project.<sup>17</sup> Approaching it as such, I equate the promises of liberalism with those of communication, thus returning to a more political, humanistic lineage of communication

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<sup>17</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

theory that seeks to reclaim the notion of authenticity in a media-saturated world.

Chapter Four outline the origins and main differences of two types of epistemological commitments in liberal thought: Enlightenment liberalism, also referred to as perfectionist liberalism, and value pluralism. This chapter points to an existing tension in liberal theory. A tension between the search for fundamental moral entitlements that will bind all human beings across time and place and the desire to find a liberal framework that combine personal autonomy with value pluralism.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven each offer an analysis of one McEwan novel, in this order: *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam*, and *Saturday*. Chapter Five focuses on the historical conversation. The analysis of *Black Dogs* discusses history's power to shape political identities and morals, as well as human limitations in grasping history. Chapter Six takes a look at the role and status of communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through the exploration of ego in news production and works of art in *Amsterdam*, McEwan examines moral communicative practices as expression of compassion and reciprocity. Chapter Seven focuses on the novel *Saturday* and it is dedicated to the scientific\artistic conversation. As such, *Saturday* examines "human nature" from both a Darwinist and poetic approaches.

In Chapter eight I present and interpreted the three main conversations I find in McEwan's work. This chapter articulates three conversations, or modes of experience, in McEwan's literary work that form the building blocks of his thought: historical conversation, a communicative conversation and a scientific\artistic conversation. By doing so I hope to better situate McEwan as a contemporary intellectual whose contribution to communication and liberal theory is immense.

The last chapter summarizes the entire argument I put forth. Namely, that imaginative literature can provide its readers with a novel space for reconsiderations of the tension between perfectionist and pluralist liberal mindsets. In addition, this chapter crystallizes the core principles of McEwan's political view of modern life under the fact of pluralism. It does so by focusing on McEwan's ethical approach to communication as a way to alleviate the pressures of modern uncertainty and fragile existence.



## **Chapter Two: The Aesthetic Turn**

### **Taking the Turn**

The transition to the 21<sup>st</sup> century was characterized by many complexities. Events like Y2K, 9/11, the Southeast Asian tsunami of 2004, the global recession and economic crisis of 2008 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 seem to have been torn from the scripts of a Hollywood blockbuster. Shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, almost every media outlet in the world presented an image of an anonymous man jumping to his death minutes before the collapse of the North Tower. The image of the “Falling Man” became at once a representative icon of the Western individual living in this era.

The world we live in is fast-changing and many people find it hard to grapple with and make sense of current events. Television—still a source of collective consciousness today—reduces world politics and conflicts to sound-bites. Wars, famines and diplomatic summits are broadcast to us as short-lived media events that blend information and entertainment. Important events are likely to get further blurred when presented in the context of other news and no-news, from drive-by shootings to touch-downs, famines, home-runs and laundry detergent ads. As a consequence, we may distance

ourselves from the highly disturbing realities that are communicated to us, by creating a moral shield against anything that is outside our doorstep.<sup>18</sup>

Scientists do their best to describe and explain the world we live in. Alas, science progresses slowly, is highly technical, and often, hard to communicate to the general public. Confronting the massive tragedy of the Bosnian War, Michael Ignatieff looked for help in fine art images, both Goya's *Disasters of War* series and Picasso's *Guernica*,<sup>19</sup> "which confront [the] desire to evade the testimony of our own eyes by grounding horror in *aesthetic forms* that force the spectator to see it as for the first time."<sup>20</sup> Taking an esthetic turn to address such confusion is becoming a growing niche in scholarly work in the Social Sciences.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, whether intentional or not, novelists have always been keen observers of society. In their fictitious explorations, authors such as Mark Twain, Franz Kafka, Aldous

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<sup>18</sup> Boltanski, *Distant Suffering [electronic Resource]*.

<sup>19</sup> Between 1810 and 1820 Spanish artist Francisco Goya created 80 prints depicting the disturbing and bloody aspects of the conflict and aftermath of Spanish struggle against Napoleon French republic. The *Guernica* was Pablo Picasso's response to the bombing of Guernica in Northern Spain by Germans and Italians during the Spanish civil war in 1937.

<sup>20</sup> Ignatieff, *Virtual War*, 29–30.

<sup>21</sup> For examples see: Keren, *The Citizen's Voice*; Keren, *Reality and Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*; Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*; Blotner, *The Political Novel*; Whitebrook, "Politics and Literature?".

Huxley and George Orwell, to name only a few, articulated the problems of their days in a way that was accessible to the general public. Accepting the inevitability of the gap existing between reality and fiction, or between the represented and its representation in the media, novels celebrate the transformative power of imagination.

American philosopher, Richard Rorty once noted that, “[b]y the early twentieth century the scientists had become as remote from most intellectuals as had the theologians. Poets and novelists had taken the place of both preachers and philosophers as the moral teachers of the youth.”<sup>22</sup> Twenty-five years earlier, Joseph L. Blotner made a comment even more far-reaching than Rorty’s. According to Blotner, the novel addresses the unmet needs left behind by scientific theories. Much like many scientific ideas, novels seek to describe and interpret human experiences. However, while science must draw from “well-defined, rigidly controlled techniques within generally accepted boundaries,” novelists are limited only by their own imagination. As such, they are free to play with time, space and language, supplementing intellectual rigour with speculative data and emotional

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<sup>22</sup> Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing,” 5.

appeals, which together result in a socially and politically conscious body of work that holds "more latitude and fewer restrictions."<sup>23</sup>

Temporarily suspending reality and replacing theoretical constructs with accessible language and identifiable shared experiences, novels create a simple, yet powerful, equation between life and fiction. Reading the novel against the dangerous dispositions of numbing regularity and complacency we may face on a daily basis can hold valuable insights to our understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accepting the proposition that literature is based on powerful imaginative forces allows us to unfold fiction's innate communicative qualities.

One of the communicative qualities of the novel is that it allows us to "move" between unrelated or unconnected spheres (geographically, culturally and so forth). The freedom of movement between what is invented and reinvented for us, embodies an intriguing aspect of communication; one that allows an investigation of empathetic visions of communication. The novel brings into proximity those elements that may be far apart; it gives face and voice to those who are voiceless. In other words, fiction is a medium in the sense that it is the carrier of stories, ideas and values, but

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<sup>23</sup> Blotner, *The Political Novel*, 8.

more than that, it is a medium in the sense of bringing together distant points in time and space. Nobel Prize-winning author J. M. Coetzee explains this idea as such: in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*, the Australian narrator and protagonist, Costello, gives a lecture on literature and tells her audience that the novel is:

[A]n attempt to understand human fate, case by case, how one creature that starts at point A, has experiences in B, C, and D, eventually ends up at point Z. The novel, like history, is an exercise in creating a coherent past. Like history, it examines the different contributions of characters and consequences in shaping the present. In doing so, the novel teaches us how to examine the present power to shape the future.<sup>24</sup>

Coetzee sketches an intimate path into the imaginary history of the private sphere. Read privately, locally and individually, the novel's sphere expresses the flow of feelings and thoughts from one place to another and communicates them to the reader. It is this intimacy that allows the readers to meet with the inner world of the "Other." It is important to note, though, that this communion of the "One" and the "Other" does not always mean

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<sup>24</sup> Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*. Translated from Hebrew.

agreement. Plurality remains an intractable problem of the human condition. As I show in Chapter Three, therefore, communication—whatever it might mean—is fundamentally a political and ethical problem, and not a semantic one.

### **Fiction and Politics**

Although literacy as a mass phenomenon is a recent event in the history of human communication, it is nonetheless a significant one. Novels, poems, and myths help us rally around an image of ourselves.<sup>25</sup> We compose our lives into stories and share them with others who do the same through conversations, public speeches, newspaper reports or artistic expressions like music and dance, theater, painting, and writing. The ancient Greeks consulted the Iliad and the Odyssey, as well as Oedipus and Antigone, in their ethical and political questioning.<sup>26</sup> The Jewish code of moral conduct is deeply rooted in the stories found in the Bible, and later on in the homiletic texts of the rabbinic literate, namely the Talmud and Midrash. The growing dissemination of novels, newspapers and magazines, made possible by the development of print, played an important role in

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<sup>25</sup> Steiner, *George Steiner on the History of Literacy* - 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*.

social change, impacting scientific, medical and geographical standards.<sup>27</sup>

Such publications helped create a sense of a “sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time,”<sup>28</sup> which contributed to the emergence of national communities and civic public spheres.

A strong connection exists between literature as a private and poetic mode of human communication and literature as a vehicle through which the national ethos and moral standards of certain collectives come about. Therefore, when Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas spoke of a “public sphere,” be it imagined or real, they originate it in a literary culture.<sup>29</sup> But the most famous discussion, perhaps, on the role of fiction in nation-building is about 2500 years old and can be found in Plato’s *Republic*, where Socrates expresses his concerns about the fictitious means by which our opinions about the good and just are being formed, disseminated, and discussed.<sup>30</sup> Socrates makes the argument that fiction is the sole practice of

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<sup>27</sup> Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 26; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1991.

<sup>29</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Amihud Gilead, *The Platonic Odyssey: A Philosophical-Literary Inquiry into the Phaedo* (Atlanta: GA: Rodopi, 1994); Rosalind Hursthouse, “Truth and Representation,” in *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Malden:

deception and imitation, and therefore a deviant of morality that has no true ability to determine what is just and what is good, and thus it should not be used to educate the youth.<sup>31</sup> For Socrates, fiction has the ability to alter young minds to think that “many happy men are unjust, and many wretched ones just, and that doing injustice is profitable if one gets away with it,”<sup>32</sup> thereby resulting in an undesired cultivation of the political being. Being a skillful “myth maker” himself, Socrates did not ask to utterly revoke poetry from the state, but to recruit its means and contents so it would sustain his own conception of the good life and polis.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the quarrel between philosophy and poetry reveals the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of fiction, and consequentially its delicate relationship with reality. We know that works of fiction are not real, although they may include references to real people or events. Alternatively, fiction can describe people or events that do not exist in a manner which

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Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 239–296; Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Tom Sorell, “Art, Society and Morality,” in *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Malden: Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed account of this argument see: Sorell, “Art, Society and Morality.”

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, 392b1–2.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.



accords with behaviors and emotions from the real world. It is neither true, nor a lie, and it may often assume prevalent faculties of human beings, as well as different characteristics of cultures and societies.<sup>34</sup>

Speech act theory provides us with a way to come to terms with these paradoxes. By considering an utterance to be an action in itself, speech act theory focuses on the performative aspects of language and not only on its meaning. Fiction makes a case for speech act theorists to exemplify their arguments about the performative nature of language. In his essay *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, John Searle makes the argument that the act imagining and authoring of a fictional text must be completely separated from the fictive utterance, which is serious and real nonetheless. This approach understands fiction in “terms of a *mode of utterance* located in a *social practice*,” since it “appeals more to action and attitude than to words and things.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, our view of fictional stories as an extension of our existing knowledge depends upon the cultural, social, political or scientific conventions authors decide to establish with their

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<sup>34</sup> Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel*.

<sup>35</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, 32–33.

readers.<sup>36</sup> While nonfictional elements can be incorporated into fictional stories (e.g., places, events or people), they are to be understood as descriptive rather than referential.<sup>37</sup> Put illustratively by Searle, “I did not *pretend* to refer to a real Sherlock Holmes; I *really referred* to the fictional Sherlock Holmes.”<sup>38</sup>

Referring to fiction or fictive utterances as a true and serious reflection of our social practices makes it an essential component to making works of fiction valuable to political knowledge. Irving Howe, the author of *Politics and the Novel* sees potential in gaining political knowledge and understanding through those novels in which “political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting.”<sup>39</sup> However, according to Howe, this condition is not sufficient in and of itself. The political novel needs also to permit “the possibility of some analytical profit.”<sup>40</sup> Catherine H. Zuckert demonstrates such “analytical profit” in her study, *Natural Right and*

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<sup>36</sup> Orwell’s *1984* and Huxley’s *Brave New World* are good examples for establishing all the above mentioned conventions.

<sup>37</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*.

<sup>38</sup> Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” 330.

<sup>39</sup> Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

*the American Imagination*. In it, she argues that American novels like *Huckleberry Finn* or *Moby Dick* were able to confront their readers with questions concerning the natural foundations of the United States' political order and institutions while "active statesmen concerned themselves primarily with institutional response to practical problems."<sup>41</sup> Zuckert explores the motif of withdrawal from society to nature, in American literature, to "reiterate the major elements of the social contract theory underlying the U.S Constitution, in the face of European philosophical criticism."<sup>42</sup>

Zuckert is interested in the formation of the American civil rights movement, and so she explores the key features of liberal political thought through the works of six American authors. In James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville and Ernest Hemingway, Zuckert sees transhistorical and natural standards of goodness of human life. Conversely, in the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain and William Faulkner, she finds the deleterious political results constituted by the idealized accounts of life in the state of nature, such as economic exploitation. Her conceptualization of the "political teaching" of the novel, and of the author as a "public teacher,"

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<sup>41</sup> Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

coincides with a repeated need to rethink the self-evident truths of the US constitution and their practicalities in the face of new events—a central topic in American political philosophy.<sup>43</sup>

This form of critical analysis is not limited to American fiction. The novels of Ian McEwan are rife with political ideas that permit “analytical profit.” McEwan is a prolific author who is conversant with multiple literary media. So far, his body of work includes twelve novels and four screenplays, three collections of short stories, two children's fiction, one oratorio and one libretto. His short stories were often transformed into screenplays, many of which he wrote, and five of his novels were successfully adapted for the screen. Over the years, McEwan has been called the “the author of newness” and “a cartographer of the contemporary who is able to make the serious popular and the popular serious.”<sup>44</sup>

McEwan emerged into the British literary scene in the early 1970s with the publication the short story collection *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), for which he received the nickname “Ian Macabre.”<sup>45</sup> His fascination with death,

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<sup>43</sup> Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*.

<sup>44</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan*; Head, *Ian McEwan*; Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*; McEwan, *Conversations with Ian McEwan*.

<sup>45</sup> Begley, “Ian McEwan.”

isolation, incest, and perverse desires and behaviors quickly gave him the reputation of an intellectual horror writer. Critics, such as Jack Slay, claimed that McEwan's "literature of shock [is characterized by] a conscious desire to repel and to discomfit the reader."<sup>46</sup> Slay also notes, however, that the exploitation of the grim aspects of human nature has metamorphosed in McEwan's mature fiction into "a more socially conscious literature."<sup>47</sup> This transformation from an "intellectual horror writer" into a "cartographer of the contemporary" comes into play in McEwan's novels when they extend the intense psychological state of their characters into the broader perspective of the public sphere and civil society. Publications like *The Child in Time* (1987), *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), the Booker Prize-winning *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005) often deal with moments of crisis in the social order and to the individual operating in such an order. These moments are often cast against geopolitical upheavals—such as World War II, the Cold War, the democratization of East Germany, terrorism and religious fundamentalism, and global warming—that provide McEwan, as he himself once noted, with

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<sup>46</sup> Slay, *Ian McEwan*, x.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

a way of exploring and testing character. How we might withstand, or fail to withstand, an extreme experience, what moral qualities and questions are brought forward, how we live with the consequences of our decisions, how memory torments, what time does, what resources we have to fall back on.<sup>48</sup>

It is this “art of unease” that gained for McEwan both popular and critical acclaim.

### **Methodology: A Quest for Understanding Texts**

The understanding of texts, any text, “begins when something [in the text] addresses us.”<sup>49</sup> According to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, this moment is “the first condition” of hermeneutics.<sup>50</sup>

Hermeneutics, *Ars interpretandi*—the art of interpretation—is the philosophical tradition this study is based on. As a theory of interpretation, hermeneutics and hermeneutic principles guide my “close reading”, understanding, and analysis of Ian McEwan’s novels.

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<sup>48</sup> Begley, “Ian McEwan,” 45.

<sup>49</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Historically, hermeneutics can be traced to ancient classical thought and rabbinical literature like the Talmud and the Midrash that aimed to bridge the gulf between the word of God(s) and human understanding of them. The status of hermeneutics as a methodological or didactic aid for understanding and interpreting linguistic and non-linguistic expressions arose, however, with German romanticism and idealism. From a sole interest in the practice of revealing the exoteric meanings of ancient texts, it shifted to the exploration of the conditions for symbolic interaction and communication. The question "how to read?" was replaced by the question "how do we communicate?" With the rise of existential philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, hermeneutics offered a link between symbolic communication and understanding of human life and existence. As such, hermeneutics teaches us that intellectual innovation depends on creating an ongoing dialogue that rearticulates the dynamics of human experience and thought.

German philosophy considered hermeneutics to be ontology. That is, it was about the most fundamental conditions of being in the world. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that understanding is a mode of being, and not a method of reading or the outcome of critical reflection. The world is tacitly intelligible to us, and we understand it in an intuitive way, rather than by gathering natural facts and conceptualizing them into a universal

proposition about the world. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's student, continued to develop Heidegger's paradigm in his project *Truth and Method*. He explored the consequences of hermeneutics on understanding human sciences in a way that is not subservient to "the dominance of modern science [...but to] the experience of philosophy, of art, and of history itself."<sup>51</sup> According to Gadamer, the sole objective of hermeneutics is to help us comprehend human experiences, not to provide a method for reading texts.

I agree that all acts of thinking, even when not related to textual analysis, can be held as acts of interpretation. Translating information obtained through our senses into language, thinking about and evaluating this information, is a pure act of interpretation. Nonetheless, I would like to limit my discussion here to textual interpretation as a hermeneutic act, and exclude the broader philosophical meaning of interpretation as an integral part of thinking and judging, since it goes beyond the needs of this dissertation. Paul Ricoeur does this just by bringing hermeneutics back to its original purpose: textual interpretation. By focusing on the means by which understanding is possible instead of focusing on the possibility of

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<sup>51</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xx–xxi.



understanding, Ricoeur brings language and lived experience together. The text is the central object of investigation in Ricoeur's theory, as is the question of its status. According to Ricoeur, while the literal meaning of a text can only be singular, its textual-symbolic meaning is multifaceted. The relation between the text and the world is more important than the relation between the text and its author. In other words, when we are not searching for the intellectual motivations and intentions of the author, we can focus our attention on the symbolic meaning of the text as a meaningful expression of our current experience of the world we live in.<sup>52</sup>

A text is, for Ricoeur, an utterance set in writing. Here, Ricoeur presents his most important hermeneutic principle: hermeneutic interpretation mostly relates to written discourses. While not every discourse is a text, every text is a discourse when it is comprised of performative utterances.<sup>53</sup> Written utterances take primacy over spoken ones, as they are recorded and fixed. According to Ricoeur, in the time of writing there is no reader, and in the time of reading there is no author. consequently, the

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<sup>52</sup> The reader may wonder whether Ricoeur's justifications for reader-text focus contradicts the profile of Ian McEwan provided in Chapter One. I believe that it does not. McEwan's profile does not infringe on the core premise of my hermeneutic analysis as the novels' reception, McEwan's biographical details, and his own attitudes and thoughts about his novels were not part of the analysis.

<sup>53</sup> Austin, "Performative Utterances"; Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse."

communication between a text and a reader does not overlap in the same way it does in, for example, a conversation where both speaker and listener are present, and understanding the speaker means understanding the conversation, and vice versa. Therefore, engaging with a text is, by definition, an exercise in interpretation in order to achieve meaning.

In his hermeneutic theory, Ricoeur moves from an author-reader focused study to a reader-text focused study.<sup>54</sup> The benefit of the reader-text focused approach to this research is in viewing the text as an autonomous object. An autonomous text is free from the author's intentions and the context of its creation, and can be read in a variety of contexts. By acknowledging textual plurality and multiplicity—that the same text may offer several legitimate interpretations and may have many meanings—we can view the text as an endless form of communication, one that is not bound by the particular situation of the author but one that addresses any future potential reader. In Ricoeur's own words: "What the reader says is a re-saying which reenacts what the text says by itself."<sup>55</sup> Put in this study's context, Ricoeur's hermeneutics allow me to situate McEwan's novels in a political and communicative theoretical context that floats free of the

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<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur, "What Is a Text"; Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text."

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, "What Is a Text," 150.

author's initial intentions or, alternately, the novels' receptions.<sup>56</sup> To use hermeneutic language, this approach depends strictly on one's own "horizon of expectations."

Ricoeur's notion that an "[interpretation of] a text means moving beyond understanding what it says to understanding what it talks about"<sup>57</sup> points to what scholars call a "hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>58</sup> This kind of hermeneutics teaches us to regard with suspicion our conscious understandings and experience (e.g., psychological or political). When put in literary context hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to expose the assumptions that a text may relay (such as political, philosophical, or linguistic). Ricoeur breaks the process into two separate but related stages. First, explaining the different parts of the text and their internal relations—what the text actually says. Second, understanding the text as a whole in relation to its parts, by

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<sup>56</sup> Levy, *Hermeneutics*; Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (TCU Press, 1976), 88.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, (Terry Lectures) (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970); Brian Leiter, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud," in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 74–105; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Man and World* 17, no. 3–4 (September 1, 1984): 313–23; Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *M/C Journal* 15, no. 1 (November 26, 2011), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431>.

asking what meanings are disclosed by the text. When readers explain a text they may focus on its main details (the development of the plot, the historical events in its background, characters' actions, and so on), which allows them to appreciate what is happening or being described in the text. This is, however, a naïve understanding of the text's meaning. The hermeneutics of suspicion goes beyond the explicit to the implicit, from the expressed to the unexpressed.<sup>59</sup> Moving forward with the interpretive process, our naïve understanding may be deepened, expanded, confirmed or rejected all together.

Hermeneutics sees in fiction a vital source of knowledge that is not subservient to scientific reasoning. In his book *The Art of the Novel*, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera argues that the novel:

discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one: with Cervantes and his contemporaries, it inquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine "what happens inside," to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man's rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explores the terra previously incognito of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it

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<sup>59</sup> Geanellos, "Exploring Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Theory of Interpretation as a Method of Analysing Research Texts."

focuses on the intrusion of the irrational into human behavior and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions.<sup>60</sup>

According to Kundera, the novel summons the readers to reflect on the role of mythology, history, psychology and politics in their lives and protects them from the "forgetting of being." In other words, by deeply engaging with novels, readers may achieve the eminent goal of hermeneutics: "rising up to humanity through culture."<sup>61</sup> Imaginative literature may help readers to transcend their immediacy, by expanding their knowledge and experiences of various moral dispositions and values, political conventions and human motivations. By attributing moral, political, psychological or historical motives to actions, the novel shows its ontological spirit. It invites readers to reflect on their concrete quest for a good life, by identifying the dimensions of social actions (such as cultural resources, norms, values and customs) that enable mutual understanding and cooperation, and that are

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<sup>60</sup> Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 9.

ultimately required for the building of systems of meaning and institutional orders.<sup>62</sup>

Close reading assists us in making the connection between the world of the reader and the world of the text possible. Close reading means reading in an attentive manner, while the focus of reading is exclusively on the materiality of the text, rather than on biography, audience history etc. Conversely, the text is considered a self-contained entity, which should be engaged with only within the confines of what it offers. Richards and Brooks stipulate close reading as a mean to discover the explicit meaning of a text.<sup>63</sup> This means that the text is viewed mostly as a discursive unit that contains "a, more or less, coherent set of interpretations the reader produces in order to make sense of it."<sup>64</sup>

This also means that the text is always torn to pieces and reconstituted by the reader. Reader-response criticism pays much attention to the many different ways in which readers may response to literary texts. According to reader-response theorists, close reading allow the reader to

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<sup>62</sup> Habermas, "A Reply."

<sup>63</sup> Richards, *Practical Criticism*; Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*.

<sup>64</sup> Van Looy, *Close Reading New Media : Analyzing Electronic Literature*, 8.

have a role in re-creating literary works. Such active participation provides the reader with the kind of experience that may yield “a sense of the human and practical implications of the information that has been acquired. This information is no longer words to be rattled off; the words now point toward actual human situation and feelings.”<sup>65</sup> By differentiating the text from the meaning it evokes the reader can transform the meaning of a text to meet their personal experiences,<sup>66</sup> or according to a particular interpretive community.<sup>67</sup>

There are many ways of making sense of texts. Close reading advocates advise to examine the text multiple times to grasp more of its meaning. Therefore, it is recommended to read a text with different purpose each time in mind. For example, reading the text for getting an impression of its content, reading for information, reading for analyzing etc. Close reading requires the reader to be an active reader. Taking notes while reading and asking questions, identifying relevant elements and factual information as well as significant ideas in the text are important strategies

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<sup>65</sup> Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 228.

<sup>66</sup> Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*.

<sup>67</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*.

for active reading. Finally, the reader is expected to determine the significance of the text.<sup>68</sup>

This dissertation is written in a way that is hermeneutically attuned to an investigation of a reader-text focused study. Therefore, this study rests on four hermeneutic pillars. Chapters one to four represent the first pillar of this study, and as such its first level of abstraction. The first pillar introduces my general arguments, theoretical background and justifications for the entire study. The second pillar, represented by chapters five, six and seven, solely focuses on the objects of analysis: McEwan's novels. In these chapters I explain and understand each novel as a whole in relation to its parts.

Chapter eight is the third pillar of the study and it represents a higher level of abstraction as it continues the interpretive process of the second pillar. This chapter strays away from the close reading of the novels to provide a broader interpretation of the literary themes found and discussed in previous chapters. Chapter nine is the last pillar and it completes the hermeneutic circle by articulating the contribution of McEwan's novels to political and communicative thought. As such, it focuses on the highest level of abstraction: meaning-giving. This pillar crystallizes the meaning of McEwan's

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<sup>68</sup> Hinchman and Moore, "Close Reading."



novels as a meaningful expression of the world we live in in the third millennium.

As I followed these strategies in the course of this study, I learned how rich and multifaceted a literary text can be. But more importantly, I discovered how demanding the act of critical interpretation is. In its core, the journey to a realization or comprehension of a literary text is a communicative one. However, as I show in the next chapter, and throughout this entire study, such journey must not be satisfied by a conclusive meaning. Rather, it must remain an open-ended project, so it can leave space for the radical changes that are yet to come.

### **Chapter Three: Understanding the Communication Terrain**

The argument I wish to make in this chapter is that the field of communication is best thought of as political and ethical, and not semantic or technological. Moreover, my argument here wishes to make clear the theoretical commonalities and strong bond that exist between the communicative and liberal project. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to review theoretical approaches to communication studies driven by ethical and political inquires. More specifically, I begin this review with a short summary of information theory which represents the birth of communication studies as a specialized academic field. Although the dominant direction in communication studies has been that of information theory I argue that a more political-ethical orientated approach to communication should be taken.

To exemplify and establish the points of convergence between the political and the communicative I review the works of Jürgen Habermas, Harold A. Innis and Benedict Anderson. I conclude by embracing J.D. Peters's ethical approach to communication and tie it back to the political field by showing the parallels between Peters's work and the Lippmann and Dewey debate. The political and ethical approach to communication allows a reading of McEwan's novels as important works of communication and politics.

## **Information Theory: Shannon and Weaver**

Information theory is often identified as the cornerstone of communication studies. The idea of communication being mainly a process of information transfer was introduced late in the 1940s, and seems to have established a strong hold since then.<sup>69</sup> At the heart of information theory stands the assumption that the validity of information is correlated with the degree of uncertainty present in a given situation. This assumption gave birth to the radio transmission model of information flow, comprised mainly of sender, message and receiver. Shannon and Weaver,<sup>70</sup> the developers of this model, identified and described the different components required when transmitting information, as well as potential interferences in the signal (i.e., noise). Based on mathematical equations and addressing technological needs, this model was influential in the field of communication engineering. The radio transmission model of information flow gained popularity in the field of social sciences because it was simple and general enough to describe human interactions (it was also easily quantifiable, which made it a desirable research tool). This model, however, did not address the pragmatic and semantic qualities of the information being transmitted or the kind of

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<sup>69</sup> Wells and Hakanen, *Mass Media and Society*.

<sup>70</sup> Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication"; Weaver, "Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication."

interaction that is taken place (i.e., its purpose, impact and effects). As such, the application of Shannon and Weaver's model of communication in the social sciences neutralized the human dimension of communication and the interplay of ethical assumptions and considerations that are constant part of any social interaction.

As everyday life in the modern world became increasingly technological and complex, and with mass media grabbing the centre of attention, questions about the influence of information, its accuracy and transmission became more important. Consequentially, the study of communication that followed this tends to focus more on the different technological means of preserving, multiplying and disseminating messages. The argument offered here wishes instead to refocus on the political and ethical desire which lies at the heart of communication.<sup>71</sup> And so, whether we choose to look at mass media such as the internet, television, the press or radio, or we choose to focus on everyday conversations on the bus, in cafes or in our classrooms, my interest here is in a communicative action that derives from, and exhibits a form of, basic political and ethical desire, and not a technological or semantic one.

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<sup>71</sup> Peters, "Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research"; Peters, "The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made."

## Defining “Communication”

While associating communication mainly with various processes of information transfer is not completely wrong, it is nonetheless a painfully narrow understanding of communication. The origin of the word itself points to a rich philosophical meaning. The key root is *mun*, which is related to words such as community and munificent. This hints at a bountiful and meaningful community (in the sense of the German word *Gemeinschaft*). The Latin word *munus* points to the exercise of public rituals. The origin of the word thus indicates a communion of people coming together to find, create and share meaningful experiences.<sup>72</sup>

However, the ongoing developments in communication technologies, industrialization and globalization, and more importantly, the institutionalization of communication studies, seems to have moved away from its original meaning. It now includes all institutions or artifacts in which ideas, information, and attitudes are transmitted and received.<sup>73</sup> Such a broad definition may miss the first and most basic source from which communication begins: the symbiotic and long-standing relationship

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<sup>72</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

<sup>73</sup> John D. Peters, “Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research,” *Communication Research* 13, no. 4 (1986): 527.

between communication and politics that sees in the art of human connection, via symbols, a deep hope for some kind of mutual recognition, coupled with an aspiration for the good life.

This long-standing relationship is rooted in a rich intellectual tradition. Aristotle, for example, conceived of communication initially through its political essence, not its form: the essence of communication was political influence. In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle writes that the practice of speech “is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient . . . the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state”.<sup>74</sup> Aristotle’s notion of speech allows us to convey our moral convictions, demonstrate good will, good judgment and good character, thus fulfilling our political nature. According to Aristotle, the human search for what is good and just, as well as for the ill and perverse, originates in communicative action.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*.

<sup>75</sup> The Greeks used the word *logos* to describe political speech, or any other form of communication. The word *logos* can also be understood as discourse, argument and reason. Plato, for example, understood the power of speech in the making of the good and just city. Therefore, Socrates invites his interlocutors to “make a city in speech” (396c9). That is to say, to reason about the fundamental principles that governs politics.

## Origins of the Public Sphere

Moving forward to the 17th century, about 200 years after the introduction of the mechanical printing technology, the British parliament decided to regulate the printing industry by including state-controlled censorship privileges in the Licensing Order of 1643. A year later John Milton gave a speech in the British parliament that was designed to invalidate the prepublication censorship component of the Licensing Order. And while unsuccessful, the speech, titled *Areopagitica*, became a philosophical defense of the right of speech and expression. Milton's argument was that faith and knowledge need exercise, and that censorship prevents such exercise, thus withholding the discovery of truth and men's intellectual development. Milton's speech suggests individuals have the ability to reason when searching for truth and the principles of the universe.<sup>76</sup>

Milton's speech was part of a broader movement in 17<sup>th</sup> century England to discuss the nature of individuals' sovereignty and their place in society. The importance of Milton's speech lay in assigning the press (and by extension, mass communication) the central role of shaping and voicing

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<sup>76</sup> Hoxby, "The Trade of Truth Advanced: *Areopagitica*, Economic Discourse, and Libertarian Reform."

public opinion.<sup>77</sup> Italian political thinker Niccolò Machiavelli equated public opinion with the art of governing when he argued that “in the matter of prudence and stability. . .the populace is more prudent, more stable, and of sounder judgment than the prince. Not without good reason is the voice of the populace likened to that of God.”<sup>78</sup>

The idea that the existence of any regime — democratic or totalitarian — is based on its citizens’ acceptance was, and still is, a powerful one in political and communicative practices, as well as in academic research.<sup>79</sup> In fact, a landmark exploration of politics and communication focuses on the formation of public opinion and the shaping of political power. This is done via direct channels like political advertisements, speeches and other forms of political participation and via indirect, and often more subtle channels including newspapers, radio and television, literature and other forms of popular culture.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics*.

<sup>78</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker (Penguin Books, 1974), 255.

<sup>79</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*.

<sup>80</sup> Norris, “Political Communication.”



Jurgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, outlines the circumstances under which public opinion formed and the role it played in building England and France's public sphere in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Much like in Milton's *Areopagitica*, Habermas's idea of public opinion refers to the "critical reflection of a public competent to form its own judgments."<sup>81</sup> The basis for this critical reflection was set forth by newspapers and magazines, reading societies, salons and cafés, which created a literary public. These forums functioned as centers of sociability in which the literary public could discuss "Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot, and Swift [which] combined literature and politics in a peculiar fashion."<sup>82</sup> In other words, the printed media was a prominent agent of change not only in the technical sense, but also in the sense that "critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes".<sup>83</sup> The combination of an interacting body of citizens with works of literature and art could foster rational and critical public opinion. This, in turn, consolidated a new phase of "[emancipation] from domination and insulated from the interference of power, in which autonomous private

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<sup>81</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1991, 90.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

people related to one another".<sup>84</sup> Although Habermas did not discuss the specific ethical or political merits of these works of literature and art, he saw how discussing literature and art could lead to a more discursive and critical society.

### **The Public Sphere and the Frankfurt School**

It is worth focusing on Habermas's contribution to communication, since it passes through an influential philosophical tradition in the field of communication. This tradition held the belief that individuals can be easily manipulated by the media, as well as other cultural industries, for various political and commercial purposes. This tradition originated in Europe and relied on critical and cultural methods, mostly influenced by Marxist perspectives.<sup>85</sup> This perspective was presented by the "Frankfurt School." Comprised largely of German-Jewish intellectuals, the Frankfurt School, and Habermas as part of it, based its research on German Idealism. Shocked by the atmosphere of fear and persecution in Nazi Germany, World War II and the Jewish Holocaust, these intellectuals exhibited a great amount of political skepticism and anti-modernist sentiments. They lamented the oppression of technology and regarded positivist epistemology (i.e., instrumental reason)

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>85</sup> Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*.

as a tool used to control the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of the masses.<sup>86</sup>

The Frankfurt School intellectuals' major conviction was that people gave themselves to the stereotypes fostered by cultural industries (e.g., movies, jazz music, architecture and advertising) to escape the inherent alienation of modern life in a capitalist society. As a result, individuals became "one-dimensional," as their leisure time, political views and social behavior were dominated by the hegemonic elite.<sup>87</sup> Drawing directly from the Marxist idea of "false consciousness", the Frankfurt School blamed mass culture as it was produced and circulated by the media industries, for cultivating a pathological addiction to false needs. Moreover, these intellectuals argued that this kind of pathological addiction was the main reason for the loss of essential traits critical to good citizenship (e.g., critical thinking, civic engagement, political participation etc.).<sup>88</sup>

Habermas was the student of Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the two leading scholars of the Frankfurt School, who published their views in a

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<sup>86</sup> Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*.

<sup>87</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*.

<sup>88</sup> Butsch, *The Citizen Audience*.

book titled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that became mandatory reading in the field of Cultural Studies. As a matter of fact, Habermas's seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was largely influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno's ideas. Much like his teachers, Habermas held that the logic of modernity is atomistic and instrumental. This kind of logic ultimately makes people treat one another as a means to an end, creates a sense of disenchantment and alienation in social relations, and leads to a decline of the public sphere.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, Habermas did not entirely share his teachers' grim perspectives. While he accepted Adorno's general claim about the loss of practical reason, he thought that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* expressed quite a pessimistic tone with regards to domination of the subject, and completely dismissed cultural modernity as empty of authentic and inspiring content. In fact, as Calhoun points out, Adorno and Horkheimer were not happy with Habermas's pragmatic approach and rejected his work as "insufficiently critical of the illusions and dangerous tendencies of an enlightenment conception of democratic public life."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*.

<sup>90</sup> Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," 4.

Habermas's work, though incredibly political in nature, sought a way to look for the *communicative goods* of reason. His vision of communication seems to embrace Aristotle's claim about the power of language to forge a community. Habermas believed that through participation in discourse individuals can achieve mutual understanding, gain communicative relief, and guard against their values being colonized by systemic coordinated markets and bureaucracies.<sup>91</sup> A communicative action is "good" if it meets the criteria of full and equal inclusion. To achieve a state of full and equal inclusion, Habermas described the procedural details of an ethical discourse in which "participants schematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation."<sup>92</sup>

Best characterized by their grim view of reality, cultural disdain and an acute disbelief in possible change (with the exception of Habermas's later scholarship), the Frankfurt School scholarship was often accused of not helping to promote a better future.<sup>93</sup> The literary critic and Marxist

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<sup>91</sup> Hove, "Understanding and Efficiency: Habermas's Concept of Communication Relief."

<sup>92</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 18.

<sup>93</sup> The Frankfurt School prided themselves of being the new wave of Marxism. One of Marxism's most fundamental goals was the creation of a better society through actions in the world. In this context, the meaning of such an accusation is that the Frankfurt School could not, therefore, claim to be descendants of Marxist theory. For more about this criticism, please see: Popper, *The Myth of the Framework*, 80.

philosopher, György Lukács once noted that “a considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the *Grand Hotel Abyss* which I described... as a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.”<sup>94</sup>

### **Media as Political: Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Harold Innis and Benedict Anderson**

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham offered an optimistic counterweight to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. The Birmingham School, like the Frankfurt theorists, also used Marxist terminology to develop a theoretical framework for the study of media events, popular culture and subcultures. They, however, did not attribute a lack of understanding, power or identity to citizens or audiences. Stuart Hall’s theory of reception is a good example. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Hall did not think that people passively accept mediated forms of social control (be it via television, newspaper, fashion or other cultural artifacts). For Hall, a wide range of possibilities exist between the process of production (which he referred to as encoding) and the process of reception (referred to as decoding). This field of possibilities becomes a political field in which the citizens or audiences can adhere to the hegemonic message,

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<sup>94</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 22.

negotiate it or completely oppose it.<sup>95</sup> Framing communication as political is reinforced when sub-cultures use style and language to negotiate a fixed political idea, such as class or oppression. In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige demonstrate Hall's claim by looking into "the status and meaning of revolt and the idea of style as a form of Refusal."<sup>96</sup> Analyzing Punk and Reggae as Britain's sub-culture, Hebdige goes on to show how these two genres use their style and language as "expressive forms but what they express is . . . a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives."<sup>97</sup> The theme of Babylon in Reggae, for example, is used to remind its listeners the tragedy made by artificial divisions and symbolize a call for justice, freedom and unity which were all lost in the mythical story of Babel.<sup>98</sup>

At about the same time that the BCCCS was getting off the ground in Britain, Canadian political economist Harold A. Innis was studying various

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<sup>95</sup> Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation"; Hall, "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities."

<sup>96</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>98</sup> King, "Early Reggae, Black Power, and the Politicization of Rastafari."

staples that brought societies into contact. Regarding the fur trade, for instance, he remarked,

The history of the fur trade is the history of contact between two civilizations, the European and the North American . . . . Unfortunately the rapid destruction of the food supply and the revolution in the methods of living accompanied by the increasing attention to the fur trade by which these products were secured, disturbed the balance which had grown up previous to the coming of the European. The new technology with its radical innovations brought about such a rapid shift in the prevailing Indian culture as to lead to wholesale destruction of the peoples concerned by warfare and disease.<sup>99</sup>

Innis's contribution to our understanding of the link between communication, culture and politics was his interest in historical moments of critical change. He took a unique approach to looking at staples like fish, fur, timber, minerals, and wheat that was quite different from that of

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<sup>99</sup> Cited in: Babe, "Foundations of Canadian Communication Thought."



mainstream economists, who treated them merely as commodities. Rather, Innis considered staples as *media*. He developed a communication perspective that explored the rise and fall of empires in certain historical epochs by treating artifacts and commodities as means of inscription mediating human relations.<sup>100</sup> Through his explorations, Innis pointed to the important influence a medium of communication (such as commodities) has on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time, making it possible to study and appraise its influence in certain cultural settings.<sup>101</sup>

Innis's time-space continuum and his concept of a "monopoly of knowledge" amplify the idea that relations between imperial centres and their colonial margins can be attributed to the differences between space-binding media and time-binding media.<sup>102</sup> Whether it was clay and stone or papyrus and the parchment codex, Innis showed how space-bound empires have pushed against time-bound cultures by utilizing different media to negotiate knowledge and strengthen their power.<sup>103</sup> Innis's work showed that it was print, and more specifically, the printed newspaper, that

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<sup>100</sup> Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*.

<sup>101</sup> Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*.

<sup>102</sup> Athwal, "Harold Innis and Comparative Politics."

<sup>103</sup> Innis, *Empire and Communications*.

completely changed the conception of time and space. Now that news could reach a vast audience on the same time, it forced a sequential uniformity on our understanding of time. Moreover, the scope of coverage and easy dissemination of newspapers stretched the boundaries of space further, and the focus has shifted from local matters to regional ones.

Expanding on Innis's and Habermas's linkage between print, literary work and the formation of political awakening and public opinion, Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* emphasizes the relationship of the novel and the newspaper to the phenomenon of nationalism.<sup>104</sup> Anderson's view of nationalism is one of kinship, not of ideology, and he rests this view on the notion that a nation is an "imagined" political community—imagined because it contains a deep sense of comradeship which expands beyond basic face-to-face communal relations. Anderson argues that the novel, much like the idea of a nation, is a representation of a "sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time".<sup>105</sup> This representation provides readers with a common point of articulation and identification that traverses the world inside the novel to the world outside of it. This creates a state of mind in which readers share the familiarity of their

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<sup>104</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

socio-landscapes, language, and time, and in which the solitary hero is appropriated by making him "*our* young man." Thus, readers create "implicitly, an embryonic [...] 'imagined community'".<sup>106</sup> Newspapers, being an "'extreme form' of the book...one-day best-sellers", also work to "reassure that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life".<sup>107</sup> These printed commodities, in their apprehension of time and place, help to create a national consciousness in that they allow people to profoundly relate themselves to others, who they have neither met nor are likely to ever meet in their lives.

### **Communication and Literature: J. D. Peters**

The work of J.D. Peters pushes further into the terrain that Anderson's imagined communities opened up. According to Peters, reconciling others and the self is the true goal of communication. Mediation—technological, legal or interpersonal—is, therefore, merely an attempt to bring us closer to a utopic desire to overcome perceived differences or miscommunications by rendering them correct. Peters calls this desire "angelic communication."<sup>108</sup> Informed by Habermas's, Innis's and Anderson's understanding of

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 35–36.

<sup>108</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

communication pivotal role in inspiring political awakening and change, this project sees in literature an opportunity for the kind of positive “mediation of meaning” Peters is writing about.

Literature, based solely on imaginative forces, opens before us a path to communicative relationships. As readers, we always take stock, whether partly or wholly, with what we read. We may accept or reject the text’s proposal or the views developed by real or fictional entities under discussion. More succinctly, literature offers us the interest and the pleasure of becoming something totally different from what we normally are, or would even want to be.

Peters’ book *Speaking into the Air*, a historical narration of the project of communication, explores both Anglo-American and Continental philosophy to make the argument that communication is first and foremost about human existence—it is not just symbolic interaction.<sup>109</sup> Thus, Peters’ approach to communication is negatively defined; it begins with acknowledging the limitations of human connections as a path to understanding communication as a whole. His core argument addresses our deepest need to not be misunderstood or misrepresented. Such longing is

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

the outcome of the “tragic fact” that “we can never communicate like the angels.”<sup>110</sup> For Peters, a failure of communication means a failure to acknowledge the human condition. Therefore, Peters argues, the core question of communication “should not be, can we communicate with each other? But can we love one another or treat each other with justice and mercy?”<sup>111</sup> Finitude, understanding, community, cooperation, love and justice are the communicative goods Peters asks to pursue.

By framing the question of communication as such, he implicitly suggests that we consider reinstating the original meaning of the word. That is, we can bring the values of sacred communion back to communication: intimacy, mutuality, and reciprocity. This means that approaching failures of communication from a technical or technological perspective, as if they are only a broken device in need of fixing is faulty and promotes no communicative good. Rather, his foundational premise of communication is that communication is “a risky adventure without guarantees.”<sup>112</sup> Most importantly, Peters’ entire approach sees the ‘Other’ and not the ‘Self’ at the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 267.

centre of the project of communication. This, then, necessarily entails issues of power, ethics and interpretation.

Peters tell us that "at best, communication is a name for all the ways humans manage to cope with the impossibility of experiencing another person's experience."<sup>113</sup> In other words, this view of communication gives us a way to approach the gaps created by our inability to fully share our existential solitude. Accepting Peters's assumption that the problem of communication is fundamentally an ethical and social problem, suggests we need to approach it with ethical tools. His solution is that we expand the scope of communication to the philosophical realm of love and justice, which he translates as dissemination and dialogue. These two communicative scripts are mutually dependent possibilities for moral communication. As such they are equated with two figures of moral teaching. In Socrates' practice of teaching Peters sees the ideal model of dialogue: souls intertwined in reciprocity. In Jesus' practice of teaching he sees a model of dissemination and broadcasting. For Peters "dissemination without dialogue can become stray scatter, and dialogue without dissemination can be interminable tyranny. The motto of communication theory is therefore:

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<sup>113</sup> Peters, "Sharing of Thoughts or Recognizing Otherness?," 378.

Dialogue with the self, dissemination with the other. This is another way of stating the ethical maxim: Treat yourself like an 'other' and the other like a 'self'.<sup>114</sup>

Peters's conceptualization of communication accepts that the quality of our communicative practices is ultimately a central element of the quality of our polity. Indeed, there are ongoing attempts among scholars and policy makers to sort out the most appropriate normative standards for good political and communicative vision and the ways in which they can be achieved in practice.<sup>115</sup> The Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society presented in the G8 summit in Okinawa in 2000, provides a good example for such an attempt. The charter's vision of information society is "one that better enables people to fulfil their potential and reactualise their aspirations" and it sets forth the goals of "creating sustainable economic growth, enhancing the public welfare, and fostering social cohesion, and work to fully realize its potential to strengthen democracy, increase transparency and accountability in governance, promote human rights, enhance cultural diversity, and to foster international peace and stability."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 57.

<sup>115</sup> Norris, "Political Communication."

<sup>116</sup> *Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society*.

The charter envisions a society in which people build virtual communities for work, and learning and leisure can transcend traditional boundaries of time and place.<sup>117</sup>

However, there seems to be a disagreement about the ability of information society to achieve these goals. According to cyber-optimists, the potential of the internet entails unlimited qualities of information, a flourishing civic society, and more open and transparent government decision-making.<sup>118</sup> Contrarily, some argue that the potential of the internet has failed to have a dramatic impact on the practical reality of 'politics as usual', and instead it acts as a place of melancholy and escapism.<sup>119</sup> This debate, merely one of many topics in the sub-field of information society, illustrates the rudimentary connection made by Peters between moral communication and democratic political action.

### **Dissemination vs Dialogue: The Lippmann-Dewey Debate**

Peters' theoretical binary of dissemination and dialogue can be better understood in the context of the Lippmann-Dewey debate from the 1920s.

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<sup>117</sup> Hagel, "Net Gain."

<sup>118</sup> See for example, Barber, "Three Scenarios for the Future of Technology and Strong Democracy."

<sup>119</sup> Keren, *Blogosphere*.



These two distinct positions characterized the field of communication studies for many years,<sup>120</sup> and the pendulum swing between these two poles is of utmost relevance today due to how it relates to citizenship, media, and democracy.<sup>121</sup> As many scholars note, neither Lippmann nor Dewey saw in American politics a particularly thriving democratic process. They both saw human nature and the function of communication—namely, the role of journalists and reporters, and by extension any kind of public communicator—as strongly linked to the politics of knowledge. That was their only common ground as their remaining understanding of the capacity of the public to be an active actor both in politics and communication was their point of departure.<sup>122</sup>

Both Lippmann and Dewey saw in communication practices, albeit differently, a promise for a better democratic society; therefore, both thought of communication first and foremost in political terms. The presentation of the Lippmann-Dewey debate is meant to reject Peters' conclusion that "Dissemination presents a saner choice for our fundamental term . . . Open scatter is more fundamental than coupled sharing . . .

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<sup>120</sup> Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*.

<sup>121</sup> Whipple, "The Dewey-Lippmann Debate Today."

<sup>122</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 57; Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*.

Dissemination is not wreckage; it is our lot."<sup>123</sup> Put into the context of modern democracy, Lippmann viewed journalism as a hierarchical system of providers and consumers, that is *dissemination*, while Dewey viewed journalism as a much more collaborative system for conversation and debate, that is, *dialogue*. The Lippmann-Dewey debate is crucial for the field of communication not only because it discusses the printed press or journalism, but because it ties desirable values such as social cohesion and democratic progress with communicative practices. This creates a structural space in which we can examine contemporary communication distortions, a space also opened up in Ian McEwan's novels.

In the opening lines of his book *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann provides a picture of politically alienated masses. According to Lippmann "[t]he private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake."<sup>124</sup> Lippmann simply thought that modern society had become too complex for the public to understand. The complexity of the world on the one hand, and the alienation and fragmentation of the masses on the other, were held by Lippmann as a

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<sup>123</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 62.

<sup>124</sup> Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 3.

permanent condition. Given the limitation of human agency and the complexity of modern democracy, Lippmann reached the conclusion that people are fundamentally unable to form intelligent, democratic publics. This was not a comment on intelligentsia but simply the result of the limits of human agency.<sup>125</sup>

Consequently, public opinion was seen as volatile, incoherent and, most importantly, irrelevant to the policy-making process. In other words, according to Lippmann, the crisis of democracy was rooted in seeking the approval and support of ill-informed individuals. The problem was not too little but too much democracy, even though Lippmann was not anti-democratic. His articulation of the problem and the solution he prescribed made him a strong advocate of democratic elitism.<sup>126</sup> A centralized body of intelligent elite, therefore, should “evaluate the policies of government and present well-informed conclusions about these key debates to the public.”<sup>127</sup> From a communication perspective, the Lippmann-like understanding of desired communicative practice was that journalists can be the best critical

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<sup>125</sup> Schudson, “The ‘Lippmann-Dewey Debate’ and the Invention of Walter Lippmann as an Anti-Democrat 1986-1996.”

<sup>126</sup> Whipple, “The Dewey-Lippmann Debate Today.”

<sup>127</sup> Champlin and Knoedler, “The Media, the News, and Democracy,” 138.

agents of political decision-making and the leaders of the citizenry. As such, Lippmann's views fit with Peters' idea of dissemination.

In contrast to Lippmann, John Dewey emphasized conversation as the ideal form of human communication through which individuals construct the truth.<sup>128</sup> As such, Dewey's ideas fall under the category of dialogic communication, which reflect Peters' views at the other end of the spectrum. Democracy, for Dewey, was not merely a means to an end, but an end as well—"the idea of community life itself".<sup>129</sup> Democracy, then, ought to provide all citizens the opportunity to achieve the Socratic goal of "self-realization" and positive fraternal association. Dewey saw in participatory democracy a model that can create the conditions for a unified, stable political order.<sup>130</sup> As such, Dewey did not agree with Lippmann's democratic elitism or a "political 'commonsense' philosophy [that] imputes a public only to support and substantiate the behavior of officials".<sup>131</sup> The "eclipse of the public" comes from cultural habits and customs that grow from passive

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<sup>128</sup> Schudson, "The 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate' and the Invention of Walter Lippmann as an Anti-Democrat 1986-1996."

<sup>129</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 148.

<sup>130</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.

<sup>131</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 117.

political practices and that, thus, leaves citizens disengaged from the democratic process. One way to mitigate the effects of the “eclipse of the public” is rooted in works of art and aesthetic experiences that hold valuable potential for installing the public with a more critical and active approach to politics than the one envisioned by Lippmann. Dewey was certainly aware of this potential. In his book, *Art as Experience* Dewey attributing art's greatest good to its exercise of imaginative vision, which can bring the public closer to an ideal political self-realization. “The union that is presented in perception [of art] persists in the remaking of impulsion and thought. The first intimations of wide and large redirections of desire and purpose are of necessity imaginative. Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration.”<sup>132</sup>

Whether this eclipse is the result of unjustified neglect or simply forgetfulness, Dewey's refusal to accept Lippmann's view about the public provided a fertile philosophical position and a jumping point for scholars interested in sorting out normative standards for good political and communicative vision. For example, Habermas took much from Dewey,

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<sup>132</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 349.

whose ideas on dialogic communication inform much of his work, from *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to his *Theory of Communicative Action*. What he drew from Dewey was meant to sort out the conditions and spaces for democratic public life.<sup>133</sup>

Habermas and Dewey share a similar mindset—they both see in conversation and civic participation the means for a stable democracy. Habermas’s ideas, however, cannot be fully equated with Dewey’s. In his work, Habermas focused extensively on conflict resolution via the tenets of rationality and consensus, for which he was heavily criticized. In contrast to Habermas, conflict has a central place in Dewey’s theory. As he once noted: “[t]he elimination of conflict is . . . a hopeless and self-contradictory ideal.”<sup>134</sup> If Habermas saw conflict as a counterproductive force, Dewey saw it as a form of social participation. For Dewey, dissent in the form of skepticism leads to open-ended, reflective inquiry through a critical curiosity that can question, if not challenge, the status quo.

While Peters explain the intellectual impoverishment of communication studies by the dominance of Lippmann’s views of public opinion and elite

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<sup>133</sup> Whipple, “The Dewey-Lippmann Debate Today.”

<sup>134</sup> Dewey, *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882–1898*, 210.

democracy,<sup>135</sup> he still prefers dissemination over dialogue. As shown by Lippmann, the doctrine of dissemination is not always one of cheerful giving and caring as seen by Peters, but one of centralized elites that assuming political power over the public. Dewey and Habermas, on the other hand, show that the doctrine of dialogue can escape the faith of an “interminable tyranny”<sup>136</sup> by celebrating participation, and reflective human agency.

### **Summarizing the Communications Arc**

The field of communications has a rich political and ethical intellectual heritage. Innis focused on the technological vision of creating a monopoly of knowledge and harnessing political power through different means of communication. Anderson conceptualized communication as social glue—an agent of national community building—beginning with works of literature that established sites of emancipation and created an environment, imagined or real, of nationalistic identification.

Similarly, Habermas, Dewey and Lippmann focused their attention on the democratic potential that lies in ethical communicative action. They believed that active and rational discourse will strengthen democratic human

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<sup>135</sup> Peters, “Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research.”

<sup>136</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 57.

associations. In contrast, Peters tried to tackle broader categories of human relations and hoped communication would instill us with existential respect for the autonomy of others, and constitute a relationship with the 'Other.'

Approaching communication from a political and ethical standpoint does not mean sacrificing specialized and professional practices of communication, or favouring a general liberal education. Nor does it suggest a normative distinction between a humanist culture of artistry and philosophy, and a culture of rule-bound ideologies. Rather, it is meant to remind us about how tightly integrated communication and politics are, and that any attempt at understanding historical and political change must also be viewed through a communications lens.



## **Chapter Four: Liberalism's Divide: Between Perfectionism and Pluralism**

### **Introducing Two World Views**

Depending on geographical locations, philosophical orientation, political affiliations, and even professions, liberalism means various things to people. As a matter of fact, liberalism contains a broad continuum of ideas and theories, many of which often oppose each other, resulting in competing visions of what liberalism means. The tension between the pro-life and pro-choice movements provides a good example. The two movements are in fierce disagreement over issues like abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and the death penalty. Both use liberal rhetoric to justify their positions on core values, which reveal different commitments to the metaphysics of human beings. As well, they demonstrate different stances on the legitimacy of political authorities to interfere through coercive means with our personal autonomy.<sup>137</sup>

Whether our political disagreements pertain to issues like the death penalty or wealth distribution, or whether we hold different views about the nature of good and right, scholars agree that liberalism is torn between two

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<sup>137</sup> Yuill, *Assisted Suicide*; Vanderford, "Vilification and Social Movements."

controversial epistemological commitments.<sup>138</sup> These competing epistemological positions yield two versions of liberalism: a narrow or perfectionist liberal world view, and a broad or pluralist one. The diversity of texts, questions, approaches, and concepts in liberal theory force me to take a somewhat generalized approach in my discussion here. The objective of this chapter is to outline the origins and main differences of these two epistemological orientations in liberal thought, rather than to present a thorough interpretation of liberal thinkers. In my discussion, I focus more on the pluralist world view as it seems to be the one standing at the centre of McEwan’s novels and complementing his communicative approach.<sup>139</sup>

### **Liberal Perfectionism**

The emergence of Liberalism during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was the key political project of the Enlightenment. Politics replaced theology and put the sole individual—and not God, class or profession—at the centre of social order. Drawing mainly from the scientific and philosophical ideals of the time, the state was to reflect universal laws and apply them equally on all its citizens, regardless of their status and affiliations. Individualism and

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<sup>138</sup> Raz, “Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence”; Gaus, “The Diversity of Comprehensive Liberalisms”; Well, *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint*.

<sup>139</sup> Note: I am using the term “pluralism” to describe a claim about the plurality of objective values, and not to describe any political program of multiculturalism or tolerance.

constriction were then, as they are today, the two main concepts that guided European intelligentsia and their discussions about liberty. Consequently, the politics of the Enlightenment emphasized the importance of universally recognized human rights, which form the basis for transnational communities.<sup>140</sup> The liberal theories that emerged from this world view centred on rationality, universality, scientific progress, and personal autonomy, and are sometimes referred to as “liberal perfectionism” or “Enlightenment liberalism.”<sup>141</sup> Some of the thinkers on this subject have been Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Emmanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and more recently John Rawls.

The idea of the individual, its importance and centrality—both as a unit of political analysis and political value in liberalism—grew rapidly after the French revolution. This was at a time when men wished to rid themselves from external-theological arbitrators or their living representatives (e.g., monarchs and priesthood). By doing so, liberal thinkers marked the attempt to separate politics from theology (an attempt that seems to fail in the 21st century). In substitute for theological, Perfectionist thinkers find the moral foundation for regulating liberal rights in both individuals’ autonomy, and in

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<sup>140</sup> Gerson, *Liberalism: Texts, Contexts, Critiques*.

<sup>141</sup> Crowder, *Theories of Multiculturalism*.

the ultimate Good and Right. The liberal perfectionist world view holds that individual autonomy entails core values crucial for developing humanity's unique capacities. These are essential for sustaining a rational examination of the self, others, and social practices, to reach the ultimate goal of human perfection. The perfectionist version of liberalism placed the origins of a political activity in abstract principles, as well as in normative ideals that later would be translated and retrieved through legal means, better known as rights. Rights symbolize the normative gravity of the principles and ideals they promise or protect. Under the perfectionist world view individuals are said to have certain natural and inalienable rights.<sup>142</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the idea of natural rights, positioned individuals and their welfare at the centre of political life from the the 18th century onwards; constituting the methodological basis of representative democracy (i.e., free and equal elections) on the one hand, and the moral foundation of human rights on the other. However, the first half of the 20th century failed to fulfill the ideals of the Enlightenment era: the rise of the nation state and the emergence of mass media gave rise to the notion of the masses, and Europe was devastated by two world wars. By and large, the

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<sup>142</sup> Seiyama, *Liberalism: Its Achievements and Failourse*.

customs and essence of mass society and the nation state stood in contradiction to the Enlightenment's vision of individualism. The values of nationalism replaced the autonomy of the individual. Autonomy was reserved for only a few individuals such as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin.<sup>143</sup>

But the second half of the 20th century was marked by a reconciliatory spirit. John Rawls's theory of justice provides a good example of a liberal perfectionist world view that tried to show that human life can be ruled by forces other than domination, cruelty and prejudice.<sup>144</sup> Theory of Justice presented an updated version of social contract theories from the 17th century. These social contract theories sought out sources of political legitimacy, and were the first to identify and protect essential rights such as life, liberty, and equality for all human beings. For example, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* demonstrated an absolute sovereignty that was based on a social contract. The sovereign's sole purpose was to promise political stability and peace. It was meant to be efficient, not just, and therefore *allowed* certain freedoms but did not *guarantee* them.<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* justified replacing regimes that

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<sup>143</sup> Gerson, *Liberalism: Texts, Contexts, Critiques*.

<sup>144</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 2001, 3.

<sup>145</sup> Hobbes, Martinich, and Battiste, *Leviathan*.

did not respect and protect basic, unchangeable, and unrepeatable rights that were part of every pre-political society.<sup>146</sup>

Rawls's theory placed emphasis on the principles of justice, and the social psychology behind these principles, as a means to create the structure of a well-ordered society. According to Rawls,

The guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into the forms of government that can be established.<sup>147</sup>

These principles are:

(a) *The equal liberties of citizenship*: This principle postulates the sorts of freedom people in a just society should have equal access to, as far as they

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<sup>146</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*.

<sup>147</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 7.

are compatible with the liberty of others. They include freedom of speech, association, assembly, worship, vote etc.

(b) *The difference principle*: This principle allows for inequalities in the distribution of social goods if it can be shown that these inequalities are for the benefit of all, and as long as people have equal opportunity to compete for and win these social goods.

Rawls's principles are lexically ordered, so the first principle (a) takes priority over the second principle (b).<sup>148</sup>

Rawls's theory of justice provides an example of the use of undivided and absolute normative principles to guide society's political activity and ends. The application of political tools—ranging from discriminatory legislation to violent tactics of enforcement to the protection of these principles or rights—is not only desirable but morally imperative. Constituting a fixed body of abstract or "natural" rights, as well as considering that normative principles can be placed in hierarchical order sparked a critique of the perfectionist commitment in liberalism.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 61–65.

### ***Critique of Liberal Perfectionism***

Many thinkers were, and are, uncomfortable with the narrow and perfectionist foundations of liberalism. While prescribing different philosophical and political solutions, authors have joined in the rejection of rationality, scientific objectivity, or the promise of achieving human perfection by simply safeguarding individual autonomy. Critics deemed as misleading the fundamental liberal idea that individuals and their well-being should be regarded as *a priori*; this idea was blind to the inherent dangers of oppression. Power relations, conflicts, and our social and psychological needs to belong to a wider community could also be considered political opportunities and not just limitations to our freedom.

The following short discussion is not meant to summarize the entire spectrum of the critique of liberalism. Admittedly, it does just the opposite. The constitutional element in liberalism often guides the conversation towards practical or institutional means aimed at handling issues of representation, participation, accessibility and accountability (e.g., constitutions, parliamentary governments, separation of powers). However, recognizing that notions of enslavement, corruption, and arbitrariness can also happen in non-institutional contexts, allows for a broader consideration of authors whose criticism of liberalism was perhaps a byproduct of their unique philosophical perspectives. Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt, for



example, point out violence, conflict, urgency, and anxiety as central elements in our lives. Michel Foucault's contribution is his deep suspicion of knowledge, and the ways in which the desire to know is strongly related to means of control. These three thinkers exemplify a line of criticism associated with domination on the one hand and the self-formation of humanity of the other.

### ***The will to Power: Morality, Conflict and Discipline***

The 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche saw in struggle and conflict a force of life. He did not think that violence or aggressiveness were problems that needed to be fixed by rationalization or escapism. In essence, Nietzsche argued, there are no moral or other guidelines to life: we experience it through our "will to power." Acting in the world is the only standard by which we can value ourselves. All other external validation systems are, therefore, unnecessary and harmful. For Nietzsche, competition and power relations stand at the centre of human relations. Not only are they not the consequences of certain social orders, but they are essential to human nature. According to Nietzsche, liberals tried to cope with and even overcome humans' natural will to power by inventing a universal moral hierarchy with which the "weak and mediocre...weaken and

pull down the stronger.”<sup>149</sup> The actions of strong and free-willed people are looked at as shameful and evil, and their “condemnations constitute the favourite revenge of the spiritually limited against those less limited.”<sup>150</sup> This line of argument is known as “slave morality.” When put in political context it points to a deep anti-liberal standpoint: the liberal promise to secure equal worth or dignity for all individuals—by assigning a fixed set of rights regardless of their actions or capabilities—was an imaginative invention meant to celebrate mediocrity and weakness.<sup>151</sup>

Much like Nietzsche, Carl Schmidt saw in politics a battlefield stripped of the mediating forces of economy, law, religion, or political parties. The political field cannot be governed by legislative and scientific definitions and rules, because the behavior and decisions of its actors are driven from a will to power and cannot be reduced to neutral and measurable predictions. Schmidt did not deny the validity of science, law or morality. But he acknowledged such arbitrators in society only if they can be protected by force in times of conflict. Schmidt believed that liberal perfectionism avoided the true essence of politics by appealing to concepts of scientific progress,

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<sup>149</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 345.

<sup>150</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 219.

<sup>151</sup> Wicks, “Friedrich Nietzsche.”

justice and universal rights. These were used by the middle class to gain political advantages, while hypocritically avoiding the conflictual aspect of politics.<sup>152</sup> Schmitt's theory framed the state as preceding both the individual and political institutions. His criticism was not about the normative goals of liberalism, but its institutional tools (such as checks and balances, or rights). Consequently, his theory advocated the right of the president to appropriate the constitution by force in times of unsolvable conflicts.<sup>153</sup>

Michel Foucault shared Schmidt's rejection of acceptable fields of knowledge to be used for problem solving in fields such as economy, law, and religion. For Foucault, much like for Nietzsche and Schmidt, the notion that hierarchical systems of knowledge, languages, and customs can be based only on historical progress or objectivity was just another way to hide the oppressive nature of capitalist society. Foucault's critique was not aimed directly at liberalism; rather, he used cultural critique to express his skepticism of central concepts used by liberals, like objectivity and freedom. Foucault did not oppose liberalism as a method to organize political institutions, but he did challenge the idea that certain standards of scientific

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<sup>152</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.

<sup>153</sup> McCormick, "Fear, Technology, and the State Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany."

knowledge can be a basis for political order. Foucault believed that languages, fields of knowledge, and cultural customs represent an internal relationship of meaning and significance relevant to the public that uses them. More often, he argued, they were used as a means of political control.<sup>154</sup>

Institutions like schools, hospitals, the army, and prisons impose similar scientific methods to systematically categorize and organize their knowledge of human beings. A social order has developed in which a unified system of roles, with mechanisms of discipline and punishment, has become the operating principle of modern society. For Foucault, the entire structure of the liberal system, its constitution, system of rights, separation of institutions and so on, is a replica of the panopticon. A panopticon is an architectural design for a prison that internalizes standards of disciplines among prisoners by placing them in a constant state of uncertainty as to whether or not they were being observed. According to Foucault, the value of political autonomy that liberalism extracted from ideals of individual sovereignty was ultimately founded on a relationship of discipline and

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<sup>154</sup> Dillon and Neal, *Foucault on Politics, Security and War*.

punishment. Individuals could not be protected from the categorizations of knowledge that determine what is permitted and what is not.<sup>155</sup>

It seems that the universal authority with which the Enlightenment, or perfectionist liberalism, speaks obscures a reality in which prosperity, progress, and peace are not always available. The events of the 20th century support this observation. From an international relations perspective, two world wars, the Cold War and ongoing fears of nuclear attack, the European domination in Asia and Africa, the war in Vietnam, and recently, global terrorism and the world economic crisis, point to a reality of constant conflict and ongoing violence, rather than one of harmony. From a more domestic or social perspective, the civil rights movement; the rise of the youth counterculture movements like the Beatniks, Hippies, and Punks; new styles of music; and the birth of postmodernist thought argued that enslavement and moral arbitrariness are not limited to the governmental realm. They can be manifested in other, sometimes unexpected, cultural contexts such as the workplace, the family, and even language itself.

Enlightenment liberalism was heavily criticized both from the Left and the Right, and some of the alternatives suggested were disturbing, to say

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<sup>155</sup> Koopman, *American Philosophy*.

the least. Nietzsche, for example, rejected democratic and liberal political structures like constitutions and majority rules, as characteristics of a slave morality. Nietzsche's admiration for the will to power was quickly affiliated with the militaristic and nationalistic discourse that allowed for the rise of Nazi Germany. Schmidt supported a presidential dictatorship with the right to forcefully appropriate the rule of law as a means of protecting democracy and liberal values. Further, Foucault deliberately abstained from providing a new basis for reform, to avoid the risk of replicating the same classification and categorization that he critiques in his work. His legacy was discomfort with existing models of liberalism, even though he refused to define new objectives.<sup>156</sup>

### **Value Pluralism**

Similar to the critics presented so far, pluralist thinkers approached liberalism mostly from a counter-Enlightenment perspective. Inspired by the Reformation project and the political consequences of religious differences, the pluralist approach to liberalism focused on the equal weight of competing value systems. It is often referred to as "value pluralism." There are many differences between pluralist and perfectionist liberalism. However, the most significant one is this: while the perfectionist version of liberalism gives

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<sup>156</sup> Gerson, *Liberalism: Texts, Contexts, Critiques*.

priority to certain normative objective values (may those be freedom, equality or justice), pluralists assume that such objective values are plural (though their numbers are finite). Even further, plural objective values sometimes conflict with one another, and most importantly, they lack a single ranking formula.<sup>157</sup>

Isaiah Berlin, one of the key philosophers associated with value pluralism, declined the notion of absolute and undivided normative principles in the social world. For him, aspiring objectivity in political theory meant focusing our attention on something outside of individual experience. It is important to remember that Berlin originally proposed his theory of value pluralism during of the Cold War. Read in this context, Berlin's pluralism tried to further aligned liberalism against totalitarian communism.<sup>158</sup>

He did this first by rejecting the idea that all human ends are ultimately compatible and will coalesce into a single whole. Moreover, Berlin argued that adhering to a single whole may lead to critical stagnation, philosophical monism, and political and social exclusion. Instead, he

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<sup>157</sup> Alex Zakaras, "A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 01 (2013): 69–96; George Crowder, "Two Concepts of Liberal Pluralism," *Political Theory* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 121–46.

<sup>158</sup> Yumatle, "Liberalism after Pluralism."

suggested a political theory based on a philosophical assumption that different value systems in the world are equally true, and that individuals should be free to choose their own conceptions of good or valuable lives. As a result Berlin held all principles and values to be incomparable or incommensurable: if values share no common currency for comparison, they cannot be reduced into a measurable or hierarchical order, and therefore, cannot be ranked against each other at all.<sup>159</sup> This position alludes to the idea that propositions take different forms and cannot be gauged against one criterion of verification, thus excluding others. Within a political context, value pluralism is predicated on the idea that human values are meaningful. Nonetheless, they are too rich and textured, too conflicted or contradictory, too many or too fragmented, to be ranked or ordered universally or temporally.<sup>160</sup>

American political theorist William Galston summarizes Berlin's value pluralism:

There is no *summum bonum* that is the chief good for all individuals. There are no "lexical orderings" among types of

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<sup>159</sup> Zakaras, "A Liberal Pluralism"; Talisse, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Politics"; Moore, "Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism"; Crowder, "Two Concepts of Liberal Pluralism."

<sup>160</sup> Gray, "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company."



goods. And there is no “first virtue of social institutions,” but, rather, a range of public values the relative importance of which will depend on particular circumstances.<sup>161</sup>

Galston’s remark, and by extension value pluralism, is bold for two reasons: first, it means that every theory that adheres to a *summum bonum* or sees the possibility of resolving moral conflicts rationally is conceptually at fault.<sup>162</sup> Second, it makes explicit the pluralist requirement for a complete revision of the basic principles and commitments of liberal political theory.<sup>163</sup>

Berlin concluded, from the first reason’s logic, that the search of Enlightenment liberalism for an external and objective standard of authority that will represent freedom accurately and guide us to harmonious life—be it God’s will, utility, or progress—is nothing but a “metaphysical chimaera.”<sup>164</sup> And it is the second reason that opened up the field of liberal theory to an ongoing discussion about the implicit relationships between liberalism and pluralism. George Crowder phrases the question as follows: “Should pluralist politics be bounded by liberal principles or should liberalism itself be

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<sup>161</sup> Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism*, 12.

<sup>162</sup> Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*.

<sup>163</sup> Talisse, “Value Pluralism and Liberal Politics.”

<sup>164</sup> Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*.

regarded as just one bundle of values among others with no authority over the rest?"<sup>165</sup> The literature on pluralism is divided over this issue. While several authors like Berlin, Joseph Raz, William Galston, George Crowder, and even John Rawls tried to show that value pluralism does in fact entail liberalism, others like John Gray, Bhikhu Parkeh, and Charles Taylor argue that pluralism presents obstacles to liberalism, to the extent that the two are rivals.

### ***Value Pluralism and Liberalism: Can the Two Coexist?***

Berlin's notion of value pluralism has traditionally been seen as supportive of liberal political theory, especially as he acknowledges rationally choosing between incommensurable goods. That is, Berlin seems to promote practical reasoning within a particular context, over the application of abstract rules.<sup>166</sup> Such practical reasoning can be seen, for example, when the judicial system resorts to a policy of reconciliation over strict justice. But Berlin's strongest support for liberalism comes in the way he moves from the necessity of choice to the value of choice. Berlin's value pluralism emphasizes moral plurality and conflicts: hence, the necessity to choose between absolute moral claims and goods. The human condition demands

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<sup>165</sup> Crowder, *Theories of Multiculturalism*, 146.

<sup>166</sup> Berlin and Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism."

that we choose. Therefore, Berlin argues, we ought to value freedom of choice, and in turn, a liberal order based on a negative liberty—lack of restrictions—which best accommodates freedom of choice.<sup>167</sup>

Similarly, Joseph Raz focused on the liberal commitment to individual freedom (which both Berlin and Raz conceived as personal autonomy). Contrary to Berlin, Raz approached his argument from a cultural point of view. According to Raz, cultures play the role of giving shape, content, and context to our lives, out of which we identify our choices and make sense of them. A liberal concern for individual well-being and freedom requires, therefore, that we respect and sustain our culture as a matter of public policy.<sup>168</sup>

### ***Pluralist Critics of Liberalism***

What does it mean for political liberal theory if we accept the central assumptions of pluralism? In other words, *if* value pluralism is true, liberal political morality (e.g., negative liberty or individual autonomy) cannot be defended because no value can be given a unique priority. Consequently, liberal institutions cannot be considered a standard of legitimacy by which

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<sup>167</sup> Berlin, *Liberty*; Crowder, “Pluralism and Liberalism.”

<sup>168</sup> Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain*, 178.

regimes are assessed. This line of argument is associated with philosopher John Gray.<sup>169</sup> According to Gray, not only are value pluralism and liberalism rival doctrines, but the very “belief that intractable disagreements about the human good can be resolved for the purposes of law or public policy by a theory of rights or basic liberties. . .expresses the quintessential illusion of liberalism.”<sup>170</sup> This means that any regime that tries to justify itself by imposing a worthwhile hierarchy of human values is illegitimate and its liberal justifications are false. Gray emphasizes this point with the following words:

It is true that value-pluralism undermines the universalist claims made by illiberal societies that are Marxist, utilitarian or positivist, Platonist, Christian or Muslim, at their foundations; but human history to date, and the human prospect for the likely future, abound with illiberal cultures that are particularistic, not universalistic, in the values they claim to embody. Authoritarian regimes sustained by Hindu, Shinto or Orthodox Jewish doctrine,

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Joseph Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain: Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics*, Rev. ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2001), 178.

<sup>169</sup> Gray, “Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company.”

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

or which seek simply to preserve a local way of life, make none of the universal claims that value-pluralism subverts.<sup>171</sup>

Here Gray suggests we may still enjoy freedom, without necessarily equating it with democracy, since the one does not automatically entail the other.<sup>172</sup> His position demonstrates that pluralism points away from universalism and towards the authority of local traditions. Gray's complete and utter rejection of universalism, based on an abstract notion of rational choice, is his main reason for dismissing liberalism. Since value pluralism denies universal ranking, and the project of liberalism is not contextual but universal, it must be rejected, or at the very least be considered just one political form among many other traditions and forms.<sup>173</sup> Given this, Gray's suggestion for resolving conflicts when traditions collide is to find a *modus vivendi* among the parties: a case-by-case pragmatic response unguided by any principle other than a general agreement for accommodation over conflict. After all, according to Gray, "liberal institutions are merely one

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<sup>171</sup> Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 185.

<sup>172</sup> It is worth mentioning that Berlin also alluded to the possibility that a liberal-minded despot might allow his subjects large measures of personal freedom. For Berlin's historical examples see: Berlin, *Liberty*, 179.

<sup>173</sup> Gray, "Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company"; Horton and Newy, *Political Theory of John Gray*.

variety of *modus vivendi*, not always the most legitimate.”<sup>174</sup> Gray’s *modus vivendi* suggests we abandon tolerance for the pursuit of an ideal form of life. It advances a commitment to a peaceful coexistence of different ways of life although what this really entails remains unclear.<sup>175</sup>

### ***A Liberal Pluralist Approach***

Scholars such as William Galston, George Crowder, and even John Rawls have gone a long way to rescind Gray’s anti-liberal reading of Berlin’s value pluralism, and tried to show how pluralism and liberal political morality can be compatible.<sup>176</sup> Arguments in favour of such compatibility begin with acknowledging an embryonic notion of human rights we can all agree on, such as devaluing starvation, arbitrary killing, and slavery.<sup>177</sup> They continue with attempts to promise minimal limitations on freedom that will allow the

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<sup>174</sup> Cf. Baghramian and Ingram, *Pluralism*, 101.

<sup>175</sup> Crowder, “Gray and the Politics of Pluralism.”

<sup>176</sup> For examples see: Galston, “Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin’s Heterodox Liberalism”; Crowder, “Two Concepts of Liberal Pluralism”; Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.

<sup>177</sup> Riley, “Crooked Timber and Liberal Culture.”

values of choice and autonomy;<sup>178</sup> oscillate between tolerance and multiculturalism;<sup>179</sup> and pass through the filters of a theory of justice.<sup>180</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Berlin's and Raz's support of liberalism was derived from their belief in rational choice and the freedom of choice. In contrast to a choice-centered and personal autonomy perspective, William Galston uses a tolerance-based argument to link pluralism and liberalism.<sup>181</sup> According to Galston, liberalism means the ability to lead and express our lives as we see fit (within a range of legitimate variations). The combination of expressive liberty and pluralism yield a liberal state that tolerates even non-liberal ways of life—a view that frames the liberal state as a political container. Tolerance is preferred over personal autonomy since the latter is too sectarian and is often rejected by many cultural groups in modern society.<sup>182</sup> A maximum feasible accommodation of expressive liberty is possible, therefore, only under toleration. Galston suggests that within the

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<sup>178</sup> Berlin, *Liberty*; Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*.

<sup>179</sup> Crowder, *Theories of Multiculturalism*; Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism*.

<sup>180</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.

<sup>181</sup> Galston, "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism"; Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism*; Galston, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory."

<sup>182</sup> For elaborated version of Galston's argument see: Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*.

context of an expressive liberty condition, we can avoid the problem of protecting traditions that may reject or be hostile to fundamental liberal values by adopting a policy of protection for individuals and minorities within groups (including the right to exit the group).<sup>183</sup>

George Crowder tries to combine universalism and value pluralism by advocating universal capacities for well-being, with the understanding that in different historical and cultural contexts multiple realizations of such capacities can exist.<sup>184</sup> Crowder's position begins with the implications or norms of value pluralism: respect for value pluralism and value diversity, and "reasonable disagreement." That is, acknowledging the fact that there are multiple intrinsic goods, all of which must be taken seriously, and society must allow its members to pursue as many of them as possible. While Crowder does not accept an automatic moral ranking of these plural goods, he acknowledges the fact that there might be a wide range of reasonable rankings. Under the pluralist logic, one reasonable ranking of moral good must be equal to the other. Consequently, Crowder argues, there is "room for people to disagree on reasonable grounds."<sup>185</sup> Liberalism, according to

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*.

<sup>185</sup> Crowder, *Theories of Multiculturalism*, 195.



Crowder, is most likely to maximize these norms by extending individual rights and liberty.

John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, and his later *Political Liberalism*—considered the cornerstones of contemporary liberal theory—are my last stop in this review of the liberal-pluralist approach.<sup>186</sup> As mentioned earlier, Rawls's political theory is based on the social contract tradition of classical liberal thinkers, but it contains one major difference: it makes the principle of “justice as fairness”—rather than legitimacy and political obedience—the focal point of modern liberalism. Rawls's theory includes pronouncements on morality and social psychology as proper grounds for politics, thus exceeding the classical focus on the structure and functions of the state.<sup>187</sup> After establishing his theory of justice, Rawls directs his efforts to reconciling pluralism and liberalism by finding a way to reach overlapping consensus among competing comprehensive values.<sup>188</sup>

Rawls identified a capacity for genuine tolerance and mutual respect among humans. Given this capacity, there is hope for reasonable citizens to

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<sup>186</sup> White, “Introduction.”

<sup>187</sup> Yumatle, “Liberalism after Pluralism.”

<sup>188</sup> Larmore, “Public Reason.”

find a basis on which to cooperate. Since such a basis cannot be rooted in any religious, moral or philosophical doctrine, Rawls finds it in the one source that can serve as a focal reference point for all reasonable citizens in a democratic society: society's public political culture. According to Rawls, society's public political culture "comprises the political institutions of a constitutional regime and the public traditions of their interpretation (including those of the judiciary), as well as historic texts and documents that are common knowledge."<sup>189</sup> Once Rawls establishes his principle of justice (that is, *equal liberties of citizenship*, and *difference*) as society's public political culture he turns to discuss *overlapping consensus* as a way to promise that all citizen obey the law. Since Rawls's political conception of justice is freestanding, in that it does not come from any comprehensive doctrine, it can be justified by any number of existing world views. Citizens can see religious freedom as attractive for many reasons, each derived from their unique world view. In other words, the affirmation of a liberal concept of justice arises from the moral reasons given by the citizens' comprehensive doctrines. Rawls believes that citizens have a civil duty to explain their political decisions to one another using common public values and standards of public inquiry.

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<sup>189</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 13–14.

However, Rawls's idea of civil duty as well as his guidelines for public inquiry and deliberations raised much criticism. For example, some argue that his rules and guidelines for public inquiry can only be found in societies that already prescribe to the theory's core values; further, his attempt to eradicate antagonism and conflicts between citizens using his overlapping consensus is problematic to the extent that it eliminates politics itself. Rawls's fallacy was rooted, mainly, in assuming his initial point. His principles of justice are designed to gain the support of citizens that already adhere to the method of seeking an overlapping consensus in times of conflict.<sup>190</sup>

Perhaps the biggest difficulty associated with Rawls's liberalism and pluralism lies in his principles of justice. According to Rawls's theory, the two lexical principles of justice are not substantive goods that can be traded with other goods. Rather, they are meant to regulate the framework within which all social goods, such as negative liberty or personal autonomy may be pursued.<sup>191</sup> This means that Rawls's theory seems to capture something

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<sup>190</sup> For example please see: Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

<sup>191</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 162.

ahistorical about moral human beings and therefore cannot integrate pluralism into liberalism.<sup>192</sup>

## **Summary**

Perfectionist and pluralist world views agree that humans most fully flourish and self-actualize only when they are free from external constraints or coercion. In this respect they both celebrate and protect individual autonomy. They differ, however, on the question of whether there can be a single standard of arbitration, given that plural values are irreducible. Perfectionism presents an objective theory of ranked values that is understood in moral terms. Pluralism, on the other hand, focuses on the inability to interpersonally justify as correct one ranking of values over another.

Regardless of one's position on the spectrum of value pluralism, theorists agree that today's world is rife with "noise." Considerable confusion exists about the validity and reliability of the information surrounding us, including the political solutions to our problems. The fact of Pluralism challenges the Enlightenment version of liberalism that guided us through most of the 20th century; its political implications challenge our

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<sup>192</sup> Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self"; Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*.

understanding of liberal-democracy. A pluralist commitment requires us to continue updating the liberalism framework to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This commitment, together with a desire to reroute the project of communication back to its fundamental ethical-political roots is the background against which I read McEwan's fiction.

McEwan is not a political author in the sense that his views of liberalism provide a package deal, where freedom and democratic institutions go together. In fact, these two concepts—occupying most liberal commentary today—do not stand at all the centre of his investigation. Rather, McEwan seems to acknowledge that the diversity of value is a fact of political and ethical life. We flourish in conflicting ways. Therefore, the fact of pluralism is not only a matter of moral philosophy, but a matter of common human experience.

Consequently, his work engages with broader themes of the experience of human decency and self-reflection in the face of conflicts, which are consistent with the premises of value-pluralism. It is McEwan's ethical considerations about the ways in which we are to communicate with one another that underscore his utmost relevance to communication theory. These considerations emphasize the political elements of communication, and the communicative elements of the political. In this respect, McEwan's

fictional work is of utmost political and communicative significance to the pluralist literature, and to the project of updating liberalism.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven explore in depth the novels *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*. Each chapter focuses on one of three key themes of McEwan's literature: history, communication, and science and art (respectively). I demonstrate how each novel, through its unique plot and form, reflects on what it means to be liberal in the 21st century; and how McEwan's characters experience a challenge to their liberal identity when they are confronted with the tension between a perfectionist world-view and a pluralist one.

## **Chapter Five: *Black Dogs* – Wrestling with the Ghosts of History**

*If there are any marks at all of special design in creation, one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of all animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals . . . .If Nature and Man are both the works of perfect goodness, that Being intended Nature as a scheme to be amended, not imitated, by Man.*

*John Stuart Mill*

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The twentieth century has been shaped, largely, by the aftershock of two world wars. The death of many millions led to an ongoing uncertainty and confusion regarding personal identity, social life and nationhood. The rapid globalization of market economies, followed by the globalization of political systems, has been heightened by support from media technologies such as satellite communication, cables and ultimately the internet and social media. This trend peaked in a millennial hysteria marked by the

Millennium bug,<sup>193</sup> the terror attack on the World Trade Center and the 2009 economic meltdown. Given these events, reflections about history and human events have a central place across academic discussions and in fiction. In *Black Dogs*, published in 1992, McEwan creates a context in which he confronts the second half of 20th century European history. In this novel McEwan explores the political meaning and effects of one of the greatest cultural dividers of 20th century: historical memory, or more specifically, how cultures and individuals choose to remember historical events, and make them into cultural knowledge using “vehicles of memory” such as books, commemorations, films etc.<sup>194</sup> *Black Dogs* is certainly not the first or last of McEwan’s explorations of history. *The Innocent* predates *Black Dogs* by two years and is the first novel by McEwan in which history makes its most full appearance. *The Innocent* embodies the concerns and challenges of giving account of historically significant events. The novel critiques the nostalgic recreation of the past and of English heroism: namely, the

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<sup>193</sup> The Millennium bug, or simply Y2K, was a global problem in coding computerized systems that were designed to abbreviate four-digit years to two-digit in order to save memory space. While a computer could recognize the numbers “56” or “99” as the years 1956 or 1999 it could not recognize “00” as the year of 2000 (it could very easily be the year of 1900). This caused a serious risk to databases in organizations like banks, insurance companies, governments and other real-time database operated organizations.

<sup>194</sup> Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History,” 1386.



“Churchillian national ‘spirit’” of Post World-War II Britain.<sup>195</sup> Setting the plot in Berlin before the fall of the wall allows McEwan to explore the idea of historical accountability and moral responsibility in a city “full of people with heavy luggage.”<sup>196</sup> He turned again to the topic of history in his 2001 novel *Atonement*, which is perhaps the most prominent example of McEwan’s engagement with history.<sup>197</sup> In *Atonement*, McEwan continued to chip away at the idealized narrative of national greatness, and the human tendency to gain order and meaning by romanticizing the world.<sup>198</sup>

*Black Dogs* follows the story of the Bernard and June Tremaine as it is observed and understood by Jeremy, their son-in-law, who is writing the family memoir. Jeremy’s memoir is framed around a family dispute that allows him to bring together both personal explanations, as well as political contextualizations of post-World War II Europe. *Black Dogs* travels back and forth between the 1940s and the 1980s in Europe, and revolves around one key incident. While hiking in the Languedoc countryside in Southern France

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<sup>195</sup> Dodou, “Dismembering a Romance of Englishness: Images of Childhood in Ian McEwan’s *The Innocent*.”

<sup>196</sup> McEwan, *The Innocent*, 208.

<sup>197</sup> Schemberg, *Achieving “At-One-Ment.”*

<sup>198</sup> Keren, *Millennium*.

in 1946, June is attacked by a pair of black, malevolent dogs, which later we learned were used by the Nazis to intimidate and attack the local population during the war. Farther back on the road and out of sight is Bernard, who is occupied by a trail of caterpillars and does not notice the dogs.

While memoirs may be considered less reliable account of history due to the fact they are written ex post facto, often suffer from exaggerations and failure of memory, and represent the writer's reflections more than the authentic experience, they nonetheless have much value for understanding the subtleties and complexities of past events.<sup>199</sup> Indeed, Jeremy's memoir is more extensive in scope than just as an examination of Bernard's and June's personal crises, as it comments not only on the family story but on Europe's story as well. As such, *Black Dogs* allow readers the opportunity to reflect on the ways they remember, retell and make sense of historical events.

### **Black Dogs and Historical Facts**

The publication of *Black Dogs* coincides with the rise of postmodern ideas celebrating the absence of history. Derrida dismisses our access to the past due to its unstable meaning or identities. For him, all discourses are a

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<sup>199</sup> Michael Keren, Shlomit Keren, *We Are Coming, Unafraid [electronic Resource]: The Jewish Legions and the Promised Land in the First World War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

“trace of that which can never be presented.”<sup>200</sup> Foucault suggests we deconstruct the past as a means to challenge present power and knowledge.<sup>201</sup> And Fukuyama just announced the end of history.<sup>202</sup> Intellectually, the end of the second millennia marks a time in which individuals are left to construct narratives that will allow them to gain some control over their lives and provide them with freedom and truth. The pronouncements of the end of history, and the coming of the new millennia created a natural opportunity for McEwan’s *Black Dogs* to reassess a century governed by violent and traumatic events. As argued by Gauthier, it is a time in which the concept of the “western civilized self” is in need of revision.<sup>203</sup>

Guided by his empiricist ethos, Bernard holds a “commonsense view of history.”<sup>204</sup> In Bernard view, if we let the facts speak for themselves we set the course for an infinite progress towards higher things. This line of thought rests on placing value on a passive acceptance of objective facts, as well as on the liberal convention that only from the free expression of competing

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<sup>200</sup> Derrida, “Deffirance,” 23.

<sup>201</sup> Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*.

<sup>202</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History?*.

<sup>203</sup> Tim S. Gauthier, “Black Dogs: McEwan’s Post-Holocaust Anxiety,” in *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

<sup>204</sup> Carr, *What Is History?*.

ideas real truth can be emerged. For June, her encounter with the dogs leads her to rethink entirely her way of being. She is certain that "it was the be the centerpiece of [Jeremy's] memoir, just as it was in her own story of her life—the defining moment, the experience that redirected, the revealed truth by whose light all previous conclusions had to be rethought."<sup>205</sup> Expressly, June gives the facts an intrinsic meaning that shatters her confidence and belief in the liberal idea of progress. Her stance challenges Bernard's, who maintain that the dogs were a figment of June's imagination, inspired by "a spot of malicious village gossip."<sup>206</sup>

Jeremy, fully aware of the difficulties in tracing and retelling history, embraces a sense of skepticism and is careful not to automatically choose the facts over their meanings. Understanding that the black dogs have a mythical significance for the Tremaines makes it hard for Jeremy to decide if it is not simply a transcendent narrative. He notes:

As a family outsider, I was both beguiled and skeptical.

Turning points are the inventions of storytellers and dramatists, a necessary mechanism when a life is reduced

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<sup>205</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 27.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

to, traduced by a plot, when a morality must be distilled from a sequence of actions, when an audience must be sent home with something unforgettable to mark a character's growth. Seeing the light, the moment of truth, the turning point—surely we borrow these from Hollywood or the Bible to make retroactive sense of an overcrowded memory. June's "black dogs."<sup>207</sup>

As there are no tangible records of the incident, the readers, as well as Jeremy, are left to examine the competing philosophical views about the general nature of the incident, and its historical and political meaning: "It was a story whose historical accuracy was of less significance than the function it served."<sup>208</sup> Here, *Black Dogs* echoes historian E. H. Carr's idea about historical facts (or lack thereof) and highlights the importance role history play in shaping our political identifies.<sup>209</sup>

### **History and Redemptive Narratives**

Before I examine further the function of this incident, it is valuable to probe deeper into the historical aspects of the novel. Arthur Bradley reads

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Carr, *What Is History?*.

*Black Dogs* under the framework of the human will-to-narrative.<sup>210</sup> Both Bernard's and June's versions of the incident present an equally potent self-serving narrative of redemption. While June views the black dogs as the embodiment of human evil, Bernard dismisses them as mere superstition, and therefore meaningless. These competing views result in different responses. June's retreat into spiritual quietism is one response to the anxieties and trauma of living in a particular moment of the 20th century, precipitated by the encounter with the dogs. This is her redemptive narrative. Bernard, on the other hand, remains committed to the Communist ideology and party until 1956 (the invasion of Hungary). Bernard's response to the events of the 20th century is to adhere to his scientific materialism to the point of almost blind faith. When witnessing the fall of the Berlin Wall with Jeremy, he presents his narrative of redemption:

What are those lines of Isaiah Berlin's that everybody quotes, especially these days, about the fatal quality of utopias? . . . If I know for certain how to bring humanity to peace, justice, happiness, boundless creativity, what price

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<sup>210</sup> Arthur Bradley, Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel [electronic Resource]: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*, (New Directions in Religion and Literature) (London: Continuum, 2010).

can be too high? To make this omelet, there can be no limit on the eggs I might need to break. Knowing what I know, I wouldn't be doing my duty if I couldn't accept that thousands may have to die now so that millions can be happy forever. . . .Laboratory work teaches you better than anything how easy it is to bend a result to fit a theory. It isn't even a matter of dishonesty. It's in our nature—our desires permeate our perceptions.<sup>211</sup>

Jeremy, however, shares the "will-to-narrative." He, too, needs a self-serving meta-narrative that will orient his view of life. The family memoir serves as such a narrative in an attempt to reconcile the personal and political. But before Jeremy can reassess Bernard and June's narratives, he needs a pre-existing point in history from which he can start his journey.

A framed picture kept on June's locker provides Jeremy with a necessary reference point. In fact, the novel begins with this 1946 snapshot of the just-married young couple Bernard and June. Choosing photography as the first medium with which we make a connection with the past is not accidental. According to J. D. Peters, allowing for new kinds of

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<sup>211</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 66–67.

representations of human form, the medium of photography plays a chief role in the social history of humankind. Photography has the ability to overcome the limitations set by time. It does so by transcribing the flow of time into an image. Thus, it communicates a record of experience in a more substantive way than human memory.<sup>212</sup> The conflation of space-time allows Jeremy to access and explore in analogous forms the replication of human experience and identity. The first scene in the novel, then, demonstrates a pure attempt to communicate with our past.

In June's snapshot Jeremy tries to trace the "aura," Walter Benjamin's term for an authentic presence and state of mind.<sup>213</sup> Taken the morning Bernard and June signed up as members of the Communist part of Britain, Jeremy understands this moment as an innocent time in which the universal reference point is not yet set by "human depravity" but by optimism and hope.<sup>214</sup> For the couple in the image "[t]he world is new and at peace, fascism has been the irrefutable evidence of capitalism's terminal crisis, the benign revolution is at hand, and they are young, just married, and in

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<sup>212</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

<sup>213</sup> Duttlinger, "Imaginary Encounters"; Benjamin et al., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*.

<sup>214</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 14. In "human depravity", McEwan means the horrors of World-War II and more specifically the Holocaust which just started to come into daylight after the war.



love."<sup>215</sup> This is our historical reference point when the novel begins, but Jeremy's retelling of the story has long drifted out of its original historical setting. In his attempt to communicate a piece of history, not only is Jeremy estranged by time, but Bernard and June are estranged by competing interpretations of past events.

### **Worldviews and Turning Points**

Through his exploration of history, McEwan makes an acute observation about communication that continues a line of argument put forth by Peters. For this scholar, communication is often understood as a registry of modern longings for a mutual communion of souls; or as some utopian environment where nothing can be misunderstood.<sup>216</sup> However, miscommunication or a failed communication "is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place."<sup>217</sup> From the very beginning of the novel we are confronted with an almost impossible situation for successful communication: the impossibility of accessing or understanding history without disruptive modes of mediation, which results in an intersubjective history of human experience.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>216</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 2.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 6.

Bernard and June's youthful optimism and innocence as reflected in June's photograph is challenged by post-Holocaust Europe. Scholars and critics have all agreed that the black dogs represent the idea of violence and human evil.<sup>218</sup> McEwan allows us to explore how Western idealism, represented in June's snapshot, copes with atrocities committed under ideological convictions and transcended ideals (such as the Nazi regime and the death camps). In other words, the black dogs are a symbol of human evil against which Bernard and June's different reactions represent two philosophical debates. This is what Jeremy's interpretation brings forth: "Rationalist and mystic, commissar and yogi, joiner and abstainer, scientist and intuitionist, Bernard and June are the extremities, the twin poles along whose slippery axis my own unbelief slithers and never comes to rest."<sup>219</sup> And indeed, at one point in the novel Bernard and June appear as schematic voices in Jeremy's head, representing the conflicting ideologies coexisting within him.

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<sup>218</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (University of South Carolina Press, 2002); Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Lars Heiler and Pascal Nicklas, "Unleashing the Black Dogs: Cathartic Horror and Political Commitment in The Innocent and Black Dogs," in *Ian McEwan: Art and Politics* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2009), 103–117; Tim S. Gauthier, "Black Dogs: McEwan's Post-Holocaust Anxiety," in *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 83-131.

<sup>219</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, xxiii.

June's and Bernard's ideological debate playing out in Jeremy's head become a focal point around which he pivots to locate his own position. However, the relative validity of each position explains Jeremy's inability to ignore this debate or commit to one ideology over the other. He thinks that "if I listened, I learned nothing. Each proposition blocked the one before or was blocked by the one that followed. It was a self-cancelling argument, a multiplication of zeros, and I could not make it stop."<sup>220</sup> Jeremy's confusion is a common feeling for the citizens of post-world WWII Europe, as well as the citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Which proposition is better equipped to cope with evil? Which one will yield a greater good? This is a pivotal element in McEwan's critical exploration of liberal life and commitment to a moral thought. The novel asks us to consider what our choices are in the face of traumatic events.

One way to cope with a traumatic event is to relive it in an attempt to understand how it happened, so it can be prevented from happening again. This requires reconstructing a narrative of the events. Bernard's view is that June's account of the events is simply her attempt to seek self-comfort and impose meaning upon the past. During their visit to Berlin he tells Jeremy:

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 97.

You can forget all that nonsense about “face to face with evil.” Religious cant. . .I was the one who told her about Churchill’s black dog. . .the name he gave to the depression he used to get. . . .So June’s idea was that if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression, civilization’s worst moods. Not bad, really. I’ve often made use of it.<sup>221</sup>

But the novel gives credence to June’s narrative. McEwan is known for his use of turning points, critical moments in the life of his characters that entirely change their views, behavior and ultimately their life. The black dogs are such a turning point in the Tremaines’ life. These dogs, trained and used by the Nazi regime are a remainder of World War II’s disquieting aftermath.<sup>222</sup>

During her encounter with the black dogs, June experiences a mystical moment, a religious revelation. And during her “moment of extremity she

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>222</sup> The novel provides many other remainders for the existence of violent and evil in the world. For example, the abusive parent in the restaurant, Jeremy’s own violent behavior, and xenophobic feelings in Europe.

knew she had discovered something extraordinary, and she was determined to survive and investigate it."<sup>223</sup> Gauthier suggests that the dogs with their purposeful and calculated plan are a perversion of nature, an abomination, and therefore entirely man-made.<sup>224</sup> This attack, therefore, cannot be simply viewed as a brutal act of starving animals, or an abstraction as Bernard and Jeremy suggest. In other words, while the black dogs represent for June a "malign principle, a force in human affairs that periodically advances to dominate and destroy the lives of individuals or nations, then retreats to await the next occasion," they also represent the moment of her revelation—an essential turning point. June's revelation suggests that with perennial evil comes also "a luminous countervailing spirit, benign and all-powerful, residing within and accessible to us all."<sup>225</sup> The acknowledgement of and belief in an ever-lurking human evil, together with the materialism of the Communist ideology are incompatible with June's mysticism. She, therefore, withdraws from practical politics and tries to replace the historical, public,

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<sup>223</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 125.

<sup>224</sup> Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*.

<sup>225</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, xxiii.

and collective commitment with a moral commitment to the local, individual, and the private as a means of coping with this dissonance.<sup>226</sup>

Bernard's approach is completely different. He approaches reality in a logical and analytical manner. He is a politician who believes in political and social reforms as the best way to remedy society's illnesses. His visit to Berlin in 1989 to witness the fall of the Berlin wall confirms his belief in progress. He maintains this belief, even while he overlooks historical wrongs and the attack of the skinheads as any sign of the failure of human progress. He does not share June's metaphorical bent, and therefore sees the black dogs simply as hungry animals. His pragmatism and rationalization bring him to a complete rejection of June's perspective on the world, one he deems "magical thinking. Completely alien to [him]."<sup>227</sup>

Bernard's "objective" worldview is the outcome of a deep ideological conviction led by a patriarchal positivism, and emotional inflexibility. His inability to enter into a dialogue with June points to the same historical certitude that is correlated with the dominance and totalitarian philosophies that silenced millions of minority voices and rejected them as historical

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<sup>226</sup> Heiler and Nicklas, "Unleashing the Black Dogs: Cathartic Horror and Political Commitment in *The Innocent and Black Dogs*"; Head, *Ian McEwan*.

<sup>227</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 57.

anomalies.<sup>228</sup> McEwan will return to this technique of confronting the male voice of rationality and science with the female voice of intuition and art in his novel *Saturday*, where he achieves a greater integration of the two positions. I discuss this further in Chapter Eight, but what is noteworthy here is that in both *Black Dogs* and *Saturday* neither side is presented as the preferred way of life.

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<sup>228</sup> Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*.

## **The Rational, the Irrational and the Postmodern**

*Black dogs* assigns equal weight of blame and responsibility to both rationalist and non-rationalist arguments in their rejection of civilization and embracement of violence. For example, the unmistakably purpose of the town of Majdanek, as reflected in its dedicated planning and construction, stands as a complete antithesis to the “attractive town” of Lublin and its golden winter sunsets, which resides next to it.<sup>229</sup> The events of Majdanek, much like the crimes of Communism, were carried out in the name of humanity and rationality, albeit a perverted one.<sup>230</sup> On the other hand, Jeremy’s response to an abusive father in a French restaurant is viewed as completely non-rational since it achieves no true and lasting justice for the abused child:

I had already made up my mind, and even as he raised his arms my fist was traveling toward his face with all my weight behind it. I caught him hard and full on the nose with such force that even as his bone crunched, I felt something snap in my knuckle. There was a satisfying moment when he was stunned but could not fall. His arms

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<sup>229</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 87–89.

<sup>230</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*.



dropped to his sides and he stood there and watched me as I hit him with the left, one two three, face, throat, and gut, before he went down. I drew back my foot, and I think I might have kicked and stomped him to death if I had not heard a voice and turned to see a thin figure in the lighted doorway across the road.<sup>231</sup>

Jeremy's response is not simply the use of force to prevent a crime, nor can it be seen as an act of self-defense. It is an act of sheer violence. These two examples are the incarnations of evil represented by the black dogs. That is to say, *Black Dogs* warns us about the return of evil whether it is in the form of rational madness or individual human wickedness.

McEwan's fascination with history gives rise to a crucial proposition. Our ability to justify any kind of politics or political actions strongly depends on our view of history. Since *Black Dogs* is composed of two competing and incommensurable historical narratives, does this, then, mean that history can only be understood in relative terms? And by extension—that the post-modern worldview has prevailed? *Black Dogs* can be easily mistaken for

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<sup>231</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 108.

celebrating relativism and the end of history.<sup>232</sup> After all, it features two core elements of postmodern thought.

The first of these elements has to do with episteme of representation. The classical episteme of representation “presuppose a spectator conception of the knowing self, [and] a designative theory of meaning.”<sup>233</sup> Postmodern thought claim that our knowledge of the world is a human and social constructs of mental structures. Bernard and June’s differences of opinion are mainly with respect to questions of how people should reside in the post-WWII world, and how they apprehend their societies and their relation to the past. That is to say, they hold different mental structures about the evaluation of history by the modern subject. *Black Dogs* confronts us with the problem of two historical figures speaking ideologically to one another. When adding Jeremy’s desire for solid historical ground beneath his feet, alongside his attitude of skepticism towards both Bernard and June, we end up with a strong postmodern sentiment.

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<sup>232</sup> M. Delrez, “Escape into Innocence: Ian McEwan and the Nightmare of History,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26, no. 2 (1995); Amy J. Elias and Inc ebrary, *Sublime Desire [electronic Resource]: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, (Parallax : Re-Visions of Culture and Society) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>233</sup> Benhabib, “Epistemologies of Postmodernism,” 107–108.

Bernard, like a true commissar, views history through the lenses of the Enlightenment and revolution. Isaiah Berlin's summary of the idea of history in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* fits perfectly with Bernard's central thesis

that there is a natural law whereby the lives of human beings no less than that of nature are determined; that men, unable to face this inexorable process, seek to represent it as a succession of free choices, to fix responsibility for what occurs upon persons endowed by them with heroic virtues or heroic vices, and called by them "great men."<sup>234</sup>

June, on the other hand, rejects the acts of "great men," with their imperviousness to human overtures. She proposes an experiential private life of abiding faith. Her experience with the dogs, in complete contrast to Bernard's experience with the caterpillars, is one of spiritual nature.

The second postmodern element in the novel is an aesthetic one. This is, perhaps, the most noticeable feature of the novel. Jeremy's memoir is episodic, fragmented and incoherent in its form, a feature often associated

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<sup>234</sup> Mossman, "Metaphors of History in *War and Peace* and *Doctor Zhivago*," 250.

with postmodern texts.<sup>235</sup> As a whole, it highlights discrepancies in the various narratives; it is geared towards the impossibility of one truth, or single coherent structure. The fact that both Bernard's and June's narratives are presented to the reader through Jeremy's narration, adds more complexity to the attempt to discover history and make sense of it, by shifting the focus of off the centre and creating a secondary memory. Bernard and June are voices in Jeremy's head, but their voices belong to Jeremy, and as such they are not theirs, but his. As pointed out by Dominick LaCapra, "it raises the issue of the way in which the historian or other analyst becomes a secondary witness, undergoes a transference relation, and must work out an acceptable subject-position with respect to the witness and his or her testimony."<sup>236</sup>

McEwan engages some postmodern observations about textuality and the reliability of historical account in this work, but the text does not adhere to the relativistic worldview offered by postmodernism; nor does it accept rational positivism and the notion of history as the great clock of time.

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<sup>235</sup> McEwan experimented with time-space leaps in his earlier novel *The Children in Time*. There, too, the main theme is remembering past events, recovering from them and reconciling with the loss of a child, childhood and time itself. For more please see: Slay, "Vandalizing Time: Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*."

<sup>236</sup> LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*.

Jeremy's memoir acknowledges the instability of narratives and mortal human intelligence. That the past is chaotic and hard to fully grasp, we understand from the first three parts of the novel. Yet, Jeremy does not seem to buy into the idea that time and space are relative, and that history has no starting point or definitional foundation.

Emblematic of postmodern text, Jeremy's memoir moves forward and backward in a non-linear fashion, but he does not deem time and structure to be meaningless. On the contrary, the fourth section of the novel—a linear and authoritative presentation of the events—points to the fact that the story can be told.<sup>237</sup> To this I would add, not only the story can be told, but also a moral commitment can be made. Jeremy's memoir represents our modern journey to cope with the outcomes of the 20th century master narratives. If Bernard and June provide the link to a distant and particular past, Jeremy is the proxy through which we can access a broader historical context that represents the yet unfolded future time.

### **The Symbol of Violence, and Collective Responsibility**

Jeremy gives more credence to June's narrative, although it is clear that he is less interested in the reality of the dogs than he is in what they

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<sup>237</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*.

symbolizes. It is worth mentioning that 1992, the publication year of *Black Dogs*, is the same year Europe experienced severe ethnic tension between the Serbs and the Bosnians. Despite the extensive coverage of the Bosnian genocide in the media and the international public opinion opposing the Serbian violence, from 1992 to 1995 not much effort was made to stop the violence. Europe, of course, is not alone in this violence and the lack of sufficient international action to curtail it. Over the course of about 100 days in 1994, over 800,000 people were killed during the Rwandan genocide.<sup>238</sup> As well, according to the United Human Rights Council, the number of casualties during the civil war in Sudan reached about 400,000 people, with over 2.5 million refugees.<sup>239</sup>

For Jeremy, whether or not June's dogs are trained Gestapo dogs is not so important to his perspective on contemporary politics. That is to say, for the novel as a whole, the core question is not so much what happened, as what the recent past tells us about our current culture. Jeremy is morally committed to adhering to June's narrative. His struggle to find a cohesive narrative does not automatically make him a "post-modern orphan."<sup>240</sup> Led

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<sup>238</sup> Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*.

<sup>239</sup> "Genocide in Darfur."

<sup>240</sup> Müller-Wood and Wood, "Bringing the Past to Heel," 49.

by his gentle skepticism he manages to extract a meaningful insight about the world we leave in: evil, much like love, is an inseparable part of human nature. It resides in each of us and can be found on all parts of the political map (liberals or communists alike). We often fail to tame it, as Jeremy's own violent behavior indicates, but it is still our responsibility to be aware of it and at least attempt to bring it under control. "It is the black dogs I return to most often" Jeremy concludes his memoir.<sup>241</sup> Jeremy's return to the symbolic structure of the black dogs is a warning against the return of evil. As reality proves over and over again, the post-Holocaust world has enough malicious entities of its own. In that respect, *Black Dogs* carries a similar message to Hayden White's view of history. For White, history is a narrative discourse, the content of which is as much imagined as found. History, therefore, needs to be understood to be open and uncontrollable in order to encourage an open and emancipatory future political mode.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 141.

<sup>242</sup> Jenkins and ebrary, *On "What Is History?"*.





## **Chapter Six: *Amsterdam* – Delusions and Disharmony**

*As is the generation of leaves, so too of men: At one time the wind shakes the leaves to the ground, but then the flourishing woods gives birth, and the season of spring comes into existence; so it is of the generation of men, which alternately come forth and pass away.*

*Homer – The Iliad*

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### ***Amsterdam* and the Baby Boomers**

At the end of WWII the Western world was facing a new era. Fear and suspicion were replaced by optimism and hope, and between the years 1946 and 1964 birth rates across the world spiked. In the United States alone, an estimated 77 million babies were born during this time. The baby boom generation had arrived in the world and with it the ethos of the individual was revived. Culturally speaking, the baby boom generation is characterized as free spirited, experimental and moved by social causes. This generation rejected and rebelled against figures of authority. Creativity, freedom of expression and human liberties were celebrated.

Moving individual tastes and desires to the center of life like this was a major catalyst in the rise of independent youth culture. New styles in art and

music as well as the popularity of emerging postmodern intellectuals such as Foucault, Barth and Derrida sought to expose, challenge and finally dissolve the power structure of society's institutions, language and culture.

Economically, this generation forced society to feed, clothe, educate and house more people than ever before, thereby helping the growth of entire industries. This generation was thus blessed with affluence and education and became the embodiment of idealism and hope. Great expectations were born. No wonder that the baby boomers are affiliated with so many significant cultural turning points: the anti-war protests; sexual freedom; drug experimentation; and the civil rights, environmental and women's movements. In many ways, the second half of the 20th century was a complete antithesis of its first half. It captured the spirit of the Enlightenment predicated on the autonomy and freedom of the individual.<sup>243</sup>

Written with an eye on the transition to the new millennium, *Amsterdam* examines this boomer generation and its prominent representations in communication, arts and politics. It raises several questions: Did the baby boom generation live up to its promise? Did this generation of people balance their desire for self-fulfillment with social

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<sup>243</sup> Jones, *Great Expectations*; Owram, *Born at the Right Time*.

responsibilities, or have they focused strictly on private life goals as the only measure by which they live their lives? What happens to a society when the idea of the 'I' exceeds the 'you' or 'we'? And how does this perception of the self affect politics and communication? *Amsterdam* attempts to deal with these questions and more. *Amsterdam* raises these questions by suggesting that a stultifying centring on the self is the dark side of individualism, and that it flattens and narrows life. Moreover, when combined with the kind of instrumental rationality that seeks the most economical application of means to a given end, self-centredness results in a cultural predicament of alienation from the public sphere which ultimately leads to a loss of political control and freedom.

Despite its being a short novella, *Amsterdam* features a twisted and complex plot. The novella's epigraph hints to its content. Much like the novella's opening line—taken from W. H. Auden's poem "The Crossroads"—*Amsterdam* is a story about the failing friendship of Clive Linley, a musician, and Vernon Halliday, a newspaper editor. The crossroads the friends are facing in *Amsterdam* is also the crossroads society faces at the beginning of the third millennium. It is true that each generation has its own effect on social change, and its own unique characteristics. And it is also true that sheer demography does not inevitably determine destiny; the baby boom generation is not necessarily monolithic in this regard. Nonetheless, this

boomer generation is considered as the great carrier of social change in the 20th century. Perhaps more importantly, the intellectual, artistic and political elite of our current society is primarily composed of the baby boomers. As such, this generation continues to challenge and shape our life. The friends in *Amsterdam* who meet and depart to their own mistakes belong to the generation that led society from the 20th century to the 21<sup>st</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ian McEwan chose to closely examine whether this generation lived up to its own great expectations.

*Amsterdam* describes the baby boom generation as an egoistic generation that exploits social welfare policies. This ultimately leads to its isolation from the social welfare state and eventually its self-destruction. In fact, this generation replaces the values of the social welfare state—such as solidarity, and empathy—with the values of neo-capitalism: radical utilitarianism and individualism. Being the first generation in the 20th century that could really focus on itself and enjoy the fruits of education, culture and economy, it is ultimately a generation dedicated to self-fulfillment. Yet, *Amsterdam* presents a portrait of a generation that is so self-absorbed that it sees itself as the only standard which all things should be measured against.

Both Clive and Vernon are an embodiment of this generation. Even though both are accomplished men who have achieved influential positions

in their respective fields, *Amsterdam* presents them as symbols of decline.

The story of their generation is recorded in the following words:

How prosperous, how influential, how they had flourished under a government they had despised for almost seventeen years.

*Talking 'bout my generation.* Such energy, such luck. Nurtured in the postwar settlement with the State's own milk and juice, and then sustained by their parents' tentative, innocent prosperity, to come of age in full employment, new universities, bright paperback books, the Augustan age of rock and roll, affordable ideals. When the ladder crumbled behind them, when the State withdrew her tit and became scold, they were already safe, they consolidated and settled down to forming this or that—taste, opinion, fortunes.<sup>244</sup>

### **The Press: Forces and Motivations**

Through Vernon, the chief editor of a newspaper called *The Judge*, *Amsterdam* examines the current state of the printed press and of news production. The press, as it is depicted in the novel, exposes the political arena in which liberal principles clash. The idea of the press as the fourth

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<sup>244</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 13.

estate was meant to keep liberal democracy stable. Yet, liberal democracy is a form of political society streaming from two different traditions. As a form of rule, democracy is based on the promise of popular sovereignty. That is, a principle of the sovereignty of the people—for a symbolic framework within which democratic rule can be exercised—must be sought after. On the other hand, liberal tradition has placed a strong emphasis on the respect and defense of human rights and individual liberties. Chantal Mouffe calls this situation the democratic paradox, and argues that there is a constitutive tension between the core values of democratic procedures and existing liberal rights.<sup>245</sup>

From the moment of its birth the press was perceived as a fitting mechanism for the cultivation of informed and critical public discourse. The existence of such discourse is desired and sought after as the basis for many civic actions such as voting, raising public inquiries, voicing opposition, and so forth. As such, the written press has a crucial role in mitigating some of the constitutive tensions between democratic and liberal traditions.<sup>246</sup> One may think of the press as a pragmatic negotiator trying to democratize liberalism and liberalize democracy, to paraphrase the Canadian political

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<sup>245</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

<sup>246</sup> Dewey, *How We Think*; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

thinker C.B Macpherson. The written press can be a fertile site for expressing and probing society's conflicting values.

John Locke identified such conflicting values as the tension between economic freedom and the individual's right to property (which translates to newspaper ownership), and intellectual freedom and freedom of consciousness—which are essential to fair reporting.<sup>247</sup> Jürgen Habermas also referred to and analyzed this tension in his book *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*. According to Habermas, liberalism eroded when small business centres gave way to monopoly capitalism, mass media systems and concentration of ownership. This process was expressed, among other ways, through the substitution of the culturally oriented literary press with the entirely profit-based commercialist press.<sup>248</sup> Put differently, the fine balance described by Locke was breached by shifting values, where the value of economic freedom became elevated above intellectual value.

Vernon, and the newspaper he works for, demonstrates these two different traditions and the shift in values, from an inclusive and critical discussion driven public discourse to a profit-motivated sensationalism, that were

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<sup>247</sup> Chambers, "Who Shall Judge?"

<sup>248</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1991.

depicted by Habermas. Vernon is not a particularly talented journalist or editor. As a matter of fact, his biggest journalistic achievement is a misguided tip about a presidential hair implant paid for with taxpayers' money. He won his current editor position only due to a "sudden realignment of proprietorial interests . . . .There was no one left but Vernon."<sup>249</sup> He lacks a professional ethos and he views the written press strictly as a business. Put bluntly, Vernon is "widely known as a man without edges, without faults or virtues, as a man who did not fully exist."<sup>250</sup> But when the Garmony affair falls into Vernon's hands, everything changes and Vernon becomes highly visible.

The Garmony affair revolves around some photos that reveal the transvestite tendencies of Julian Garmony, Britain's minister of foreign affairs. In handling the Garmony affair, the *Judge* is revealed to be governed by monopoly business practices, as much as by personal motives. Vernon supports the publication of the photographs of Garmony. He bases his support on the argument of the public's right to know. However, when he seeks Clive's support, he finds out that Clive believes the photographs to be personal and does not support their publication. Clive's argument is based

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<sup>249</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 33.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.



on the values of the sexual revolution and freedom of expression. "If it is okay to be a transvestite, then it's okay for a racist to be one. What's not okay is to be a racist."<sup>251</sup> Vernon, on the other hand, is convinced that Garmony represents an example of a financially, morally, and sexually corrupt government and that his "head was urgently needed on a plate."<sup>252</sup>

Behind Vernon's argument we find two more motives. The first motivation is commercial. Trying not to be the fifth editor who fails to reverse the declining circulation of the newspaper, Vernon understands that "[t]ime was running out for the *Judge*,"<sup>253</sup> and that the Garmony story is what he needs to boost circulation. Indeed, once the Garmony story breaks, it takes only a week for sales of the *Judge* to go up by a hundred thousand.<sup>254</sup> The second, and perhaps more central motivation, is Vernon's self-worth. Working on the Garmony story

had revealed to Vernon new aspects of his powers and potential.

. .he felt large and benign, a little ruthless, perhaps, but

ultimately good, capable of standing alone against the current,

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<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

seeing over the heads of his contemporaries, knowing that he was about to shape the destiny of his country and that he could bear the responsibility. More than bear—he *needed* this weight, his gifts needed the weight that no one else could shoulder.<sup>255</sup>

McEwan goes on to describe the hubris that clouds Vernon's consciousness with, "a glow of competence and well-being; for his sure hands were about to cut away a cancer from the organs of the body politic."<sup>256</sup> At once Vernon had become the *Judge* and the executioner.

The Garmony affair points to the lost alliance between the press and the public. The loss of this alliance reinforces *Amsterdam's* disappointment in the baby boom generation. Vernon belongs to a rebel generation that fought for a critical public, and values of freedom and justice. Vernon represents the entity that oversees all authorities, but this is clouded by his urge to get the scoop, as well as by a personal and political vendetta. The Garmony affair is not an important journalistic story that probes democratic and civic practices. It is a story only in the sense that it is presented and kept as such. Vernon does everything in his power to keep the story alive until "his

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<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–110.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

gifts for persuasion and planning began to produce results."<sup>257</sup> Using the argument of the public interest for publishing Garmony's photographs, Vernon overcomes all objections. *The Judge* has a lot of stock in this story and it monetizes them by trailing "the Garmony story, stoking and fine-tuning public curiosity so that photographs no one had ever seen had become an icon in the political culture, from Parliament to pub, an item of general discussion, a subject on which no important player could afford to be without an opinion."<sup>258</sup> Indeed, the "buzz" proves to be a successful strategy when the circulation manager reports the best figures in seventeen years.<sup>259</sup> The Garmony affair has such an impact on public curiosity that

all the papers, broadsheets and all, had been obliged to run related features. . . .The *Independent* had come up with a tired piece on privacy laws in ten different countries. The *Telegraph* had a psychologist theorizing pompously on cross-dressing, and the *Guardian* had given over a double-page spread, dominated by a picture of J. Edgar Hoover in

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 123.

a cocktail dress, to a sneering affair, wised-up piece on transvestites in public life.<sup>260</sup>

The Garmony affair represents the much discussed dilution of news and information. The impact of market-driven journalism on the public sphere is a major concern for media theorists.<sup>261</sup> As journalism researcher Bob Franklin argues:

[N]ews media have increasingly become part of the entertainment industry instead of providing a forum for informed debate of key issues of public concern. Journalism's priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities, from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family, are judged more "newsworthy" than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 118–119.

<sup>261</sup> For examples see: Brantlinger, *Bread & Circuses*; Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant.<sup>262</sup>

In other words, the newsworthiness of the Garmony affair, with its peripheral stories and related features, is illusionary, and certainly not of public importance. It is a sensation, a spectacle constructed to increase circulation and is carried as a personal vendetta.

This interpretation is reinforced by the spin Garmony's party managers put on the story. The rapid change in the press' coverage of the story after Rose Garmony's appearance reinforce the view that sensationalism expropriates entirely the political process and dissolves public opinion, as much as such public exists in *Amsterdam*. In fact, Garmony's spin, much like Vernon's first page, shows more about the packaging of information than the intrinsic value of information itself. Journalism and politics in *Amsterdam* are predicated on the supremacy of the market and not on a lucid debate about political issues.

### **Spectacle: Image and Reality**

The coverage of the Garmony affair revolves around situating theatrical images against social realities. McEwan gives importance to

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<sup>262</sup> Franklin, *Newszak and News Media*, 4.

images as an effective tool of communication: they are simple and ambivalent enough to leave room for our own projections and interpretations. Images can effectively generate illusions by creating pseudo-events in which the image replaces.<sup>263</sup> Guy Debord called this phenomenon the culmination of spectacles. According to Debord, the spectacle is not just an image or a collection of images but a social relation between people that is mediated by images. As such, the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. In its form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system (namely, selling more papers, or keeping Garmony in power).<sup>264</sup>

Vernon's obsession with one out-of-context image points to a lack of tolerance for the rigour of serious political argument. This age of "politics of slogans, deceit and mystifying pageantry" fundamentally depoliticizes society.<sup>265</sup> Garmony's political agenda is rarely discussed in Amsterdam; while it is not entirely ignored, it is pushed aside in favour of the drama over Vernon and Garmony's tactical maneuvers, both offensive and defensive. On

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<sup>263</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, 5–6; Boorstin, "From News-Gathering to News-Making."

<sup>264</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

<sup>265</sup> Gitlin, "Bites and Blips: Chunk News, Savvy Talk and the Bifurcation of American Politics."

Vernon's "offensive" side, Garmony's images are the issue, and *The Judge* focusses on the type of coverage they usually provide.

The paper had covered the courtroom battles, the icy support of fraternal government colleagues, the dithering of the Prime Minister, the "grave concern" of senior Opposition figures, and the musing of the great and the good. *The Judge* had thrown open its pages to denunciations by those opposed to publication, and it had sponsored a televised debate on the need for a privacy law.<sup>266</sup>

A day before Vernon's much-discussed images are to be published, the Garmony side carries out a well-planned three-stage defense.<sup>267</sup> First, a film crew accompanies Mrs. Garmony on her workday, a surgeon in a children's hospital. Images of a grateful African man whose daughter was treated by Mrs. Garmony, and a flattering scripted voice-over set the image of a highly successful, adored and compassionate professional. Second, a family clip of the Garmonys in their country home in Wiltshire is presented. This shot is

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<sup>266</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 107–108.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

composed with serene, symbolic details to create a spectacle: a sheep tending its newborn lamb, the Garmony's sheepdog by their side, the family cat cradled by Garmony's daughter, the family dressed in woolies and oilcloth. These images are not accidental. As reality emerges within the spectacle, the spectacle becomes real. This blend of imagery symbolizes pure politics driven by family values of tender care, loyalty and support, as well as hard work and simplicity.

The final and perhaps most important phase in Garmony's spin is the spoiler: the "reveal" by his wife of the much spoken-about, but as yet unseen, photos of Julian Garmony. In her speech to the media Rose Garmony tells the public—as if to reiterate the symbolic images shown earlier—about "the days of hard work and making do" of the Garmonys.<sup>268</sup> She lists the couple's triumphs and attributes them to their honesty and deep trust in each other. Her husband's transgender tendencies were always known to her. Rose Garmony admits that some pictures were once taken in a spirit of celebration by a friend of the family. Not only she is aware of her husband's tendencies, she feels it is "[Nothing] that their love could not absorb, and over the years it had

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 132.



endeared itself to her, and she had come to regard it with respect, as an inseparable part of [Garmony's] individuality."<sup>269</sup> To prove her claims, she reveals Vernon's front page photo to the cameras. In an orchestrated move, Garmony's children stand at his side, while Mrs. Garmony accuses *The Judge* of being political and trying to drive her husband from office. When asked if she had any message for the editor of *The Judge*, she replies with the following well scripted sound-bite: "Mr. Halliday, you have the mentality of a blackmailer, and the moral stature of a flea."<sup>270</sup>

*Amsterdam's* behind-the-scenes presentation of news production, a culture of mischievous spins and spoilers, illuminates a contemporary aspect of news production: enchantment with the means over the ends. Here the argument is not just about the "dumbing down" and "tabloidization" promoted by *The Judge* (though it has its fair share of it). Rather, the argument goes beyond that point and entails much more. The shift from the public-service ethos of journalism to infotainment marks a powerful diversion. In the "society of the

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 135.

spectacle”,<sup>271</sup> the marketization of news not only jeopardizes critical democratic practices among citizens, it takes our attention away from neoliberal imperialism, the tyranny of technology and an unsustainable consumerist lifestyle.

### **Aesthetics and Social Responsibility**

Clive Linley is, perhaps, the most vivid embodiment in this novel of the baby boom generation. At the age of 21 he inherited a large house where he hosts many cultural events and parties with some of the leading cultural figures of the sixties, such as John Lennon and Jimmy Hendrix. He flourished as a musician and was finally asked to compose the symphony that will mark the change of a century. As such, Clive enjoys the status of a tastemaker. Living on his own with absolutely no desire to share the company of others, Clive is a self-sufficient musician who rejects any social conventions,<sup>272</sup> to the extent that even “the thought of children playing his music made him feel faintly depressed.”<sup>273</sup> But even more obnoxious than his obvious

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<sup>271</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

<sup>272</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 10.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

misanthropy is Clive's perception of himself simply as a genius who exists in an artist sphere, completely detached from the world he lives in.<sup>274</sup>

As noted, Clive's successful musical career reaches a peak when he is asked to compose the symphony of the millennium. But *Amsterdam* in fact rejects the notion of this character, that artistic expression can be solely valued on its aesthetic merits, and that it is a creation that can come *ex nihilo*, as if in an act of ingenuity. Indeed, the novel portrays an interesting relation between the following triad: the misanthrope and detached artist, the context in which art is being made, and moral corruption.

Clive is trained in classical music; he admires Beethoven and sees himself as Ralph Vaughan Williams's heir.<sup>275</sup> Sharing Williams's philosophical view of music, Clive believes that humans are *Homo Musicus*—of a genetic ability to understand rhythms, melodies and harmonies. In other words, the impulse to create and enjoy music is common to all of humanity. This cultural-evolutionary agenda that Clive subscribes to strongly affiliates music with human nature and it aligns with Williams's own words: "The wildest howl of the savage, or the most careless whistling of the errand boy is

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>275</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was an English composer symphonies.

nothing else than an attempt to reach into the infinite, which attempt we call art."<sup>276</sup> Clive's book, *Recalling Beauty*, expands Williams's notion by claiming that modernism "imprisoned music in the academy, where it was jealously professionalized, isolated, and rendered sterile, its vital covenant with a general public arrogantly broken."<sup>277</sup> Clive's remedy is to free music from the smothering and inferior hostile conditions of modern art. This can be achieved, on the one hand, by returning to a true humanistic tradition that acknowledges the beauty of our nature vis-à-vis our genetic disposition to grasp music, and, on the other hand, by restoring the communicative essence of music. Clive concludes that writing music must occur in a way that reaches out to the wider public, attempting to elevate and expand their taste without patronizing them. This is the social responsibility of the composer. While Clive's thesis may be considered novel and appealing, his actions are not. Clive's misanthropy, combined with his strong sense of self admiration and importance, prevents him from acting according to his own moral beliefs.

Beginning with the symphony itself, Clive's entire musical piece is plagiarized from Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," and half the orchestra refuses to

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<sup>276</sup> Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 63.

<sup>277</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 23.

play it.<sup>278</sup> *Amsterdam* provides several clues to Clive's plagiarism. Searching for the right notes, he always resorts to Beethoven. "He knew their enticing sweetness and melancholy. He knew their simplicity, and the model, surely, was Beethoven's Ode to Joy . . . .Such was the exalted nature of his mission, and of his ambition. Beethoven."<sup>279</sup> The message here is that artistic expressions are rooted in shared experiences and context, and cannot be created in complete contextual isolation. Clive's symphony did not come to him out of nothing, as an expression of his own musical ingenuity, as he wished to believe. The idea of sharing a cultural horizon is important not only because it is humbling, but because it shows us that our actions (and expressions) are influenced by larger traditions. It is crucial to acknowledge that we are bound by certain norms, and that we do not exist outside of such norms. This idea is especially important in Clive's case because his plagiarism strikes a sour note in light of his bigger evasion of moral responsibility.

Clive's beliefs about the emancipatory nature of music do not coincide with his actions in the Lake District and serve as further evidence of his moral prevarication. Clive takes a trip to this area to disconnect from people,

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 82.

and, by extension, to disassociate his composition, from the suffocating life of daily urbanity which he describes to be:

Square miles of meager modern houses whose principal purpose was the support of TV aerials and dishes; factories producing worthless junk to be advertised on the televisions and, in dismal lots, lorries queuing to distribute it; and everywhere else, roads and the tyranny of traffic . . . .No one would have wished it this way, but no one had been asked. Nobody planned it, nobody wanted it, but most people had to live in it. To watch it mile after mile, who would have guessed that kindness or the imagination, that Purcell or Britten, Shakespeare or Milton, had ever existed?<sup>280</sup>

Clive believes that the great outdoors will set him free and restore a sense of control in a way that will allow him to complete his symphony.<sup>281</sup> What we see in the novel, however, is a description of this entire trip as a willingly self-imposed isolation of a self-centered misanthropic musician. This trip provides McEwan with the perfect opportunity to employ his technique of

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 84–85.

'turning point': a small external event that changes the life of one of his characters. Relishing his solitude, Clive finds inspiration in a loud alarm call of a large bird.<sup>282</sup> When he tries to scribble the notes he hears the voice of a woman calling for help. He turns to see a man attacking a woman on the bank of a small lake, and as a result, faces a real dilemma: "What was clear now was the pressure of choice: he should either go down and protect the woman, if she needed protection, or he should creep away round the side of Glaramara to find a sheltered place to continue his work, if it was not already lost."<sup>283</sup> He chooses to leave the girl to her own destiny. In the moment of truth, when the opportunity to act presents itself, Clive abandons his entire moral beliefs as they have been presented so far.

He had a number of friends who played the genius card when it suited, failing to show up for this or that in the belief that whatever local upset it caused, it could only increase respect for the compelling nature of their high calling. These types—novelists were by far the worst—managed to convince friends and families that not only their working hours but every nap and

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 90. Note the similarities in Clive's experience to Williams's words about cultivating the "wildest howl of the savage" to create art.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 94.

stroll, every fit of silence, depression, or drunkenness, bore the exculpatory ticket of high intent. A mask for mediocrity, was Clive's view. He didn't doubt that the calling was high, but bad behaviour was not a part of it. Perhaps every century there was an exception or two to be made. Beethoven, yes; Dylan Thomas, *most certainly not*.<sup>284</sup>

He strongly believes that "[s]o much depended on [his artistic project]—the symphony, the celebration, his reputation, the lamented century's ode to joy," that he chooses to sacrifice the woman and cannot see that this action is wrong.<sup>285</sup> Clive simply positions his artistic calling higher than all other values, while denouncing others who do the same. And since Clive thinks of himself and his symphony to be of the same magnitude as Beethoven, he spares himself the critique. Clive is lacking in empathy that he rids himself of guilt for his shameful action (or rather, his inaction). His explanation is nothing but a form of self-justification that emphasizes his selfishness and self-absorption.

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 90.



If he had approached the couple . . . .The melody could not have survived the psychic flurry . . . .His fate, their fate, separate paths. It was not his business. [Music] was his business, and it wasn't easy, and he wasn't asking for anyone's help . . . .He wanted the anonymity of the city again, and the confinement of his studio. . .it was excitement that made him feel this way, not shame.<sup>286</sup>

If the trip to the Lake District can be seen as somewhat analogous to the hypothetical political condition known as the "the state of nature," what can we make of it? Political theorists and novelists alike have used the state of nature to examine the origins and legitimacy of rights and social values. In this initial state that precedes our post-industrial, government-oriented society, our actions towards one another lay the foundations for some of our liberties today (life, freedom of expression and movement, equality and so on). Turning his back on that woman for the sake of his art relinquishes the most basic moral affinity between human beings. Clive's argument about the power of art to cultivate the souls of a wider public via its communicative properties is rendered moot when he chooses to walk away. What is evident

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 96–97.

here is that adhering to their “higher callings” at the expense of those in need, or ruining the lives of others to seek more fame and status than they already hold are the guiding principles of both Clive and Vernon.

To conclude, *Amsterdam* is a story about two friends whose mistaken paths lead them to dishonour and destruction. Vernon and Clive do not see their own actions as “rowdy lies.”<sup>287</sup> The flashes of a promised fame blind them—they are positive their actions are reasonable, just and even necessary. But *Amsterdam* shows that such behaviour cannot be sustained and that it can only lead to a miserable end, as suggested by the novella’s ending. The mutual killing of the friends is the final step in their blind righteousness and it symbolizes how the values of greed and pursuit of status end up collapsing into themselves. More than that, *Amsterdam* is a story of a failing generation. The nascent promise of the baby boom generation did not reach fruition, by the end of the century, or at all.

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<sup>287</sup> Kohn, “The Fivesquare Amsterdam of Ian McEwan.,” 92.

## **Chapter Seven: *Saturday* – Evolutionary Ethics, Public Reason and Morality**

*The practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive.*

*Thomas Henry Huxley*

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### **Terrorism and Evolutionary Ethics**

When the United States experienced devastating terrorist attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, all Western democratic nations experienced a traumatic and transformative event. This is supported by research showing that terrorism's destructiveness influences political views worldwide. When people and nations are exposed to terror,

this affects their threat perceptions, which in turn has psychological effects on their behavioural and cognitive adaptation to other threatening situations. A growing body of evidence shows that constant exposure to terror shapes subjective levels of patriotism, political optimism and political trust, which constitute a nation's resiliency levels.<sup>288</sup> While the threat of terrorist violence remains a major political issue, we would be mistaken to think it poses the major or only threat to our democratic world. As several studies, as well as the novella *Amsterdam*, have pointed out, corruption, manipulation and the egotistical pursuit of status and fame have their share in shredding the delicate fabric of democratic way of life.<sup>289</sup>

McEwan considers these questions and sheds some light on this core experience of 21st century uncertainty in his novel *Saturday*, having already written about post-World War II Europe and the Cold War. *Saturday* examines the foundations and strength of our democratic and liberal conventions when faced with the threat of violence. As our perceptions—and

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<sup>288</sup> Daphna Canetti et al., "What Does National Resilience Mean in a Democracy? Evidence from the United States and Israel," *Armed Forces & Society* (March 26, 2013).

<sup>289</sup> For example please see: Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*. Specifically, Nussbaum's argument about prioritization of economic growth above all other public goods; Anderson and Tverdova, "Corruption, Political Allegiances, and Attitudes Toward Government in Contemporary Democracies"; Dryzek, *Democracy in Capitalist Times*. Specifically, the argument about how capitalist values entrenches instrumental reasoning at the expense of communicative rationality.

specifically our political perceptions—play a vital role in building social capital, understanding the psychological effect of trauma on the individual in a democratic society is a pressing question in the 21st century. Set on Saturday, February 15, 2003, the day of the largest anti-war demonstration that ever took place in England, the novel follows one day in the life of Henry Perowne. Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, is happily married to his beloved wife Rosalind, with whom he has two kids with artistic aspirations. The Perownes are getting ready for a family reunion in celebration of the publication of their daughter's first poetry book. Being a man of science, Perowne's mindset and world view is largely informed by scientific reasoning. This rational perspective is unsettled when he sees a burning plane struggling over the skies of London from his bedroom window early in the morning.

While it conspicuously draws on the apocalyptic visuals of the attack on the World Trade Centre, *Saturday* is by no means about 9/11 but about the long shadow it casts upon us. Deliberate terror attack or unfortunate accident? This question catalyzes the novel and directs its main theme: the struggle of a democratic society transformed by a traumatic experience which carries significant and far-reaching consequences. The novel takes up these concerns, exploring the ways in which trauma and the perception of threat affect our moral stances and liberal conventions. Even when the news

report reveals the burning plane to be a malfunctioning cargo plane and not a terror attack against Western life, Perowne remains ill at ease. Perowne's unease is, unfortunately, familiar to all of us. In the complex society in which we live, the ecology of fear and traumatic experiences are fostered daily by a media climate composed mostly of, as Perowne indicates, "Iraq. . . America and power, European distrust, Islam—its suffering and self-pity, Israel and Palestine, dictators, democracy. . . weapons of mass destruction, nuclear fuel rods, satellite photography, lasers, nanotechnology."<sup>290</sup> Fundamentalism and the threat of violence on the one hand, and advanced destructive technology on the other, mark the beginning of Perowne's *Saturday* as well as our new millennium.

*Saturday* represents a particularly troubled moment in the contemporary West, and Henry Perowne takes the role of an everyman in the post 9/11 world. With the anti-war demonstration against the invasion of Iraq acting as a backdrop to his day, Perowne is concerned with legitimacy and stability under the condition of pluralism. But he is also inspired to live his life conscious of the role that evolution, biology and genetics play in determining the outcomes of our lives. His intellectual commitment to the

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<sup>290</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 34.

science of evolution guides him through the events of his day. It leads him to contemplate the possible relations between political action, ethics and responsibility; the biological foundations of human nature; and the ways in which genetic foundations shape our social behaviours. He asks:

What better creation myth? An unimaginable sweep of time, numberless generations spawning by infinitesimal steps complex living beauty out of inert matter, driven on by the blind furies of random mutation, natural selection and environmental change, with the tragedy of forms continually dying, and lately the wonder of minds emerging and with them morality, love, art, cities—and the unprecedented bonus of this story happening to be demonstrably true.<sup>291</sup>

The idea that we are governed by a substantial blind force is widely accepted by many evolutionary theorists. In his book *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View*, Richard Dawkins promotes the idea that:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 56.

justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifferences. . .DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.<sup>292</sup>

The idea that we are dancing to the music of DNA is thought provoking and raises a pressing political question: What form of government, policy or rule is best employed to mitigate our “blind, pitiless indifferences”? The evolution of cultural and societal norms through the history of mankind certainly indicates a desire or need to overcome our primordial biology and form a stable society. In fact, the attempt to answer political questions with evidence from the life sciences responds to this evolutionary framing and has been a growing field of research in the past few decades. *Saturday* addresses both ends of the spectrum by considering political liberalism and biological materialism.

The novel explores the biological and political challenges in reaching Rawls’s “fair terms of cooperation” in today’s democracy.<sup>293</sup> In doing so, it

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<sup>292</sup> Dawkins, *River out of Eden*, 113.

<sup>293</sup> Rawls, “Justice as Fairness,” July 1, 1985, 232.



does not just mark the end of the relative pacification of most of contemporary Europe, but it also uncovers the fragile construct of civility and points to the cracks through which violence repeatedly breaks through. *Saturday* contests the idea that there is one ruling principle by which we can understand, or orchestrate, our entire society. Rawls's theory of political liberalism or Dawkins "selfish gene"<sup>294</sup> cannot always account for our social collaborations (or the lack thereof). If we are to successfully face the challenges of the 21st century, McEwan suggests we step beyond the dichotomy of the humanist and scientific traditions.

### **The Failure of Public Reason**

As I mentioned in chapter Three, the relative prosperity and stability achieved in the Western world during the second half of the 20th century, brought forth attempts to restore faith in reason and redefine the foundation of liberalism. John Rawls thought that the one way to minimize the risk of "drawing a bad card" that places us under the "blind furies of random mutation"<sup>295</sup> (physically and socially speaking) is to search for an authoritative mode of deliberation, one that will guide us in evaluating the governing principles of our life in a conflicted society.

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<sup>294</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*.

<sup>295</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 56.

Rawls came up with a way to ensure that a general form of government, the effective use of fundamental rights of citizens and matters of social and economic justice are aligned with the principles of "justice as fairness." Rawls called the aggregation of all such matters (voting, representation, distribution of wealth etc.) the "essentials of democratic polity."<sup>296</sup> Building on his theory of justice, Rawls argues that in order to maintain a just and stable democratic society over time, citizens must "have an enduring desire to honour fair terms of cooperation and to be fully cooperating members of society."<sup>297</sup>

Henry Perowne is a Rawlsian citizen, a normative member of a democratic society. He does not believe in "fate or providence, or the future being made by someone in the sky." Rather, he finds his "freedom from the scheming of a gloomy god" in "the pickiness of pure chance and physical laws."<sup>298</sup> He strongly believes that "reason, being a powerful tool, [is] irresistible, [and] the only way" to remedy the world's afflictions.<sup>299</sup> However,

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<sup>296</sup> John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (July 1, 1997): 766.

<sup>297</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 55.

<sup>298</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 128.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

when he finds himself in a car accident on his way to his weekly squash game, he learns that not all members of society share his beliefs about reason. It is a minor accident and so Perowne offers to exchange insurance details or call the police to set matters straight. Anyone that has ever been involved in a car accident knows that this is the right and reasonable thing to do. Perowne simply follows what Rawls refers to as *public reason*: A citizenry mode of negotiation and deliberation aimed at bringing disputes to a just and fair conclusion. The application of public reason (i.e., reference to public values and standards like equality and rules of evidence) gives legitimacy to public decision making under the conditions of a pluralist society.<sup>300</sup>

Guided by the elementary principles of “justice as fairness,” public reason is a mode of deliberation that carries “a duty of civility.” This duty, Rawls tells us, will morally constrain partisan values or controversial reasoning that cannot be widely accepted by others. Perowne’s appeal to public reason is, however, entirely rejected. Baxter, the owner of the other car, presents Perowne with a counter-offer to pay him cash for his broken side mirror. When Perowne refuses to be blackmailed, Baxter and his thugs

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<sup>300</sup> Larmore, “Public Reason.”

turn to violence. Rawls does not account for such an outcome in his deliberative model. Violent conflicts are considered a failure of public reason, a breakdown in the rational and reasonable process of communication. Therefore, Rawls excludes them from the range of possibilities worth probing. Perowne does not enjoy the same privilege of taking violence out of the equation. His knowledge of evolutionary theories debunks the idea that violence is irrational. He assesses his situation:

It's not always a pathology; self-interested social organisms find it rational to be violent sometimes . . . .Holding the unruly, the thugs, in check is the famous "common power" to keep all men in awe—a governing body, an arm of the state, freely granted a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. But drug dealers and pimps, among others who live beyond the law, are not inclined to dial nine-nine-nine for Leviathan; they settle their quarrels in their own way.<sup>301</sup>

Behavioural scientist Johan M.G. van der Dennen argues that both high-level violence (such as institutionalized terror, wars or genocides) and low-level violence (i.e., in the criminal domain) are not motivated by

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<sup>301</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 88.

physiological aggression but are really a purposely calculated “rational” act.<sup>302</sup> Cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker agrees with this observation and rejects the idea that our mind has no innate traits, that people are born good and corrupted by society, or have simply made a bad choice. For Pinker, violence “is not a primitive, irrational urge, nor is it a ‘pathology’ except in the metaphorical sense of a condition that everyone would like to eliminate. Instead, it is a near-inevitable outcome of the dynamics of self-interested, rational social organisms.”<sup>303</sup>

But Perowne makes another observation about his encounter. He acknowledges that people settling their quarrels in their own way is a violation of society’s social contract. If Leviathan—Hobbes’s metaphor for society’s absolute, undivided and unlimited authority—is deemed ineffective in conflict resolution, how can Rawls’s vague “duty of civility” govern public reason and communicative practices in times of dispute? Perowne’s incident goes to show that some people simply do not respect the same civic codes that most people do. Not only does Baxter’s “code of the street” threaten Perowne’s personal safety, but it also demonstrates a profound lack of faith

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<sup>302</sup> Dennen, “Problems in the Concepts and Definitions of Aggression, Violence, and Some Related Terms.”

<sup>303</sup> Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, 329.

in state justice. It is almost impossible to maintain any system of cooperation for mutual benefits when people do not share the same interpretation of what is rational or reasonable. That is, while Rawls's amorphous "duty of civility" assumes the containment of violence by establishing rules for its legitimate deployment, Baxter's street code nonetheless remains ubiquitous and concrete.

We can choose to simply dismiss this event as an unexceptional episode in an otherwise reasonable society. But *Saturday* goes further to show that even reasonable citizens under the sway of public reason are likely to bump heads. Perowne's daughter Daisy and his American associate Jay Strauss do not dispute the essentials of democratic polity. They do, however, disagree about the role of the impending war in Iraq in obtaining these essentials for both Iraqi citizens and Western nations. Daisy, the young poet, represents the left-wing voice that strongly opposes the war in Iraq. Her forecast for the war includes a

half-million Iraqi dead through famine and bombing, three million refugees, the death of the UN, the collapse of the world order if America goes it alone, Baghdad entirely destroyed as it's taken street by street from the Republican Guard, Turks invading from the north, Iranians from the east, Israelis from the west,

the whole region in flames. . .the Americans [will] take the oil and build their military bases and run the place like a colony.<sup>304</sup>

Jay Strauss, on the other hand, represents the reactionary right-wing voice seeking to preserve, defend and disseminate the values of open society. For Jay, Iraq is “a rotten state, a natural ally of terrorists, [that is] bound to cause mischief at some point.” Therefore it is better being “liberated and democratised.”<sup>305</sup>

In this way, both the anti- and pro-war positions are shown to have their merits in the novel. Although Daisy and Jay conduct themselves according to a “duty of civility” and speak the language of public reason, Perowne finds a real dilemma in forming a rational and reasoned position about the war. McEwan shows Perowne’s deliberations about this:

Does [the Prime Minister] sincerely believe that going to war will make us safer? Does Saddam possess weapons of terrifying potential? Simply, the Prime Minister might be sincere and wrong . . . .He could be on the verge of a monstrous miscalculation. Or perhaps it will work out—the dictator vanquished without

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<sup>304</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 186.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

hundreds of thousands of deaths, and after a year or two, a democracy at least, secular or Islamic, nestling among the weary tyrannies of the Middle East. . .<sup>306</sup>

Perowne's inability to form a position with regards to the war—experiencing “his own ambivalence as a form of vertigo, of dizzy indecision”<sup>307</sup>—challenges Rawls's conviction that agreement over the essentials of democratic polity will ultimately minimize “the burden of reason.”<sup>308</sup> When Perowne is required to choose one position over another he learns that he cannot form a clear, and certainly not agreed upon, hierarchy of values. From the humanitarian perspective, any single course of action, including taking no action, will have ramifications: potential causality or guilt. Perowne's position on the topic remains equivocal throughout the novel.

This equivocation kindles Richard Rorty's criticism of the novel. Rorty makes the observation that *Saturday* is ultimately about the lack of politics. For him the novel depicts “our inability. . .to sketch a credible agenda for

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Rawls, “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” 235.



large-scale change”<sup>309</sup> and that it “makes vivid both our uneasiness about the future and our queasy, debilitating agnosticism about matters of justice and redistributed wealth.”<sup>310</sup> But *Saturday* is *not* about the lack of politics, so much as it is about the limitation of a leading theoretical orientation in liberal thought: rational choice. Anchored by actual preferences and experiences, *Saturday* points to the weaknesses of reason, under which we are meant to negotiate the large spectrum of competing human desires and experiences when forming a reasonable political position or decision. It is evident that *Saturday* stands in complete opposite to Rawls’s theory that is purely based on deductive reasoning and normative assumptions about human and reason. What *Saturday* demonstrates then is that rational choice is not as easily accessible as Rawls would like us to believe; politics often consists of miscommunication, indecision and violence, which cannot be simply dismiss as pathology.

There is an interesting parallel between Perowne’s urban drama and the invasion of Iraq. *Saturday* reflects the trauma of violence characterizing the beginning of the 21st century, both locally and internationally. It positions both local and international aspects in an ironic geographical

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<sup>309</sup> Rorty, “A Queasy Agnosticism,” 92.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

proximity—Perowne can clearly hear “the tramping and tribal drums of the peace mongers” minutes before being attacked by Baxter’s thugs.<sup>311</sup> This irony reveals, in Rawls’s citizenry mode of deliberation, a fundamental tension that negates the logic of commonly accepted and communicated public reason. While prescribing a liberal logic to democratic politics, Rawls overlooked the possibility that liberalism and democracy may not be strongly compatible or perfectly reconciled. Rawls’s vision of civic bargaining seems to yield agreement only among those persons who accept his principles of political liberalism.<sup>312</sup> Not only does *Saturday* confront us with the reality of citizens who do not share an “enduring desire” to follow the principles of political liberalism, it also demonstrates the difficulty of privately choosing one value over the other.

### **Biological Materialism: Grandeur View of Life**

In several of his books, McEwan takes a deep and sincere interest in the natural sciences. *The Children in Time* is heavily based on ideas from quantum physics, and explores time and alternate realities; *Solar* tells the story of a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who is pursuing a solar energy-

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<sup>311</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 87.

<sup>312</sup> Bruce W. Brower, “The Limits of Public Reason,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 91, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 5–26; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

based solution for climate change; and *Enduring Love* is based on a psychiatric case study of “De Clerammault’s Syndrome”—obsessive love. In this respect *Saturday* is no different. Neurologist Henry Perowne admires Charles Darwin, and sees in his theory of evolution a view of life with “grandeur.”<sup>313</sup> Darwin’s investigation explained hereditary mechanisms, competition, sexual selection, probability and chance of many species. It did not, however, referred to the human species. He concluded his famous book, *On the Origin of Species*, with the following words:

In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation. Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.<sup>314</sup>

Perowne heeds Darwin’s invitation and constantly refers to the science of neurobiology and evolutionary psychology to try and make sense of the challenges liberal citizens facing in the 21st century. When Perowne suggests that “the brilliant machinery of being is undone by the tiniest of

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<sup>313</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 55–56.

<sup>314</sup> Darwin and Endersby, *On the Origin of Species*, 432.

faulty cogs, the insidious whisper of ruin, a single bad idea lodged in every cell, on every chromosome four," he invokes a modern, scientific notion of the law of nature, from which it is almost impossible to be liberated.<sup>315</sup>

Perowne's view of human nature is guided by the universal aspects of neurobiology and cognitive science, which conservatively imply that variations between individuals are largely the result of genetic constitutions. As such, he finds pleasure and satisfaction in the view that "endless and beautiful forms of life. . .including exalted beings like ourselves, arose from physical laws, from war of nature, famine and death."<sup>316</sup> Innate to Perowne's deterministic outlook on life are elementary Darwinian principles. First, Perowne posits chance as the cause for most things that happen. For him our existence is determined by a random distribution of possibilities.<sup>317</sup> When he thinks how different his two children—Theo, a blues musician, and Daisy, a poet—are from himself, he notes that:

It's a commonplace of parenting and modern genetics that parents have little or no influence on the characters of their

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<sup>315</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 94.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19.

children. You never know who you are going to get. . .prospects, accent, table manners—these might lie within your power to shape. But what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you is which sperm finds which egg, how the cards in two packs are chosen, then how they are shuffled, halved and spliced at the moment of recombination. Cheerful or neurotic, kind or greedy, curious or dull, expansive or shy and anywhere in between.<sup>318</sup>

Perowne suggests that biology may not just shape our physical attributes, but also the genes governing our behavioural traits. The way he sees it, the connection between human biology and social behaviour is evident, and should be explored further. Perowne happily accepts the random distribution of possibilities and pure chance as a condition of life:

The random ordering of the world, the unimaginable odds against any particular condition, still please him. Even as a child . . . he never believed in fate or providence, or the future being made by someone in the sky. Instead, at every instant, a trillion

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 25.

possible futures; the pickiness of pure chance and physical laws seemed like freedom from the scheming of a gloomy god.<sup>319</sup>

His scientific knowledge and way of thinking help him understand the working of the human brain and body down to the molecular level. Despite the fact that Perowne is deeply touched by the frenzied and intrusive world around him, his default way of thinking is essentially unimaginative. His world view is tightly wound around core principles of philosophical materialism designed to explain the universe with observable and measurable truth. When his daughter, Daisy, tries to instill some appreciation for literature in him he finds the task tedious and frustrating. Unable to understand the emotional motivations of the characters in Daisy's books he dismisses the realm of literature as a "childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real."<sup>320</sup>, and misses the opportunity to consider another way of engaging in the complexities of life. Instead, Perowne endorses the centrality of "the survival of the fittest" and competition as intrinsic to human nature. The idea of natural selection suggests that our ability to adapt to and survive dramatic changes in environmental conditions is essential to the preservation of life.

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 66.

## **Perowne: Autonomous and Self-contained**

Given the randomness and frenzy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Perowne is determined to make the most out of “the brief privilege of consciousness”;<sup>321</sup> and so he explains his reactions to the threats (the burning airplane, the violent altercation with Baxter) using the only terms he know: as originating in a survival advantage conferred from dreaming up bad outcomes and scheming to avoid them.<sup>322</sup> Perowne builds a protective bubble for himself and his family; his home is protected with “three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts. . .two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, [a] box of electronics that works the Entryphone system, [a] red panic button, [an] alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits. Such defences, such mundane embattlement: beware of the city's poor, the drug-addicted, the downright bad.”<sup>323</sup> Inside of his protective bubble he feels safe, and from the safety and distance of his bedroom he observes the outside world. When he meets the eyes of a man cleaning the sidewalk, he notes that this unexpected encounter forces him to feel “bound to the other man, as though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>322</sup> Root, “A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism.”

<sup>323</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 36.

each other's life." This experience has the potential to penetrate his protective bubble and therefore he immediately "looks away."<sup>324</sup>

*Saturday* paints Perowne as emotionally disabled, distant and isolated. His inability to connect with others should not come as a surprise. Everything about him hints at self-preoccupation. Even his name invokes a reference to possession and identity: Per-own-e. The novel revolves around his own happiness and possessions: he is happily married and takes pleasure in his kids' successes, he enjoys rewarding work and the status of a world expert, he lives in an expensive neighborhood and enjoys driving around in his fancy car. His achievements came to him with hard work. In fact, in accordance with natural selection theory, every moment of Henry's awareness involves competition for control, for authority, for possession. Perowne's friendly squash game with his colleague quickly becomes a battle scene:

There's nothing at stake—they're not on the club's squash ladder. There's only the 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

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.



enjoyable. It might become so in retrospect—and only to the winner.<sup>325</sup>

Perowne cannot resist the assumption that the fallibility of rationality—violent and self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse, suicide bombers, street violence and even the proliferation of nuclear weapons—is rooted in a biological malfunction. In other words, for him, in a law-ordered society with car insurance, municipal by-laws and a judicial system, violence outlives its biological logic. Therefore, it must be an outcome of neurological anomaly. That is exactly what happens when he confronts Baxter and his thugs on the street. Seconds before he gets into a fight with Baxter he notes to himself:

poor self-control, emotional lability, explosive temper, suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons. There is much in human affairs that can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule. Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter? And who will ever find a morality,

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 113.

an ethics down among the enzymes and amino acids when the general taste is for looking in the other direction?<sup>326</sup>

Perowne sees everything as tied to a genetic base: physical diseases, cognition and personality traits are all influenced by genetic differences. The other direction he refers to is the dominance of rational theory or behaviouralism. These two theoretical orientations provide explanations for moral behaviour based on psychological and sociological factors, political motives and economic circumstances, but not biology.

Despite Perowne's strong scientific convictions, *Saturday* asks us to take biology with a grain of salt. Specifically, it asks us to be cautious when viewing complex and culturally influenced social life strictly through the lenses of biology and genetics. Perowne's deterministic view of human nature is what ultimately gets him into trouble with Baxter. While he is pointing out the weaknesses of others, Perowne is oblivious to his own. *Saturday* gives this phenomenon a name—anosognosia.<sup>327</sup> Anosognosia is a deficit of self-awareness associated with brain injuries and mental illnesses,

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 91–92.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 74.

in which patients are unaware of their own condition.<sup>328</sup> When he assumes the role of a caring doctor during his first encounter with Baxter, he does so for the wrong reasons, and he is unable to see how his actions may affect Baxter's emotional motivation. He quickly and correctly diagnoses Baxter as suffering from Huntington's disease: a neurodegenerative disease leading to continual involuntary movements, progressive dementia and ultimately death. While his diagnosis buys him a way out of violent altercation, it humiliates Baxter in front of his accomplices, who abandon him on the sidewalk. Unable to see beyond his scientific prism Perowne's moral empathy is impaired.

### **Imagination and Moral Empathy**

The novel takes its most dramatic turn when the genetically and socially unfortunate Baxter breaks into Perowne's house and takes him and his family hostage. Perowne "the professional reductionist" still sees in Baxter's impaired biology the catalyst for his behaviour.<sup>329</sup> This is a crucial moment in the novel, when culture and biology confront each other at the most fundamental level. In his act of terror Baxter asks

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<sup>328</sup> Fiadhnaid O'keeffe et al., "Awareness of Deficits in Traumatic Brain Injury: A Multidimensional Approach to Assessing Metacognitive Knowledge and Online-Awareness," *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 13, no. 01 (2007): 38–49.

<sup>329</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 272.

Daisy to recite one of her poems while she is naked. Under the implicit threat of rape Daisy recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" which profoundly changes Baxter's attitude "from lord of terror to amazed admirer."<sup>330</sup> The moment between Daisy and Baxter indicates that the capacity to imagine is biological, but the content of our imaginations is cultural. In other words, *Saturday* both underlines and undermines the power of biology. The sudden change of mood provides Perowne and his son with the opportunity to take Baxter down.

This scene was criticized by Erik Martiny as improbable and even unbelievable.<sup>331</sup> Martiny's criticism begs the question: Does *Saturday* suggest we face violence and terror armed solely with poetic metaphors and imagery? I do not think so. McEwan has fully explored the danger of applying uncritical imagination to real life situations in other novels like *Atonement* and *Enduring Love*. Therefore, this is no aesthetic utopia. If Perowne's *Saturday* was hijacked by the worst aspect of human nature, this moment shows that McEwan subscribes to the

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>331</sup> Martiny, "A Darker Longing': Shades of Nihilism in Contemporary Terrorist Fiction."

traditions of Hume and Adam Smith, that reconcile the inherently social, inter-relational self with "selfishness."<sup>332</sup>

The power of imagination is brought up in the novel to balance Perowne's reductionist approach and to position the genetic failures of human cognition against its greatest achievements. If the random distribution of genes can elicit minds, so can poetry or other forms of art.<sup>333</sup> The ability to imagine other lives, or the life of the "Other," is the gateway to moral sympathy and co-operation. Baxter is not the only one transformed by the experience. Perowne's transformation happens when he and Theo fling Baxter down the stairs

He falls backwards, with arms outstretched, still holding the knife in his right hand. There's a moment, which seems to unfold and luxuriously expand, when all goes silent and still, when Baxter is entirely airborne, suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay. And Henry thinks he sees in the wide brown eyes a sorrowful

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<sup>332</sup> Childs, "Contemporary McEwan and Anosognosia."

<sup>333</sup> The transformative potential of art on its consumers has been well documented in many psychological studies. For an excellent review on the topic see: Djikic et al., "On Being Moved by Art."

accusation of betrayal. He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much—the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family—the handsome healthy son with the strong guitarist’s hands come to rescue him, the beautiful poet for a daughter, unattainable even in her nakedness, the famous father-in-law, the gifted, loving wife; and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less.<sup>334</sup>

Perowne’s moment of sympathetic identification guides him to operate on Baxter and later on, convince his family to drop all charges against him. We can say that by stepping out of his anosognosia, Perowne is finally able, for the first time during the novel, to see beyond his beliefs and achieve a higher moral agency.

To conclude, *Saturday* uses rational theory and evolutionary psychology to explore “human nature” in the 21st century. Alongside war and terrorism, as well as poetry and science, it suggests that “we are the beneficiaries and victims of our nature (social primates, evolved through time like wind-sculpted rock), merry and venal, cooperative

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<sup>334</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 227–228.

and selfish.”<sup>335</sup> The novel goes further, saying that imagination can install us with moral sympathy; which in its turn can refine our innate tendency towards dissonance and terrible misunderstanding. Without moral sympathy as the basis for our social behaviour no citizenry mode of deliberation can exist; therefore, any vision of public reason or ethical discourse is simply an abstract concept.

Saturday, perhaps more than any of McEwan’s novels, announces the coming of a third culture where art and science complement each other. While science tries to define human nature in terms of measurable and genetic truth, imaginative art exemplifies the best of human creativity. Both art and science, when practiced with a critical eye, help us cultivate our minds and find sweetness and light in life. Ian McEwan’s Saturday dares to cross the divide between science and art, theory and practice, and probes the contingencies of the process. Extremism and terror on the international level, domestic violence on the local and urban level, and Huntington’s disease or any other neurosurgical trauma on the biological level are all considered here as metaphors for the condition of Anosognosia: the loss of recognition of the self and the other. How we are to restore this loss of

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<sup>335</sup> McEwan, “Save the Boot Room, Save the Earth.”

recognition is a question of communication, as much as it is a question of politics.



## **Chapter Eight: Ian McEwan and the 21st Century**

McEwan's engagement with the fact of pluralism strongly aligns with his approach to communication. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a broader discussion on how the main three themes of history, communication and science and art relate to McEwan's overall contribution to political and communicative thought. More specifically, I would like to show how these themes relate to the argument I outlined in chapter Four. Namely, that the tension between perfectionist and pluralist liberal mindsets mirrors how we approach history, communication, and science. Pulling forward the argument made in chapter Three, this tension also indicates a need for an ethical approach to communication. While my discussion is mostly based on *Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*, I occasionally make references to McEwan's other novels in order to provide a broader context to my analysis.<sup>336</sup>

### **Modes of Experience**

Similarly to Dewey and Berlin, McEwan holds that conflicts arise because of historical and political biases, and contingencies of human actions. Such historical and political contingencies and biases are portrayed in McEwan's entire literary work, and presented as inseparable parts of any

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<sup>336</sup> The novels I mention are: *The Innocent*, *The Child in Time*, *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*.

social order. In the light of the novels' events, both his characters and readers may experience the dynamic function of reflective inquiry.

McEwan's writing can be read as three broad conversations between politically conscious principles related to history, communication, science and art. Through these conversations McEwan confronts his readers with the "fact of pluralism." These conversations call attention to what Michael Oakeshott calls "modes of experience."<sup>337</sup> Oakeshott does not limit his understanding of pluralism solely to cultural diversity, such as the differences between racial ethnic or linguistic groups. Rather, he addresses pluralism by looking into the modes through which we act on, and contemplate the world in practical activity, science, and poetry.

McEwan does the same. He shows his readers that the perfectionist quest for universal principles that will guide our existence is ultimately illusory. His novels—structured by the central dualities of western modern thought: science-art, mind-body, intellect-sense, nature-artifice—show that no matter how well we think we conduct our lives together, there will be a continuous gap between the self and the other.

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<sup>337</sup> Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," 490–491.

By grounding these broad themes in modern daily experiences, McEwan is able to update the existing liberal framework by offering a liberal-pluralist approach that is committed to the ideal of individualism and personal autonomy on one hand; and greater issues that transcend the self on the other. As such, his novels encourage readers to think about the role “social sentiments” like compassion, empathy, love, and justice may play in shaping their lives in the 21st century. They do so by allowing readers to explore their relationships with, and their understanding of history, communication, and science.

McEwan’s historical approach uncovers the role that history plays in shaping our comprehensive world-view of human wellbeing. While pluralism takes historical and cultural contexts into account when addressing individuals, perfectionism adheres to a universal and a-historical context in its model of the rational individual. In engaging communication, McEwan revives the old debate between Lippmann and Dewey (as presented in Chapter Two). From a communication studies perspective, the Lippmann-Dewey debate is mostly about the role mass media plays in democratic society. But this debate pertains to a deeper, more fundamental, question that was later posed by Peters: Is communication possible? The novella *Amsterdam* takes one step further and asks: If communication is possible, what communicative practice is best suited to our democratic aspirations?

*Amsterdam* does not only probe the role of the printed press in a democratic society but also explores Peters' notion of communication as love and justice.

The third conversation in my analysis is dedicated to the intersection of science and art: specifically, the life sciences and the humanities. The novel *Saturday* explores one of the biggest features of liberal thought—human nature. *Saturday* connects Darwinism and social behavior, to deepen our understanding of the fact of pluralism and politics in the 21st century.

## **History**

History is a major player in McEwan's work. By presenting a dialogue between history and politics, McEwan allows liberal readers to re-examine their heritage at the time of the new millennium. In one of his earlier novels, *The Innocent*, the lead character Maria notes that "we all have to make our own arrangements with the past."<sup>338</sup> This kind of deep concern with how to integrate past events into our current identity indicates how closely the public and private interweave in McEwan's fiction.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> McEwan, *The Innocent*, 262.

<sup>339</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*.

McEwan's engagement with history is not accidental. In fact, it is a crucial building block in his political thought. After all, history has always been a central subject of liberal inquiry. The search for an improved social order or moral code is often done through explorations of past ideas, practices, and customs. An understanding of history is therefore useful to better understand the needs of the hour. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, for example, was a Protestant parliamentary opposition to King James II's Catholicism in the 17th century. Not only was Locke's liberal thought deeply rooted in the historical context of the Glorious Revolution, but it also considered the importance of time in the creation of a long-lasting constitution.<sup>340</sup>

Karl Marx's materialistic interpretation of history laid the foundation for one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most powerful ideologies (an ideology McEwan addresses in *Black Dogs*). For Marx, antagonistic history would end when communism replaced capitalism. Francis Fukuyama took a similar approach to that of Marx, focusing on the evolutionary progress of history to predict a universal and homogenous state. Conversely, Fukuyama replaced communism with Western liberal democracy. He argued that "what we may

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<sup>340</sup> Gerson, *Liberalism: Texts, Contexts, Critiques*.

be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."<sup>341</sup>

McEwan's deep engagement with historically contextualized narrative is twofold: On the one hand, it allows us to read McEwan's fictional narratives as events contextualized and anchored in reality. On the other hand, it focuses on the fictitious personal narratives of characters to say something about the political narrative of society itself. As David Malcolm puts it, history is used in McEwan's novels as public event and personal account.<sup>342</sup>

These critical moments allow McEwan to re-examine liberal identity in a time of social confusion.<sup>343</sup> *Black Dogs*, for example, revolves around post-World War II Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall; it speaks to the ways in which our memories of the past shape our political and moral view in the present. Global terrorism and the war in Iraq serve as a backdrop to the

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<sup>341</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History?*.

<sup>342</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*.

<sup>343</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan*; Head, *Ian McEwan*; Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*; McEwan, *Conversations with Ian McEwan*; Nicklas, *Ian McEwan: Art and Politics*.

novel *Saturday*, which takes a look into human nature and the scientific attempt to explain violence, trauma, and moral behavior. These two novels are excellent examples of critical moments in modern times: coping with the atrocities of World War II and the fall of Communism, and facing Islamic fundamentalism and global terror attacks. But it is not just the exploration of past and global events that challenge our liberal identity. *Amsterdam* deals with a, rather insignificant, present-time domestic political scandal; the kind of which we encounter almost daily on the news, and has very little to do with any political goods. All three novels question our ability (or the lack thereof) to fully grasp historical and current events that may shape our political and moral perceptions, and the ramifications that their interpretation may entail.

McEwan's exploration of history is interesting as it puts the question of interpretation at its core. In his book *What is History?* E. H. Carr is skeptical about what he refers to as a "commonsense view of history," in which

the empirical theory of knowledge presupposes a complete separation between subject and object. Facts, like sense impressions, impinge on the observer from outside and are independent of his consciousness. The process of reception is passive: having received the data, he then acts on them

. . . .This is what may be called the commonsense view of history. History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. . . . First get your facts straight, then plunge at your peril into the shifting sands of interpretation—that is the ultimate wisdom of the [dominant] empirical, commonsense school of history.<sup>344</sup>

Carr sees no special need to praise the value of facts in the study of history. For him, historical accuracy is a duty and not a virtue. What makes the “facts” of the past “historical” facts, though, is “a question of interpretation. This element of interpretation enters into every fact of history.”<sup>345</sup> By way of explanation, a factual past event will become historical fact only after it has been taken by a historian and inserted into his or her interpretation. *Black Dogs* adopts Carr’s suggestion by making known the key incident around which the novel revolves. The family dispute is not about the facts but their interpretation.

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<sup>344</sup> Carr, *What Is History?*, 9–10.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.



McEwan's approach to history, both as public event and personal account is somewhat phenomenological, as Malcolm observed.<sup>346</sup> It focuses more on the characters' experience of events across time, and not the actual time frame of the events. According to this approach, if our personal knowledge as well as our social wisdom is based on experience, it cannot be reduced and enunciated as an axiomatic principle.<sup>347</sup> This is a core principle in McEwan's political thought, and it is presented through an examination of human experiences, accumulated and interpreted throughout time.

In the 21st century the immediacy and urgency of events makes time a crucial component when examining coping mechanisms during life-changing events. One of the consequences of living in desynchronized high-speed society is that "life is no longer planned along a line that stretches from the past into the future."<sup>348</sup> Exploring the present and the memory of the past as an expression of experience across time allows McEwan to assess

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<sup>346</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*.

<sup>347</sup> This idea was presented in Edmund Burke's political writing. According to Burke, our political knowledge, rules of behavior and laws reflect a long process of adjustment to circumstances. This process of adjustment should take precedence over the desire to act according to principles rooted outside of our historical experience. For more of Burke's argument please see: Gandy and Stanlis, *Edmund Burke*; Lakoff, "Tocqueville, Burke, and the Origins of Liberal Conservatism."

<sup>348</sup> Hartmut Rosa, "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society," *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 19.

potential coping mechanisms people use against traumatic historical events, such as the Holocaust or the 9/11 terror attacks, at both the private and political level. Traumatic historical events like these are disruptive and can shake our political stability. The concept of time, therefore, is another central element in McEwan's treatment of history and his political thought.

McEwan's earlier novel *The Child in Time* contests the perception of time —historical time—as linear and contingent. Instead, the novel describes a time in which history moves backwards.<sup>349</sup> *The Child in Time* focuses on the struggle of Stephen, a children's author, to cope with the loss of his daughter who was abducted while they were shopping together in a supermarket. It depicts England as a post-Thatcher dystopia: a country that turned its back on social welfare for 19th century version of capitalist laissez-faire. It is not surprising, then, that the novel *The Child in Time* marks the beginning of McEwan's political writing.<sup>350</sup> When Stephen talks with the wife of his friend, a physicist, he argues that: "the common sense, everyday version of [time] as linear, regular, absolute, marching from left to right, from the past through the present to the future, is either nonsense or

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<sup>349</sup> Wright, "New Physics, Old Metaphysics."

<sup>350</sup> Head, *Ian McEwan*; Groes, *Ian McEwan*; Nicklas, *Ian McEwan: Art and Politics*.

a tiny fraction of the truth.” To that she replies, “Neither Albert Einstein nor T. S. Eliot can offer a satisfying explanation to our experience of time.”<sup>351</sup>

Indeed, the ways in which we experience time often varies, and a satisfying explanation of this experience is hard to come by. But when McEwan writes about events and experiences that take place in time and across time, he makes an important attempt to comment on the notion of history as shaping political identities in both limited and accelerated ways. In doing so, he challenges the liberal perfectionist view that situates theoretical principles outside of time, avoiding their historical roots and implications.

Novels are perfect tools for such exploration because they are a “slow” medium. Their reading demands great time and attention and is done in a linear and chronological manner. This, however, does not interfere with the ability of the novel to suspend, expedite or alter our sense of time by applying various literary means. The entire novel of *Saturday* slowly spans one day in the life of its protagonist. However, the pace and intensity of events during this day—political demonstration, car accidents, sport match, a break-in and assault (all of which may be considered a daily urban routine in today’s society)—points to a rather “fast” novel. This inherent quality of

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<sup>351</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 135–136.

the novel and literary technique allow readers to explore the experience and meaning of time in politically charged contexts. As such, McEwan's readers, as well as protagonists, may find themselves haunted by the ghosts of history on one hand; and confronted with the expediency of decision making in desynchronized high-speed society, on the other.

### **Communication**

McEwan approaches communication as a political and ethical problem. As such, he can be affiliated with the long lineage of scholars who thought of communication in political terms. In chapter Three, I discussed some of the leading authors in this lineage. In the previous three chapters I offered an analysis that recognizes otherness, or the lack of thereof, within self and other. Consistently, and not surprisingly, this is an overarching theme in McEwan's fiction.<sup>352</sup> Exploring ways to accommodate of the self and the other is a core task in McEwan's pluralist approach to communication theory.

The protagonist's memoir in *Black Dogs* introduces him to the violent potential within himself and others. The novel also points to the infinite remoteness of the two other key characters, Bernard's and June's.

*Amsterdam* associated the "eclipse of the public" with the social structural

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<sup>352</sup> Schemberg, *Achieving "At-One-Ment."*

realities of advanced capitalism (as they were presented by Habermas), as well as with the elitist representative state governed by officials (as was presented by Dewey). *Saturday* resolves the grim prophecies of *Black Dogs* and *Amsterdam* by demonstrating a possible transition from a paranoid post-9/11 world that fears the other, to a more reconciled, communicative approach that takes responsibility for the other.

“The other” or “otherness” is an interpretive, phenomenological constitution and description of the self. It considers our basic instinct to approach intersubjective relations in a way that constitutes other people within a shared social universe: the other can be “like me” or it can help divide “we” and “they.” Given that any encounter with another person affects the self, it is not surprising that the other became a central concept in philosophy and social sciences.<sup>353</sup>

Emmanuel Lévinas positions the other and otherness at the center of his philosophy. For Lévinas, philosophy begins with the prime condition of human communication: a face-to-face encounter with another person.<sup>354</sup> Therefore, all intersubjective experiences are the beginning of ethics since,

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<sup>353</sup> Lingis, “The Fundamental Ethical Experience.”

<sup>354</sup> Perperzak, “Sincerely Yours. Towards a Phenomenology of Me.”

during an encounter with the other, the “I” discovers its own particularity and becomes responsible for what is happening. According to Lévinas, ethical behavior begins by assuming responsibility for the other on the individual level, which in its turn will allow for the constitution of humanity even in the absence of the Law.<sup>355</sup>

McEwan’s writing leans towards Lévinas’s perspective. This lineage sees in communication a potential for doing good and for the preservation of human distinctness. It does not, however, overlook the pragmatic context of communication (the Dewey-Habermas lineage). The Dewey-Habermas perspective holds that communication is a mode of action that can foster a morally autonomous self and create a democratic community.<sup>356</sup> The novella *Amsterdam*, for example, comments on both perspectives. It does so by exploring the communicative practices of a society driven by competitive elitism (the Dewey-Habermas perspective); and by pointing to the lack of moral responsibility towards the other (the Lévinas perspective).

As great novels often do, McEwan’s texts make concrete the effects of communicative mechanisms on social cohesion. His novels *Atonement* and

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<sup>355</sup> Lévinas, *The Levinas Reader*, Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*.

<sup>356</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

*The Innocent*, for example, look into the consequences of deception and lies; *On Chesil Beach* and *Black Dogs* explore the conditions of infinite remoteness; and *Amsterdam* examines whether the practice of expert elites can truly lead us toward a great community. Interestingly, each one of these novels also explores the advantages and limitations of art in communicating truthfully and morally.

By choosing a self-referential style of writing, one in which the artistic text reflects on its own communicative abilities, McEwan is able to explore both the moral motivation behind our communicative actions, as well as the effects of these actions. I argue that McEwan's strategies for exploring different kinds of interpersonal relations strongly align with the notion that "[a]t best, communication is a name for all the ways humans manage to cope with the impossibility of experiencing another person's experience."<sup>357</sup> Put differently, the relationships presented in McEwan's novels allow his characters and readers to explore their relationship with "the other" both within and outside of themselves.

To conclude, McEwan's approach to communication seems to be twofold. First, it provides an ontological commitment to think of

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<sup>357</sup> Peters, "Sharing of Thoughts or Recognizing Otherness?," 374.

communication as an opportunity to constitute relationships with the other, rather than focusing on the motivation to share information with one another (the Lévinas perspective). Second, by way of fictive illustration it provides a view of potential distortions or failures that may occur in an advanced capitalist society characterized by corporate structures. This is similarly a theme in his novella *Amsterdam*. Here McEwan expresses his critical skepticism of liberal concepts such as objectivity and freedom. By doing so, he echoes some of the prominent ideas discussed in chapter Four. This twofold approach to communication is quite unique. It describes the crucial moments and consequences of communication failures, and it does so without placing communication in a specific field, institution, or activity.

In pulling this idea forward, McEwan does not make the pedestrian mistake of strictly attributing communication to information exchange via media technologies. He does not equate the essential failure to communicate with the problem of having too little or too much information. Instead, he presents a notion of communication that acknowledges the innate difficulty, perhaps even impossibility, of sharing mentalities. In this, he joins Peters in positioning the other at the core of the communicative process.<sup>358</sup> McEwan

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<sup>358</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 21.



also joins pluralist thinkers in search for a reasonable ranking for well-being while acknowledging value pluralism. Because of this, McEwan's novels offer the reader a moral-political approach to communication—one that seeks to constitute a world in which human beings take communicative actions that recognize a community contained by mutuality and reciprocity.

### **Human Nature: Science and Arts**

McEwan's tendency to upset the assumed equilibrium and separation of scientific knowledge and social experience, which is a prominent trajectory in his fiction, received "a wide range of responses, from the ecstatic to the dismissive."<sup>359</sup> In his novels, McEwan refers to a gulf of mutual incomprehension that exists between "literary intellectuals" and "natural scientists."<sup>360</sup> Although heavily invested in scientific-cantered prose, McEwan's treatment of the two cultures in his novels seems intended to remain neutral as he avoids pronouncing the complete authority of one culture over the other. Rather, his work presents a dual orientation that balances speculations and empirical data, a helpful perspective when trying to learn how people may approach certain conflicts in their lives.

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<sup>359</sup> Clark and Gordon, *Ian McEwan's Enduring Love*, 58–59.

<sup>360</sup> Carbonell, "A Consilient Science and Humanities in McEwan's *Enduring Love*."

McEwan's novels often travel between two distinct, and arguably opposite, pillars: the life sciences (mainly, biology and physics), and the arts and humanities (philosophy and poetry). This polarization is often expressed in his novels as positivism versus social constructivism, reductive rationalism versus holism. And so, McEwan's readers will recurrently come across various depictions and dialogues of a beleaguered rationality set in opposition to the poetic sensibilities of the humanities. As such, his work has a strong pluralist disposition since it touches on the premises of the pluralist approach: the lack of moral hierarchy between contesting human goods.

This approach instantiates C.P Snow's famous Rede lecture from May 1959.<sup>361</sup> In his lecture, Snow expressed his concerns about a deep divide between the two cultures we broadly delineate as the arts and sciences. Not only does McEwan's fiction not shy away from the Snow's "two cultures" debate,<sup>362</sup> but it also embodies the potential for mediating these two cultures

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<sup>361</sup> Snow, "The Rede Lecture, 1959."

<sup>362</sup> Jonathan Greenberg, "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry? Ian McEwan's Enduring Love," 2007, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0403/is\\_2\\_53/ai\\_n24946957/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0403/is_2_53/ai_n24946957/); Curtis Carbonell, "A Consilient Science and Humanities in McEwan's Enduring Love," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2010).

(as Snow himself imagines in his 1963 book, where literary intellectuals converse directly with scientists).<sup>363</sup>

McEwan's work offers hope for the arts and the sciences to collaborate in the quest to understand human nature. Perhaps this is the reason that the sciences and the arts are often represented in McEwan's novels by members of the same family (i.e., married couples, siblings, a father and daughter) as if to suggest that these two cultures are joined by powerful bonds.

Consistent with the two cultures debate, McEwan's fiction presents characters that act as archetypes of literary intellectuals or scientists. This allows the readers to explore the psychological motivations of these characters, their "nature," and by extension the way in which each culture experience the world. This is also consistent with McEwan's liberal-pluralist approach. How can we learn how are citizens and policy makers make informed decisions, or evaluate information on complex and important matters such as GM crops, literacy, nuclear energy and weaponry, or climate change, if our education or world view is strictly confined to one culture or another? And more importantly, what are the social outcomes of subscribing strictly to one culture or another?

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<sup>363</sup> Snow, *The Two Cultures*.

Whether they are rooted in theology, metaphysics, or the economy the understanding of human nature, and their epistemological commitments, was always central to political thought (as I have discussed in chapter four). Therefore, I consider McEwan's literary treatment of the quarrel between science and art an epistemological thriller, as much as it is political. Scientific progress allows McEwan to enjoy advanced knowledge about the human mind and its mechanisms and further scrutinize "human nature." Enjoying access to a scientific knowledge that was not available to past thinkers like Hobbes, Kant, Locke, and even Rawls, McEwan is able to bring both the scientific and humanistic cultures to his political thought.<sup>364</sup> The need to reconcile the most radical differences among people, with hope for a deeper unity within the species, brings forth exciting explorations about the knobs of human nature, and both the scientific and artistic mechanisms for tuning these knobs.

My analysis of *Saturday* in chapter Seven exemplified how the two cultures can be stronger together. While scientists, such as the protagonist Henry Perowne, celebrate the wonders of the human brain through technology and science, artists, such as Perowne's kids, contemplate and engage the wonders of the human mind through poetry and music. While

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<sup>364</sup> Thrailkill, "Ian McEwan's Neurological Novel."

Perowne's deep understanding of science and technology allow him to correctly diagnose illnesses, his disdain of literature and lack of empathy prevents him from evaluating his patients' social tendencies and vulnerabilities.

Genetics and neurosurgery may play a leading role in *Saturday*, but the novel teaches us less about the brain and more about consciousness, specifically, social consciousness, morality, and empathy. McEwan's engagement with science in his novels often reflects a contemporary and deep attempt to understand our social relationships (e.g., technological approaches to remedy social illnesses such as violence or poverty).<sup>365</sup> Only by combining the merits of these two cultures are we able to cope with challenges of the 21st century.

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<sup>365</sup> Greenberg, "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry?".

## **Chapter Nine: Conclusions**

This work approached the British author Ian McEwan as a modern liberal-pluralist thinker. It focused on three of McEwan's novels—*Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*—and on the ways in which these novels attempt to cope with issues related to history, politics and morals, and communication and science. McEwan's characters experience a challenge to their liberal identity when they are confronted with the tension between a perfectionist world view and a pluralist one. While each novel offers unique characters and plots, all three novels converge into a unified political view about modern life under the fact of pluralism. In this thesis, I have shown that McEwan's artistic oeuvre comments on the liberal experience in the 21st century.

### **The Power of Imaginative Literature**

This study was predicated on the assumption that despite how political fiction often engages with current events, it still maintains a quality of timelessness. Since authors cannot and should not be shielded from the events of their time, their writing is affected by their surroundings even when it is not directly commenting on them. The objective here has been to assess the role of fiction as a medium of communication, and as an agent for social change and political knowledge. Hermeneutics allowed me to research shifts between the "close world" of each novel (micro-analysis) and its

aggregated cohesive meaning as a repository and trajectory of political thought (macro-analysis). This perspective suggests that fiction that lends itself to political reading must be doing so by providing the materials that allow us to read it as such.<sup>366</sup> This is just what McEwan's work does: through critical moments in the life of his characters McEwan explores the shift from the 20th century to the 21st century.

### **Communication and Politics: Two Sides of the Coin**

Chapters Three and Four contextualized the cardinal relations between communication and politics where I wove together the conception of communicative goods and liberal political goods. I have shown that communication, much like liberalism, is a set of means by which we negotiate our existence with others. Both are driven by moral hopes of human betterment, reconciliation of the Self and the Other, and ultimately an index of what constitutes a good society.

It is not surprising that communication scholars such as Dewey, Habermas, Innis and Peters to name a few, were also political thinkers. Relying on the historical, yet still relevant, debate around propaganda studies the field of communication studies revolves around an ever-existing

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<sup>366</sup> Howe, *Politics and the Novel*.

tension between a view of communication as a promoting civic cynicism and communication as a builder of democratic associations.<sup>367</sup> Associating the study of communication with various public (dis)engagements means not just the creation of invisible communities but a larger moral commitment to deliberative politics or as succinctly put by Peters, to the “problem of power, ethics and art.”<sup>368</sup>

### **Research Contribution**

I believe that this study provides an example of the new ways in which we can think about the strong relations between politics and communication. By closely studying the novels of Ian McEwan, not only does this research join in the growing body of literature on the political aspects of his fiction, it also offers a conceptual framework that will allow researchers to revive the political-ethical lineage in communication studies. The first contribution of this study relates to the unified and consistent line of thought in McEwan’s novels, and his intellectual contribution to the field of politics and communication. The second contribution relates to the important pedagogical implications of this work.

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<sup>367</sup> Cmiel, “On Cynicism, Evil and the Discovery of Communication in the 1940s.”

<sup>368</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 268.



### ***McEwan and Communications***

McEwan's contribution to the study of communication is multi-layered.

First, his novels often deal with topics of communication:

- *Black Dogs*—the writing of memoir as a means to understand history.
- *Amsterdam*—the state of the printed press at the end of the 20th century.
- *Saturday*—the coverage of the terror attack on the World Trade Center and its effect on citizens' political perception.

As I have demonstrated, his novels are interested in the different practices of mass media and communication. Second, the basis for McEwan's ethics relies on the power of imagination as a communicative tool. For McEwan, the feasibility of communication and the ability to communicate with one another is rooted in imagining others and their life circumstances. McEwan offers an extended perspective on communication, one that is not bounded by various media or technology. Rather, he offers a philosophical reconceptualization of communication as an ethical matter. How are we to communicate in the face of new challenges? His work emphasizes that this is not a technological question, but an ethical one.

McEwan's novels tie together the 20th century projects of communication and liberalism. As such, they allow readers to broadly

examine their hopes for interpersonal communication and how these hopes affect politics. Essentially, McEwan can be added to the group of great communication thinkers composed of figures like Dewey, Habermas, Innis and Peters. Like them, McEwan's exploration of various communication modalities is secondary to his broader political message, one in which he makes a strong connection between the good life and good communication.

I have framed and addressed this connection by asking: How can one be a good liberal in the 21st century? The answer McEwan gives us is both political and communicative. A good liberal in the 21st century cannot talk about justice, peace or human rights without imagining the other. All means of communication are merely an extension of our need, desire and will to imagine the other. Therefore, to achieve good communication one must seek to reconcile the Self in the Other. Literature may help us to achieve this goal by fostering feelings of empathy and compassion for the other. Together, these feelings generate a solid basis for a plural-liberal perspective.

For McEwan, the failure of communication (as well as reason) is due to human hubris. Here, McEwan's novels pick up where Peters' *Speaking into the Air* left off. The hubris McEwan warns us against is the belief that we can orchestrate human experience by linking it with cultural progress and social harmony: in *Amsterdam*, with a symphony for the millennium, and in

*Saturday*, by implying that by drilling into the human mind we will discover something about the human spirit. The customs and behaviours that originate in such hubris are doomed to fail.

Acknowledging this hubris brings McEwan back to Dewey's ideal of communication. It is a pluralist ideal, backed by practices of conversation and participation. The characters in McEwan's novels are facing a chaotic reality in which anything can happen. Therefore, they often seek a space to reconcile with their past, their families and themselves. In *The Innocent*, Lenard in uses his imagination to envision his wedding night. In *Atonement*, Briony rewrites the events of her personal history to gain control of her life. In *Saturday*, Perowne returns to the Operating Room, where science and technology allow him to control the situation and predict its outcomes. Each novel presents a solution that demonstrates how risky a communication adventure can be. We can never completely remove interference in the process of communication, but we can be more empathetic towards its existence. By accepting Dewey's vision of participating members of the

public that embrace imagination and critical curiosity, “the dark side of communication”<sup>369</sup> can become a bit brighter.

### ***McEwan: Author of Plural liberalism***

Pascal Nicklas noted that McEwan’s “poetics are not based on ideas of the collective but rather rest in the individual.”<sup>370</sup> Probing the experiences of individuals—the foundational rock of liberalism—in various political contexts is McEwan’s greatest contribution to the political novel. Liberal theory fundamentally promises the individual the freedom to pursue an authentic and fulfilling life. McEwan’s novels remind us that challenging social norms, and the existence of other humans may interfere with this quest and the kind of freedoms that allow it.

McEwan’s writing is political in the broadest sense of the term. It is not meant to encapsulate matters of policy, and it does not engage with the typical issues in liberal debates. These are left for policy makers and political scientists. Rather, it presents a strong liberal-pluralist message: a conceptual framework that addresses the larger questions about human nature and the structure of society. McEwan writes about modern

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<sup>369</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 267.

<sup>370</sup> Nicklas, “The Ethical Question: Art and Politics in the Work of Ian McEwan,” 13.

experiences of individuals and puts their moral rationales to the test, providing his readers openings to examine their own morals.

McEwan's main strategy to achieve this is by exploring psychological pathologies between people, such as mistrust, social remoteness, physical violence and assaults. These kinds of pathologies present a threat not only to the "physical integrity of individuals,"<sup>371</sup> but also to their social, mental and moral integrity. McEwan shows that these kinds of threats can be countered by cultivating empathy and love, which implies mutual support, recognition and acceptance of others. In doing this, McEwan's writing becomes primordial in the sense that it engages with an innate sense of ethics that stands at the core of human relations. The following sections review these ethical principles.

***History: Shaping Political Identities:*** McEwan acknowledges history's central role in shaping our social lives and political identities. More importantly, he points to our limited ability to fully understand history. Expressly, our social ethos and political identity is essentially founded on a

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<sup>371</sup> Schwalm, "Figures of Authorship, Empathy, & The Ethics of Narrative (Mis-)Recognition in Ian McEwan's Later Fiction," 175.

partial and limited understanding of past events. The limitation of human agency was long recognized by thinkers like Edmund Burke and Walter Lippmann. In contrast to Burke or Lippmann, McEwan does not resort to conservatism or elitism as strategies to mitigate this limitation. Rather, he encourages us to participate in a conversation about history and its implications.

This means we must not forget history or assume we have reached its end. In *Black Dogs*, the conversation about history that takes place through Jeremy's memoir points to a scary truth: evil exists in all of us and can potentially reemerge. It also reminds us that perfectionist hopes that seek to base polity on an ahistorical unified scale of values can only end with the murder of millions, like in the case of the great ideologies of the 20th century. Such a scale, if it exists, cannot take precedence over other moral scales. The memory of historical atrocities, or more accurately, the meaning of such historical events is to allow us to develop a sense of attentiveness and awareness of what is potentially evil, and restrains it when it reemerges.

McEwan is an author of the great divide. He tests the relationships between his characters, but he also tests the relationships between their inner values and the outside world. These kinds of tests always happen when larger forces clashing in the background: Communism and Capitalism, Rationalism and Mysticism, Liberalism and Fundamentalism. In *Black Dogs*,

for example, Bernard and June's relationship is under examination, but so are the values of rationalism and mysticism. As such, the novel deals with the effect of power on morality. *Amsterdam* explores the heritage of the most promising generation in the 20th century—baby boomers—and positions capitalism, status and prestige against the moral principle of "shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour."<sup>372</sup> *Saturday* deals with human nature, violence, and free will against the background of global terrorism. The change of the millennium is not, or rather cannot be, grounded in "Enlightenment liberalism." The large ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as liberalism, and the belief in rationality, game theories and moral progress do not always accord with current events and reality.

***21st Century Liberalism: Confronting Extreme Capitalism:*** While capitalism celebrates and empowers individualism by promoting liberal values such as freedom of choice and freedom from constraints, its by-product is a system of values that completely insulates the individual. McEwan criticizes the generation of baby boomers who exploited the state's generous welfare system and then rejected it, only to later become part of the power structures they once tried to change. *Amsterdam* depicts a society

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<sup>372</sup> Leviticus 19:16

predicated on the values of status, power, prestige and money. It is a society in which its "taste makers" and "opinion leaders" are so self-absorbed that they have replaced individualism with pure selfishness. In this kind of world individuals are constantly seeking new ways to empower themselves, with very little regard for the broader moral consequences of their actions. It is a world of spins, in which immoral actions are painted with liberal arguments. McEwan seems to be repulsed by "selfish opportunism." He fully demonstrates this sentiment in *Amsterdam* (and again in his later novel *Solar*) by showing us that we must not see hell in the company of others.

While individualism remains the most important element of liberal theory, we must not place it above all other values. Put bluntly, success, prestige and self-preservation cannot override compassion and solidarity. The story of the protagonists in *Amsterdam*, Lionel and Clive, echoes Dewey's and Habermas's world view: the system embraces the values of extreme capitalism at the private social level, such as in the family, workplace and civic society. The project of communication thus has failed in advancing a framework of liberalism that can accommodate both the Self and the Other.

***Uncertain, Fragile Human Reason:*** The world of the 21st century is one of uncertainty, chaos and infinite possibilities. Therefore, we must not take anything for granted: that we are living in a democratic society; that we have human and civil rights; and, certainly, that we are happy. Each of



these three McEwan novels hinges on one critical event that sets the course of things. These quotidian events happen quickly: a minor car accident on the way to a squash game, a sudden encounter with two black dogs on a hiking trail, and a call for help from a fellow hiker. The way we react in such critical moments can determine the course of our lives. In a world of endless possibilities our actions carry nothing but the pure potential to be good or bad. The question of whether human nature is good or bad is almost obsolete, as McEwan shows that we have the potential to be both. We arrive in the world and our place in it is largely determined by a variety of cultural, political, social, economic, or genetic circumstances over which we have very little influence. But unlike the characters of great Greek tragedies our destiny is not entirely out of hands. We can decide to work to maintain the fragile equilibrium of our existence by cultivating our nature with great works of art and science.

McEwan accepts the obvious fragility and limitation of human reason; but unlike Lippmann, he also assigns this fragility to the elite experts, as we see in *Amsterdam*. What this demonstrates then is that Lippmann's expert elite do not understand reality any better than the layman. More importantly, they certainly do not have a moral authority over alternative perspectives. Since incommensurability cannot be resolved or overcome, we

best not be dogmatic in our search for answers: communism, liberalism, scientism, or humanism are all to be taken with a grain of salt.

*Black Dogs* and *Saturday* present a belief in general human progress (be it economic, scientific, political, or moral progress). They both bring forth humanity's hopes and expectations to create a brave new world that will be inherently different from the one in which we are currently living. Bernard's ideological conviction suggests that political apparatus, like the parliament or other governing agencies, are necessary in order to bring about progress and achieve collective goals. Conversely, Perowne believes that a better scientific understanding of the natural world, along with innovative technological abilities to control the natural world, will allow for human improvement both for the individual and the collective.

Yet, McEwan rejects both Bernard's and Perowne's tendencies to think of modernity as an inclusive category. Indeed, reason and rationality replaced transcendental powers and served as a true engine of liberation, rather than being combined or added to this existing orientation. But our over-confidence and inability to coexist with those who hold different "reasons" led to the greatest tragedies of the 20th century (the Holocaust, two world wars, Communism, ecological and environmental disasters). The constant need of rationalists, such as Bernard and Perowne, to seek certainty and predictability is one of the greatest problems of modernity.

Therefore, McEwan seems to confront his characters (and readers) with a reality of uncertainty as a means to acknowledge this integral and fundamental part of human existence. Healthy skepticism and constant questioning, not just toward the Other, but also toward ourselves, is the only way to guarantee liberal pluralism.

***Being present:*** Accepting that our happiness is uncertain and fragile means we must always aspire to be present in the moment. Therefore, McEwan abandons the kind of thinking and abstractions that strive to step away from reality to investigate life from a hypothetical, *a priori* point in time and space (such as Rawls's theory of justice). Instead, he prefers to search and find human wisdom in the world and in human actions. McEwan is skeptical about abstracted principles of justice (or any other perfectionist theory, for that matter), and places his emphasis on human experience and intimate understandings of particular contexts as the only way to live morally.

Humans are exceptional creatures in that we can converse with one another in the Aristotelian sense of exhibiting good judgment and fine character, to create rituals and symbols, and join together to achieve collective goals. From a plural-liberal perspective, such community is more likely to balance ethical universalism and legitimate cultural variations. Therefore, to be truly liberal in the 21st century one must demonstrate a strong commitment to self-fulfillment *and* a moral obligation to the Other;

one must be willing to consider rationalism and mysticism, science and art, individual autonomy and cultural membership. Given the complex challenges of our days, it is next to impossible to achieve a comprehensive view, even in a society of reasonable citizens. For every Perowne out there, there will be a Baxter threatening to destroy our happiness. But self-preservation does not mean we can be excused from our moral obligations. McEwan's work suggests that authentic art (not like the symphony presented in *Amsterdam*) can help us stay open to the presence of sometimes conflicting perspectives: violence or evil can be a matter of defective chromosomes or a matter of social circumstances, or the combination of the two.

***The Possibility for transformation:*** What seems evident from McEwan's novels is that it is almost impossible for us to reach a rational consensus. But despite this gloomy conclusion, McEwan still offers us a rather optimistic message by showing us the space for redemption (*Tikkun Olam*). McEwan does not update liberalism by outlining new rules and practices of government and communication. Instead, he takes an immense interest in the founding values and experiences that should guide practical propositions.

In *Black Dogs* and *Amsterdam* we see a reference to the relations between humanity and the social world. Ultimately, they both ask a similar question: Who did more damage in the world? Was it the idealist who sought political utopia and translated his ideologies into violent actions, or was it the

individualist who stripped himself of social responsibility in favour of the egotistical pursuit of status and prestige? It is noteworthy that both archetypes use the liberal language of social responsibility to justify their respective positions.

McEwan sees the fault that lies in both archetypes. In *Saturday*, however, we see a possibility for correction or redemption. Perowne, who finds safe haven in science, understands its limitations and suspend his personal happiness to morally acknowledge his responsibility for the Baxter. In *Saturday*, we see his attempt to leave the two archetypes of *Black Dogs* and *Amsterdam* behind, and walk towards a moral view based simultaneously on scientific and humanist grounds.

### ***Literature and liberal education***

This entire project celebrates the implicit relations between literacy and democracy. This is an argument that does not need to be repeated. As scholars we owe a debt to the societies that support us. Making the vast knowledge produced in our faculties and departments accessible to the general public has proven to be quite a difficult task. It seems that while modern society enjoy increased access to material comfort, it also lack public spirit and qualities of dedication, of concentration, of breadth and of depth. Carefully applying ourselves to reading novels that demand something of us generates a sense of achievement. Reading great works of

art allows us to converse with great minds. Using imaginative literature as a platform through which we can foster civic responsibility and sensitivity is the kind of education we seemed to be shying away from.

McEwan's novels invite us to contemplate our contemporary condition and reflect on liberal democracy as a product of our virtues as well as vices. The problems of human hubris, uncertainty, and fragile rationality are unique problems of modernity, but are also perennial problems of humanity. The characters in McEwan's novels exercise their agency but still end up disrupting authentic social relations. The opening lines of *Saturday's* epigraph echo the greatest question of liberal education: "What it means to be man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science."<sup>373</sup> McEwan's novel suggests that modern conditions result in an impoverished sense of the Self and the social. The project of the Enlightenment, while truly increasing liberty, also made technology, science and the idea of progression values in themselves. Within an educational context, this project exemplifies how to augment theoretical and abstract discussions by rooting them in lived experience.

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<sup>373</sup> McEwan, *Saturday*, 1.

I would like to conclude this work with a personal note. Most critics will agree that an important work of art is aesthetically interesting, technically accomplished and intellectually dense. I believe McEwan's fiction meets all three criteria; surely, not an unexpected sentiment if one spends several years in the company of McEwan's novels, as I have. This study, however, has a much more limited scope. It focuses on the third criterion of quality fiction, and leaves the assessment of the first two criteria for popular and scholarly critics. What I have argued here attests to the novels' intellectual contribution to the field of politics and communication.

The analysis of the novels I offer here required far less critical faculties than I expect McEwan required to write these novels. My goal was to read McEwan's novels in a way that invites interplay between self-understanding and understanding the world in the context of the 21st century. Here lays an ironic paradox of the hermeneutic circle. A truthful engagement with a text requires no doctrine, method or theory. Yet, in order to acknowledge McEwan's profound intellectual and emotional understanding of what it means to be human, I had to turn it into a logical, calculated and systemic progression of arguments; from an artistic vision and act of imagination to a dissertation. And so the attempt to translate the concrete to the abstract unavoidably results in some distortions. My only solace is that what these novels lose in this translation, they may gain back if my work intrigues new

readers or brings back to the novels previous readers seeking to reflect their moral horizons.



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