VIOLENCE, NARRATIVE AND COMMUNITY AFTER 9/11: A READING OF IAN McEWAN’S SATURDAY

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This thesis situates Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday* (2005) in the context of debates about violence, narrative and community. These debates are becoming increasingly pressing in the aftermath of 9/11, as global violence continues to escalate. Drawing primarily on critiques of the West’s responses to 9/11 by Judith Butler, Jenny Edkins and Slavoj Žižek, I explore the tendency for Western nation states to recycle their trauma into stabilizing narratives that define self against other, disguise the instability and implicit violence of the social order, and erase ambivalent questions about the state’s own complicity in provoking violent conflict. This recycling process works to legitimize the state’s right to respond violently to the trauma in order to prevent future attacks. As an alternative to this impulse to violently order and control, I argue that embracing vulnerability and ambivalence can help us begin to imagine a less violent world. Butler’s notion of “ethical enmeshment,” Žižek’s insistence upon the importance of “self-relating,” and Edkins’ call for us to “encircle” the revelatory potential of trauma, can help us to interrogate the West’s sense of detached entitlement to security and instead establish an important sense of collective responsibility for global distributions of vulnerability.

Set on the day of massive worldwide protests against the coming war in Iraq, McEwan’s *Saturday* engages with and critiques a dominant post-9/11 narrative frame of imminent terrorist attack. In my reading of the novel, I examine the news media’s role in producing a passive and depoliticized “community of anxiety.” I explore issues of privilege and detachment, as well as the narrative frames that re-inscribe dominant ideas about democratic social order, particularly with regard to the forms of violence that are legitimised or de-legitimized within it. Finally, I
argue that *Saturday* moves its protagonist from a position of privileged detachment towards the beginnings of a greater sense of his ethical responsibility for others. Through a story about the invasion of one family’s heavily secured home, McEwan affords us the opportunity to think about ethical responses to violent interventions that have been foreclosed by the military response to 9/11.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Grandfather, Dennis Woodman, who taught me that $8 \times 8 = 64$ and always took such great interest in my education.
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INTRODUCTION: FROM THE “PRESUMPTION OF IMPERMEABILITY” TO AN “ETHICAL ENMESHMENT”

With hindsight, we can say that the traumatic events of September 11th, 2001 unsettled many previously invisible assumptions upon which life in Western nation states such as the United States and Great Britain has been based. A ride on the London Underground or the New York Subway feels different now. As Henry Perowne, the main character in Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday* (2005) observes, “everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed” (15). Life seems less secure, less certain. In her book *Precarious Life*, a reflection on the post-9/11 condition, Judith Butler attributes this uncertainty to the loss of the “presumption of First World impermeability” (41) that assumed the United States to be secure against attacks from the outside. This disrupted presumption is reflected in a short piece by Richard Powers called “The Simile,” published in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 23rd, 2001:

Failed similes proliferated throughout the afternoon [of September 11th] … Streets like Kinshasa. Rubble like Beirut or the West Bank. No simile will ever serve. In its size and devastation and suddenness, the destruction of Sept. 11 is, in fact, like nothing, unless it is like the terrors experienced in those parts of the world that seemed so distant on Sept.10. (21-21)

Powers’ response reveals a number of salient points. Firstly, we see evidence of the trauma’s resistance to attempts to narrativize it—we cannot find words to describe it; there is no frame of reference; it is “like nothing.” Instead, a different frame of reference tentatively emerges in the comparison to “those parts of the world that seemed so distant on Sept. 10.” Therefore, we also get a sense that 9/11 provoked a new feeling of being vulnerably connected to people, places and
experiences outside of the framework of security offered by First World nation states. What can we infer from this disruption of privileged Western-centric perspectives and sudden feeling of connectivity or dependence, and how are we to respond to it?

The disruption of this First World presumption, and the sense of stable everyday normality that was based upon it, has led to important questions across a spectrum of discourses and disciplines; journalism, critical and political theory, and the arts. What does this sudden eruption of violence into a secure space reveal to us about what it means to be human and what human beings are capable of? What does it reveal about human relationships, or about what it means to be a member of a community? How is community to be defined, who is it to be defined by, and who is it to include? What do these violent events and their aftermath reveal about the function and limitations of the power of the sovereign nation state and the type of community it generates? What forms of political action—by subjects or by the state—are possible, justifiable or desirable in the context of this type of violent assault on both individual human lives and the state under which they live? Can individuals influence the world of “politics”? What counts as “political” action? How do media representations and narratives figure in debates about violence and community? And, most importantly, what do our answers or approaches to these questions reveal about the way we live now and how we may have to live—more or less violently—in the future?

These are all questions raised in McEwan’s novel, *Saturday*, widely hailed as one of the more perceptive literary explorations of life in a Western democracy after 9/11—an event that looms large in the novel but is rarely referenced directly. The novel is set in London and takes place over the course of a single day—Saturday, February 15th, 2003—the day of massive public protests against the planned invasion of Iraq. Henry Perowne does not participate in the march.
Instead, he goes about his business, preparing for a family reunion in the evening. Nevertheless, political considerations are often in his thoughts. He is constantly turning on and off the television or radio and observes that “it’s a condition of the time, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and to be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety” (180).

However, Perowne’s compulsive engagement with media narratives also speaks to a form of political paralysis or enforced passivity. Feelings of communal anxiety and imminent threat also produce a sense of detachment and isolation from the realm of actual political events because subjects such as Perowne are presented with few avenues for active participation and influence. His instinct is to support military action in Iraq, but he feels that his opinions do not ultimately matter anyway. He sometimes feels that the world is degenerating into a less secure, more dangerous place; however, this view is counterbalanced by a belief in the continuation of rational progress, as evinced by the privileges of his immediate circumstances. He is a successful neurosurgeon, living in a luxurious home in one of the richest nations in the world. McEwan, however, draws attention to the “mundane embattlement” required to sustain these privileges.

On Perowne’s front door we see:

Three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the entryphone system, the red panic button, the alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits.

Such defences, such mundane embattlement: beware the cities poor, the drug addicted, the downright bad. (37)

Security is achieved through the literal exclusion of elements that threaten the stability and rationality of the social order—the poor, the drug addicted and the bad are kept out of the house.
The exclusive and stable order of Perowne’s existence is challenged when he is involved in a car crash with a young man named Baxter who experiences violent mood swings as a symptom of Huntington’s disease. When Baxter and his two companions threaten Perowne with violence in order to solve the dispute about the crash, Perowne uses his medical knowledge to diagnose Baxter’s condition and manipulate him by offering him a story that gives false hope in the face of the incurable disease. The novel explores ethical dilemmas that arise with the use and abuse of knowledge as a form of power. Knowledge works to inscribe (and limit) particular meanings and define relationships between people. Perowne’s manipulations later come back to haunt him when Baxter breaks into his house and terrorizes his family—an act that is not presented as a random invasion but instead as the consequence of an earlier power struggle. The unexpected plot developments during and after this breach in security provide the terrain for further ethical investigations of privilege, responsibility, and the legitimacy of violent action by individuals and the state.

I am going to argue that the novel’s presentation of Baxter and Perowne’s power struggle does not locate violence as an outside or marginal threat to the security of the social order but instead reveals violence to be inherent within the production of the social order itself, particularly through the operations of state power. This intrinsic violence is disguised by a particular narrative frame whereby “the poor, the drug addicted [and] the downright bad” are not only literally excluded from the house but also understood as potentially violent threats that exist outside of the social order rather than being connected to problems that exist within it. Robert Elias argues that, although ostensibly peaceable, Western democracies often create “a culture of violent solutions” to the problems of violence in society, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence on both micro and macro levels. Elias says that violence by those in power against those on the
margins tends to be viewed as legitimate; whereas, violence by those on the margins against those in power is viewed as dangerous and illegitimate. However, he says that cultures that legitimize violent solutions on a macro-level—in other words, that of state powers—also implicitly encourage violent solutions on a micro-level, thereby creating a cycle of violence (132). I will argue that arresting these cycles of violence involves looking critically at the particular narrative frames that work to legitimize and even valorize some forms of state-endorsed violence and condemn or demonize other forms of violence.

Questions about these narrativized logics not only apply to the actions of the characters in the novel but also work as potential critiques of the way in which the social order functions in a liberal nation state such as Britain, and other Western democracies. Furthermore, in the international context of the export by force of Western “freedom and democracy” to the rest of the world—referenced in the novel most explicitly through the characters’ debates and ambivalence about the legitimacy of the planned war on Iraq—the disguise or denial of this inherent violence appears all the more problematic. Butler suggests in Undoing Gender that when “we see the violence done in the name of preserving western [sic] values … we have to ask whether this violence is one of the values we seek to defend. … Clearly the west does not author all violence, but it does, upon suffering or anticipating injury, marshal violence to preserve its borders, real or imaginary” (231). The events of Saturday take place at a precise moment when the state is marshalling violence in the name of national security. The novel ends with Perowne debating about whether to marshal the violence of the state against Baxter, something the rule of law legitimizes. Importantly, he resists the temptation to construct Baxter as an evil outsider and instead examines his own complicity in provoking the violent situation. As a result, Perowne makes an ethically-motivated decision not to press charges, a decision that goes against the grain
of the “culture of violent solutions.” In this way, the novel suggests that violence and insecurity will not ultimately be abated by violent retaliations and heightened security or isolation.

In terms of wider significance of McEwan’s work, I argue that the ethical questions raised in Perowne’s dealings with Baxter apply as insistently to the novel’s national and international contexts as they do to the actions of the individual characters. The narrative forces Perowne to examine his complicity and, by extension, McEwan seems to be suggesting that Western nation states also need to critically examine their own roles in perpetuating violent conflicts. Even though Perowne fails to make a clear statement about the planned war in Iraq, Saturday can be read as a critique of the militaristic response to 9/11 and the culture of fear that both justifies and is produced by this action.

McEwan’s critique works by presenting ethical dilemmas about how to respond to and protect oneself against violence on a more comprehensible scale, for example, through the plot line that narrates Perowne’s decision about how to use his victim status. McEwan explains in an interview that he wanted to evoke the sense of invasion produced by 9/11 but that “one can only do it on a private scale. If you say the airliner hit the side of the building, a thousand people died, nothing happens to your scalp. So I, in a sense, tried to find the private scale of that feeling” (Z. Smith 234). Here, I think an important distinction needs to be made; although the feelings produced by these events may be comparable, and therefore raise similar ethical questions about how to respond, the events themselves are not. I am not intending to argue that Baxter’s invasion of Perowne’s heavily secured home works as a direct allegory of 9/11. It is definitely possible to read the character of Perowne and his impulse to order and control as an exploration of “what the First World is” (McEwan qtd. in Z. Smith 226). However, a logical extension into making a direct analogy between Baxter and the 9/11 hijackers crudely and
problematically erases cultural differences. From a strictly allegorical perspective, McEwan would appear to make a direct analogy between Islamic fundamentalism and Huntington’s disease. Furthermore, this allegorical reading would erase the important element of class tension that impacts upon Perowne and Baxter’s dealings. These readings are too reductive, seeking to impose simplified explanations upon both the text and its context. McEwan does not offer us a narrative that would explain the causes of 9/11 or transform its large scale trauma into something more comprehensible. He does not explain the causes of the Iraq war. Rather, he affords us the opportunity to reflect upon the ethical choices that must be made in the aftermath of any violent interventions, and to consider what type of community we are part of, or would like to be.

I am going to argue that the novel presents these choices as opportunities to begin transforming our “culture of violent solutions” by reinventing or re-imagining a social order in line with what Butler theorizes as an acknowledgement of our “ethical enmeshment” with others. “Ethical enmeshment” is a term that Butler uses to describe a state of co-dependency and co-responsibility that arises when individuals acknowledge the limits of their own autonomy and forgo rigid self/other distinctions. Fluid relationships between self and other are often exposed through experiences of grief or vulnerability. She insists that, as human bodies, we always exist outside of ourselves and for one another; this existence for each other creates an ethical imperative to question the way that we impinge upon each other’s ability to live without violence and threat.

In the next section, I will look at the critical and narrative processes that can help us understand the ways that we are always, unavoidably “enmeshed” with others. I will also elaborate upon other key terms and aspects of the theoretical framework that informs, and is informed by, my reading of the novel. However, at this point it is important to note that when
we recognize our enmeshment with others, we are not left with a set of easily predetermined answers about what courses of action are ‘right,’ but often in a state of radical ambivalence. This can be unsettling to our sense of who we are. Nevertheless, theorists such as Butler argue that this state of ambivalence is where we need to remain if social transformation is to occur. Importantly, we are left with a crucial set of ethically motivated questions, rather than answers. These questions can be used to interrogate dominant narratives about legitimate violence and, potentially, reveal ways of imagining and living in less violent communities.

The “Individual” and the Social Order

Before thinking about how a social order might be refashioned along less violent, more ethical lines, we must first understand more about how it operates in the currently dominant Western liberal view, particularly with respect to il/legitimate violence and the trauma that this can produce. In _Trauma and the Memory of Politics_, Jenny Edkins explains that, according to this liberal view, the state is made up of a collection of distinct, separate, autonomous individuals who join together as a community to form democratic institutions. Subjects legitimize the power and authority of the state—and its use of force or violence if necessary—in exchange for security and order. As Max Weber defined it, the state exists as an institution that holds the monopoly on legitimate uses of violence. This power and its monopoly is not static but is, as Michel Foucault theorized, continually produced and reproduced in the interactions between individuals and institutions of state. With regards to the use of violence as a particular form of power, Philip Smith’s essay on “Civil Society and Violence” explains the importance of narratives as means of establishing and disseminating cultural norms that define when violence can or should be used:

Members of civil society and civil institutions—in particular, the mass media—use narratives to interpret particular acts of violence, thus diffusing social norms about
appropriate or inappropriate uses of violence. In this way, narratives link the macrorealm of events, social structure, and legitimacy with the microrealm of interpretation, typification, and cognition. Narratives can be understood as enabling the individual conscience to judge distant acts of violence—via their cultural refraction in the myths and symbols of the collective conscience. (92)

Smith goes on to establish “three stringent narrative conditions that the state and the citizen must meet to legitimize their violent acts to contemporary civil society”:

1. violence must be a last resort, restrained to minimum levels, and there should be no peaceful alternatives; 
2. the violence must be undertaken by a quasi-heroic “pure” figure against an “evil other”; and 
3. the violence must be undertaken for selfless and universalistic reasons. (110)

From the point of view of this model, democratic consensus about the legitimate use of violence is achieved via this narrative mediation between individual judgment and collective will. Smith argues convincingly that public will and reception can have the power to accept, reject, or shape these narratives.¹

However, we can also see that this consensus is contingent upon the assumption of a certain relationship between the individual and collective conscience—that they are connected but at least functionally independent. As I will explore in more detail in the first chapter, “Media and a Community of Anxiety,” in Saturday Perowne is constantly consuming news narratives in an attempt to decide if the war is legitimate, but he becomes worried that “he isn’t thinking independently” of these media narratives and is instead “becoming a dupe” and “a docile citizen”

¹ Smith explains that the speed with which the state capitalizes upon and narrativizes a prevailing public mood is also indicative of a limitation upon state power in that “consent for violence can come and go with a speed that is first disconcerting but that can be understood once we examine the shifting narrative frames of civil discourse. … Civil consent to state violence is as provisional as the monopoly. The state risks losing public support when it cannot align its violent actions with legitimating narratives” (111).
Implicitly, he questions the legitimacy of the entire system by disputing the capability of the individual to make judgments independently of the collective. Therefore, as Edkins observes, the stability of the democratic process, and our faith in it, “rests on not questioning that particular form of political community [offered by democratic states] or the forms of personhood on which it is based” (10). In particular, this involves forgetting the role of violence and trauma in forming and sustaining this community, and maintaining the belief in the autonomy of the individual subject who acts independently within the context of a stable social order.

Edkins explains that a more complex understanding of this model can be approached through psychoanalytic accounts of subject formation which show that sovereign individuals—the foundation of the democratic consensus—do not pre-exist independently of the social order but are instead produced by a relationship with the social order. This is not to say, however, that the social order exists in a stable form prior to the formation of the subject either. Edkins explains that the subject and the social order “are both in a continual process of becoming”:

Neither exists as a fixed entity in the present moment, as the common-sense view in western culture might lead us to expect. Both are always in the process of formation. This is because the two are so intimately related. The person is formed, not through a process of interaction with the social order (since that would mean thinking of the social as already there) but by imagining or supposing that the social exists. This supposing by the individual is what brings the social into being. (13)

Here we can begin to understand that the form of community generated by the democratic system is not as simple or stable as the first, state-centered model assumes it to be. In fact, it is sustained by collective acts of imagination. Benedict Anderson famously argues that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which
they are imagined” (6). Edkins builds upon this idea; her point being that, in the form of the Western democratic state, a particular “style of imagining” has become so dominant that it makes the social order appear to be a stable reality, rather than an imaginative construction. Narratives help establish this dominance. Not only do narratives negotiate norms of legitimate violence within the social order, they also play a yet more foundational role in the production of the social order itself because they give a recognizable form and structure to these collective imaginings. In the case of Western liberal democracies, the social order is continually re-inscribed by narratives of democratic consensus and individual autonomy that facilitate the imagination of a certain form of community and, at the same time, limit the imagination of alternatives.

Alongside these narratives about autonomy and consensus, Anderson argues that nation states have also been able to construct powerful and often heroic narratives of national history and heritage. These narratives give a sense of common identity to individual subjects, work to legitimize the authority of the state and, if necessary, demand “colossal sacrifice” from its subjects. However, Anderson is less concerned with particular representations of national identity and instead more interested in the structures that enable the transformation of a disparate and somewhat arbitrary group of people into something representable as a nation. How do people who can have no direct knowledge of one another come to identify as part of a community? He explains that these structuring narratives rely upon a particular way of apprehending time as an empty, homogenous space across which events occur in a linear fashion. This apprehension of time creates a space in which all present community members exist simultaneously, as if on a horizontal line that moves steadily forward in time. Thus, subjects are able to imagine other people existing at the same time as themselves without knowing this
objectively. For example, in the novel Perowne looks out of his window and over the city, perceiving it as a community of people united by their simultaneous existence in time:

[The city] is a sleepless entity whose wires never stop singing; among so many millions there are bound to be people staring out of windows when normally they would be asleep. And not the same people every night. That it should be him and not someone else is an arbitrary matter. (16)

As well as imagining this simultaneity, Perowne places the present moment in the context of a linear historical narrative of national heritage and progress:

Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work. (3)

Perowne perceives that the social order of the city is sustained by a collective act of will and, at the same time, the reader can perceive Perowne’s sense of confidence and personal investment in this process. We can also see how larger linear narratives of national history are reified by more mundane activities. Repeated acts of “sleeping, working, entertaining” sustain the social order in its “continual process of becoming” and, through their predictable daily repetition, disguise the contingency of this process.

Edkins explains that the world of what we call “politics”—the mechanics and daily processes of government that sustain the type of community that we call the nation state—is fundamentally dependent upon this notion of linear time, and the imaginative processes and daily repetitions facilitated by it. In contrast to Perowne’s confidence in the stability of the social order, Edkins’ work emphasizes its inherent instability. She explains that perspectives such as
the one represented by Perowne in the above example are not only based upon collective imagination but also on a form of collective forgetting: forgetting that the stabilizing notion of linear time is not “reality” but merely one particular way of apprehending it; forgetting of the instability of the social order as something that needs to be continually reproduced; forgetting that the narratives used to reify these imaginative constructions are partial and therefore political; forgetting the idea that, as individuals, we are subject to various operations of power that limit our autonomy. These necessary acts of forgetting produce hidden gaps in the linear narratives through which we comprehend the world of “politics.” In general, the state acts to suture over these gaps. However, when we acknowledge the gaps hidden by this forgetfulness and partiality, we can see that “in the west, both state and subject pretend to a wholeness and a closure that is not possible” (Edkins 11). In many ways, this is a necessary pretence, allowing daily life to function with what we recognize as normality. Many of our assumptions about our identities as both individuals and group members are based upon this sense of “wholeness and closure.” Therefore, when an event such as 9/11 occurs that calls the stability of the state and “wholeness and closure” of the social order into question, we can experience a traumatic sense of alienation from what we have come to recognize as “reality.” The social order no longer seems to tell us who we are. Importantly though, alternative forms of community can be imagined when trauma reveals gaps in narratives of national sovereignty and security.

Trauma and the Political

Edkins explains that the feelings of helplessness and lost meaning associated with trauma often involve a sense of both betrayal and revelation. Firstly, victims or witnesses to trauma feel betrayed because their trust in someone or something that is supposed to offer safety or security has been broken. Violence erupts into a place or context—family, home, nation—that is not only
presumed to be secure but also represents part of a social order that gives form and meaning to our lives, both as individuals and communities. For example, a child is traumatized by abuse at the hands of a family member, someone who is supposed to represent love and protection. A soldier is traumatized when the state—a structure that is supposed to offer security—conscripts him or her into battle and then fails to offer sufficient support, either during or after. In the case of 9/11, a symbol of a dominant and supposedly impregnable world power is suddenly destroyed. Normality is disrupted and we cannot immediately find new words or stories to fill the gaps. We are not immediately sure what the event means. We cannot describe what is happening. Events do not fit neatly into the narratives of state and nation. Instead:

[Traumatic events] strip away the diverse commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility. They question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of.

(Edkins 5)

In this sense, traumatic events can also reveal the instability of everything we take for granted. As we have seen, the function and stability of the social order depends in large part upon our faith that some form of collectively knowable reality exists. The existence of this reality is bound up with collective imaginative adherence to narratives of individuality, state and nation. Adherence is implicit in everyday practices that participate in maintaining the status quo. Trauma disrupts our everyday practices and reveals the previously unacknowledged fictionality.

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2 In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek argues that what we are actually experiencing at moments like this is a “return to the Real”; however, the Real appears as a fiction because “on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition” (19). In this way, the post-modern insistence that what we experience as reality is in fact a fictional construct is inverted. Experiences that are so intense that we can only experience them as fiction are, in fact, real.
of this reality. Trauma creates a crisis in our ability to know what this reality is and, by extension, it creates a crisis in the individual and communal identities invested in all these processes. According to Cathy Caruth, the notion of trauma presents us with “a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche’s relation to reality”:  

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of a belatedness. (208)

A traumatic event disrupts our apprehension of linear time because it refuses to remain in the past and repeatedly inserts itself into the present, for example, in the experience of “repetitive seeing.” The event cannot be forgotten, but neither can it be remembered through a particular linear narrative of past events. Linear narratives are impossible because they require the event to be comprehensible or meaningful in some way. This would deny the “inability to know” that characterizes traumatic experiences.

Edkins theorizes that, at moments like this, the structured world of “politics” is replaced by something that she and others have begun to term “the political.” This is “the arena of innovation and revolution, a field of sudden, unexpected and abrupt change, a point at which the status quo is challenged” (xiv). At this point, we move from the linear time upon which “politics” and the imagined social reality is based and into what Edkins calls “trauma time” (xiv). Edkins argues that the experience of trauma time can have radical political potential because it forces us to acknowledge “the provisional nature of what we call social reality” and its need to be reproduced continually on a day-to-day basis. She also argues that, depending on how we respond to traumatic revelations, they may open up possibilities for questioning the operations of
state power and imagining alternative forms of community. The window of opportunity can be very small though since, as we have seen, the possibility of imagining alternatives to the status quo is usually foreclosed by the appearance of a stable social reality. Indeed, the production of this reality is predicated upon forgetting or limiting the imagination of alternatives. After the trauma, stability may quickly seem to reappear as the state moves to re-write the trauma as a knowable event.

However, the task of imagining alternative forms of political community becomes particularly insistent when an event such as 9/11 reveals that the peaceful security offered by Western nation states often works to disguise the mechanisms by which “our faith in the social order and our search for security are invested in systems that are themselves productive of and produced by violence” (Edkins 6). For example, in her book, *Why War?,* Jacqueline Rose elucidates Freud’s theories that war not only threatens civilization but can also advance it. In his essay “Why War?,” Freud compares the ambivalence of war to that of civilization itself, something to which we owe “the best of what we have become as well as a good part of what we suffer from” (qtd. in Rose 16). For example, in our “culture of violent solutions,” states offer security but can also inflict suffering. They can use the threat of violence against ‘enemies within’ as a means of keeping order. States also hold the power to make war, do violence to people in other places and sacrifice their own subjects for the cause. Rose concludes that “if, therefore, war neither simply threatens nor simply advances the cause of civilization, it is because it mimics or participates in the fundamental ambivalence of civilization itself” (16)—a “fundamental ambivalence” that, in daily life, we tend to ignore rather than confront.

When states perceive themselves to be under threat, one clear aspect of this ambivalence is revealed. In order for states to function as systems that offer security, the value and
importance of single lives must therefore be viewed as ultimately subordinate or sacrificeable in the defense of the community of the nation and its interests. At the same time, subjects must retain a trust in the state only to sacrifice lives for legitimate causes. As Philip Smith explains, narratives play a hugely important role in establishing a framework with which to make judgments about the meaning of events and the legitimacy of violent responses to them. We need to tell a story about an event in order to initially recognize that it happened, and then make sense of it, and decide upon an appropriate response. However, we have also seen that traumatic events are characterized by their disruption of stable narratives and their resistance to meaning, often because they reveal the “fundamental ambivalence” of civilization itself. In this way, trauma demands a response at the same time as making one seem impossible. This apparent impossibility presents survivors and witnesses with a challenge that is, as I will explain, both a political and an ethical one. How are we to respond when we witness trauma? What kinds of narratives are appropriate? Edkins argues that what generally happens when we are confronted by a narrative vacuum or loss of meaning through trauma is that dominant narratives tend to be re-inscribed in an attempt to return to the lost security of the status quo and, in the process, possible alternatives are erased.

Ambivalence Erased: The State’s Response to 9/11

In the case of 9/11, traumatic ambivalence was very clearly erased in favor of the re-inscription of dominant narratives. The United States government responded to an assault on its sovereign power by using the trauma and suffering of individuals as a means to legitimize military action against other states that may or may not have been linked to the terrorist attacks. At this time, radical and transformative questions were quickly foreclosed through a process by which, as Butler explains, “a framework for understanding emerges in tandem with the
experience, and that frame works both to preclude certain types of questions, certain types of historical enquiries, and to function as a moral justification for retaliation” (*Precarious Life* 4). The dominant frame insisted that the time for relativism had come to an end and that the attacks represented a simple case of evil versus innocence. The context for the attacks was presented as a clash of civilizations: one standing for freedom and liberal democracy, the other for fundamentalism and oppression. The only appropriate response appeared to be adopting a heroic stance against this unspeakable evil on behalf of the innocent victims of 9/11. There was to be no room for ambivalence; the choice was narrowed down to being “with us or with the terrorists.”

In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek presents an alternative framework for understanding the attacks as not a “clash of civilizations” but rather related to “clashes within each civilization” (41). He identifies an ambivalent relationship between capitalism and democracy, arguing that American foreign policy has historically favored economic gain and geopolitical strategy rather than, as it has claimed, the spreading of freedom and democracy. By supporting oppressive and corrupt regimes in the service of economic gains, U.S. imperialism has engendered anti-Western sentiment and fundamentalism abroad. He suggests that, if we see the World Trade Center, as many outside of the privileged West undoubtedly do, as a symbol of global capitalist dominance, it is far more difficult to adopt the stance that the USA is an entirely innocent party. So what constitutes an appropriate response to the attacks? Žižek says that if we locate the attacks in the context of the “antagonisms of global capitalism,” we are prevented from adopting a clear ethical stance and forced to encounter “the limit of moral reasoning.” This is because, “from the moral standpoint, the victims are innocent, the act was an abominable crime, this very innocence, however, is not innocent—to adopt such an ‘innocent’ position in today’s
global capitalist universe is in itself a false abstraction” (50). Žižek is not trying to blame the victims here but rather trying to resist reducing the argument to simple binaries. He is careful to point out that “this, of course, in no way entails the compromise notion of shared guilt (the terrorists are to blame, but the Americans are also partly to blame…)—the point is, rather, that the two sides are not really opposed; that they belong to the same field” (50-51). However, this crucial perspective of seeing the terrorists and their victims as “part of the same field” entails a kind of ambivalence—a collapsing of easy assumptions about the identities of self and other—that was not easily sustained in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Žižek argues that, in order to protest the violence of the attacks on ethical grounds, we must avoid engaging in the “moralizing mathematics of guilt” that justifies the sacrifice of some equally innocent lives (51). We must disrupt narratives that imply that some lives are more or less valuable than others. The only appropriate stance is “unconditional solidarity with all victims” (51). In other words, we must resist the temptation to create narratives that legitimize or celebrate any form of violence. For example, we can see that heroic and patriotic narratives that present “fundamentalists” in the Third World as “evil others” preclude this kind of “unconditional solidarity” because they must create an unbridgeable gap between “us” and “them” in order to justify violent action.

This supposedly unbridgeable distinction can be disrupted by a process that Žižek calls “self-relating”—an “inclusion of oneself into the picture” so as to better understand the ways that we “are involved with what we are fighting against” (57). Žižek points out that “every feature attributed to the other is already present at the very heart of the USA”: religious fundamentalism is alive and well on the political right, while the ‘fanatical’ willingness to sacrifice oneself for a greater cause finds its counterpart in patriotically-motivated American militarism (43).
Recognizing these ideas demand highly complex, ambivalent, and quite possibly discomforting narratives that may unsettle stable assumptions about what the nation stands for. Rose explains that, in order to go to war, we need a firm conviction that we are doing the right thing. Clearly, ambivalence is the precise opposite of this. Therefore, we tend to “project on to the alien, or other, the destructiveness we fear in the most intimate relations or parts of ourself. Instead of trying to repair it at home, we send it abroad … [because] this saves us the effort of ambivalence” (18-19). By projecting undesirable traits onto others, we save ourselves the work of understanding that we are involved in producing that which we fear.

In particular, simple dichotomies between “us and them” save us the effort of understanding contradictions at the heart of state power itself. For example, when we condemn the hijackers on moral grounds for their abuse of a power imbalance and flagrant disregard for human life, we must also notice that the dehumanizing process that enabled the hijackers to sacrifice lives for their cause is not fundamentally dissimilar to the logics that underpin state powers in Western democracies—powers grant the state a monopoly on measuring the humanity of individuals against the demands of the wider political context. Edkins suggests that the 9/11 hijackers “behaved very much as states do when they engage in the bombing of civilian areas or in sending conscripts into battle.” They “took ordinary citizens of all nationalities and turned them into instruments for, and casualties of, indiscriminate political violence” (19). The hijackers made use of the power, normally only granted to the state, to treat people as what Georgio Agamben calls “bare life”—people who can, in the eyes of the law, be killed with impunity. From this perspective, the attacks were not so much a fundamental assault on the structure of the democratic state but rather “an instance of state-like violence, a reflection of the
state” (Edkins 227). The state and the attackers are operating within the same field of power relations.

How are we to protest this situation or re-invent this field of power relations? Edkins argues that non-violent forms of protest often draw their power from the contrast they make against the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. However, the response to 9/11 simply reasserted this right to a monopoly. Instead of questioning distributions of the power to manipulate “bare life,” and trying to limit future excesses of power, the state-like operations of the hijackers and their disregard for human life in fact “made it easier for the state to claim that any form of violence it might choose to use was legitimate [and] opened the way for the state to move quickly with its offer of revenge and retaliation as a suitable and legitimate answer to that traumatic tear in the fabric of normality” (Edkins 19). The innocence and humanity of the victims—and potential future victims—was then used to justify sacrificing lives in foreign places. Therefore, while the state was condemning the violence and affirming the humanity of the victims, it was also perhaps more significantly affirming its own entitlement to impermeability, and its own exclusive power to decide whose life is unassailably valuable or whose can be sacrificed. Our grounds for condemning the attacks, within a political framework that grants the state its monopoly on legitimized violence, therefore have more to do with the relative legitimacy of the narrative that tries to justify this sacrifice and less to do with potentially more radical questions about the distributions of power that make these cycles of violence and traumatic abuses possible.

These perspectives further reinforce the theory that war and civilization, trauma and the state, can be mutually productive and often involved in sustaining cycles of violence. State-like powers produce trauma and/or the threat of it; in turn, this trauma and threat can be used to re-
legitimize the need for greater powers to protect against, or even pre-empt, future threats. Lester R. Kurtz and Jennifer Turpin summarize this position as the “peace through strength” strategy and point out that it is “ironically … the most effective approach in preventing the weak and powerless from becoming violent, while provoking those with more resources to escalate their aggression,” making the world ultimately more vulnerable to violent abuses of power by those who have it (211). In legitimizing a violent response to 9/11, the state re-inscribed the very same logics and power relations that created the potential for the state-like attacks to happen, while disguising the idea that they are “part of the same field.” In this way, the re-inscription was underwritten by the exclusion of more ambivalent and “self-relating” narratives from the frame.

Both Edkins and Butler see the rapid re-inscription of these dominant narratives of state as the loss of an opportunity to imagine more inclusive and ethically-based forms of community that promote seek to redress rather than reassemble the power imbalances that dangerously sustain “peace through strength” and perpetuate a “culture of violent solutions.” Edkins states that the speed with which all this happened left witnesses and survivors in “an impossible position” where “it was difficult to distinguish calls for recognition of the trauma from calls for revenge” (19). That is to say, there were no readily available narrative frames within which to make a distinction between “recognition” and “revenge” and, in so doing, contest the narratives of heroism and patriotism that worked to fit the events back into the dominant-but-momentarily-disrupted reality of state “politics.” There was no available framework in which to view the ‘opposed’ sides as “belong[ing] to the same field” and thus to begin a process of “self-relating.” Narratives of ‘us versus them’ effectively erase the ambivalent characteristics of the trauma that, Edkins suggests, give it its revelatory “political quality.” The ambivalence is “political” because it signifies the contingency of the social order and thus also the potential for social
transformation. Edkins argues that when the trauma is re-written by a simplified narrative process, its revelatory effects are “neutralized.” This means that the traumatic event is also “depoliticized”; it can still be used and manipulated by dominant powers but the potential for social transformation is lost.

Alternative Responses: Approaching a Framework for “Self-Relating”

Instead of rapidly depoliticizing the trauma in this way, Edkins argues that a more transformative response involves “encircling the trauma” and coming to terms with its disruption to the social order without trying to recover the lost sense of the social order’s “wholeness and closure.” “Encircling the trauma” involves finding ways to recognize its devastating effects on both individuals and communities without ever assuming that meaning can be fully revealed (15). Butler also advocates something similar in terms of “tarrying with grief” (Precarious Life 30). The slower, reflective processes associated with grief and mourning—rather than speedy revenge and retaliation—can reveal the basis for a more ethical way of being in the world. Butler argues that grief is an important emotion because it gives us a sense of being “outside ourselves”; it disrupts our stable sense of self and “creates a sense of disorientation for the first-person, that is, the perspective of the ego” (Undoing Gender 25). Grief makes us feel weak and vulnerable. This feeling of vulnerability can have useful ethical implications because it “contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental sociality of embodied life” (Undoing Gender 22). Grief socializes us by reminding us that “we are always for something more than, and other than, ourselves,” not least because we all have bodies that expose us to others and make us both vulnerable to violence and potential instruments of violence. Part of our desire to imagine ourselves into secure communities speaks to this recognition that our bodies are vulnerable. But vulnerability is not simply a motive. Butler’s key point is that recognizing
common bodily vulnerability to violence makes us not purely autonomous individuals but always already in community. The different ways in which our particular form of community situates, displaces or makes use of this vulnerability means that “we are constituted politically in part by the social vulnerability of our bodies” (Undoing Gender 18). If Anderson argues that communities are to be distinguished by the “style in which they are imagined,” we can perhaps add that communities can also be distinguished by the way in which they distribute vulnerability by offering security to some and threatening or using violence—the most extreme manifestation of power over the body—against outsiders or ‘enemies within.’

Dominant narratives maintain that state-legitimized violence is the only way to make our communities secure. In order to interrogate these narratives, Butler asks:

Is there not another way of imagining community in such a way that it becomes incumbent upon us to consider very carefully when and where we engage violence, for violence is always an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves, for one another? (22)

In Butler’s argument, the fact of having a body means that we exist as the potential to do violence or have violence done to us; we are all potential victims, and potential perpetrators. The ongoing potential for violence “establishes a field of ethical enmeshment with others” (25) because the decisions we make and the actions we take can influence distributions of violence. As an ethical guideline, Butler states that “when we come to deciding right and wrong courses of action in that context [of ethical enmeshment through common vulnerability], it is crucial to ask: what forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions have they been created” (225)? We have to ask what courses of action reflect “unconditional
solidarity with all victims” (Žižek 51) and what actions displace violence onto others, either by inflicting violence upon them, or by denying our own violent potential.

If we apply these questions to the political climate in the post-9/11 West, we have to ask “what violences and exclusions” had sustained “the presumption of First World impermeability” that was traumatically disrupted and revealed by the attacks, and at what costs should it be re-assembled, if at all? 9/11 gave us the opportunity to understand that security is not a basic human right, however much we may want it to be, but an unevenly distributed and somewhat illusory privilege. We have seen that the ability to imagine an unassailably secure and stable social reality is not only contingent upon a complex process of narrative and forgetting by those who live as members of the community. In a more global context, we can also see that the ability to imagine community in this way is a privilege far more often afforded to subjects in the First World. Furthermore, the privileged illusion is also sustained for some at the expense of others. It was a privilege, as Butler asserts in Precarious Life, “to be the place that could not be attacked, where life was safe from violence from abroad, where the only violence we knew was the kind that we inflicted on ourselves. The violence we inflict on others is only—and always—selectively brought to our attention” (39). It is possible to argue that few people in the West would actively oppose the idea that the world would be a better place if everyone in it were able to live without the immanent threat of violence. However, it is also possible to argue that taking our First World security for granted fails to remedy what Butler criticizes as “the radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe” (Undoing Gender 24). On top of this, “unconditional solidarity with all victims” is precluded by unconditional consent-by-default to the logics that create illusions of security through violent
means. In this context, as Jacques Derrida suggested in response to 9/11, “no one is politically guiltless” (qtd. in Žižek 57).

Understanding Privilege and Collective Responsibility

We can clarify this argument about collective responsibility for the unequal global distributions of vulnerability, by looking closely at the way that identity privileges operate within a single culture. As I will explore later, *Saturday* does this with respect to class. In an essay on race, gender, and sexuality as forms of identity un/privilege, Devon A. Carbado posits “the notion that taking identity privileges for granted helps to legitimize problematic assumptions about identity and entitlement,” assumptions that implicitly sustain systems of inequality and injustice (209). For example, he argues that race, gender and sexuality function as systems of cultural organization that make marginalized groups vulnerable to violence or discrimination on the basis of their identity. These same systems have a simultaneously depoliticizing effect on those whose identities create a form of security on the basis of being, for example, white, male and/or straight. Carbado explains that privilege and its taken-for-granted security often manifest themselves in the form of “negative identity signification” where, for example, a white man may not think of himself as raced or gendered because he is, in this sense, the norm. Here we can see that privilege has a neutralizing or depoliticizing effect upon those who have it. The privileged are excluded from the threat of violence and yet take this security to be an unquestionable fact of life. In order to disrupt this unexamined sense of security, Carbado makes an argument for “a privilege-centered understanding of discrimination” based upon the assumption that privilege and discrimination are part of the same field (209). From this perspective, white privilege is sustained by racism and, by the same token, racism cannot exist without the complicity of those who experience white privilege. Carbado does not argue reductively that ‘all whites are racist,
whether they know it or not’ but instead that we need a wider conception of discrimination and broader definition of political culpability for it. Moving beyond the recognition of directly discriminatory acts, Carbado insists that if we occupy positions of privilege but fail to question aspects of the social order that produce unprivileged, we are complicit in profiting from and reproducing an unjust, discriminatory and potentially violent system. Carbado’s argument is, in effect, a call for recognition of collective responsibility.

This perspective is evident in a criticism of Saturday voiced by Zadie Smith in her interview with McEwan. She notes the way that the narrative pays close, descriptive attention to the comforts of Perowne’s lifestyle and the way that these luxuries allow him to celebrate progress, civilization and stability. As a reader, Smith finds it difficult to empathize and “celebrate with Henry Perowne, knowing what his privileges are based on” (225). She asks, “surely one of the problems we have with all this progress is that it has been at the expense of foreign places and foreign people who do not partake of this progress, and that’s exactly why we’re in this shitstorm/‘war-without-end’ nightmare scenario right now” (225)? In response, McEwan acknowledges these “conventions of liberal intellectual anxiety, one of the spectral opponents of life in the West” but also asserts that “the reason I wanted to make Perowne wealthy is because, actually, that’s what the first world is” (226). McEwan adds that “you block these [less privileged] people out of your world picture. It’s a kind of framing … But great things are achieved within that frame” (226). In this last statement, McEwan is trying to avoid the essentially hypocritical position of unreservedly criticizing Western culture without recognizing the aspects of it from which he and his imagined characters profit. However, we can still see the problem with this kind of framing; it fails to recognize any sense of personal or political responsibility. To return to Butler’s observations, we can see that Perowne’s security and
privilege are dependent upon a mutually productive relationship with the relative weakness and vulnerability of others; however, the “negative identity signification” of privilege affords him a particular kind of stable perspective or “frame” that ignores the collective responsibility that goes with privilege.

Recognizing and acting in accordance with this new definition of collective responsibility involves a change in perspective of the kind demanded by Carbado. We need a form of “self-relating,” to borrow Žižek’s term. We need to place ourselves into a larger picture that includes others with whom ‘we’ would not necessarily identify, for example, because they are not part of what we perceive to be ‘our’ community. Frameworks of “negative identity signification” need to be revealed before their discriminatory effects can be disrupted. But, as Carbado explains, disrupting these frameworks is often the best way of revealing them. As I will explore more fully in chapter two, “Disrupted Frames,” many of the frames through which Perowne perceives the world are revealed to be very partial, insecure, and in need of constant re-inscription. For instance, he suffers from an anxious loss of faith in the fictions of national security and oscillates between a view of the world as benign and dangerous. Butler makes an argument that 9/11 produces such a change in perspective on a global scale in that “the loss of First World presumption is the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world as a national entitlement” (39). In light of Carbado’s analysis, it is perhaps possible to characterize “the presumption of First World impermeability” as a type of cultural “negative identity signification” that could not be revealed until it was disrupted by the trauma of 9/11. Like many in the West, Perowne feels a heightened sense that his way of life may be under threat or subject to sudden, violent interruption. But, because of the immediate privileges and luxuries of his local situation—he can go out and buy lobsters, play squash, and drive around London in his
Mercedes—this danger feels hypothetical and is sustained more by media narratives than any direct experience or immediate threat. Thus, although he is made anxious by what he sees in the media, he tends to re-inscribe his belief in the stability of the status quo and retreat into the relatively safe and privileged space afforded by detached intellectual introspection.

In an argument that has parallels with Edkins’ points about the transformative potential of traumatic revelations, Carbado goes on to explore alternative ways in which the revelation, and therefore dismantling of, this security and “negative identity signification” can offer the potential for transformation of the social order. In order to begin to undo the injustices of racism, and hetero/sexism, he does not argue that privileged individuals or groups should have to start experiencing the types of discrimination felt by the marginalized but rather that privileged subjects should “recognize and grapple with” the fact that they do not have to (209). In the context of Butler’s argument, we can make a case not that people in the privileged West need to start undergoing the traumas felt in less stable parts of the world—this is not an argument that the USA somehow ‘deserved’ 9/11—but that an ethical imperative has emerged in its wake. We need to resist the desire to reassemble these stabilizing frames. We need to set aside the assumption that a particular national identity endows us with an “entitlement” to security and “recognize and grapple with” a newly revealed reality in which, as Susan Sontag succinctly puts it, “our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering” (102-3). It is in this process of recognition and grappling that a “field of ethical enmeshment” can be established beyond the confines of “imagined communities” such as state and nation and toward “unconditional solidarity with all victims.”
Narrative Tactics

What kinds of narratives might move us towards a new understanding of community in terms of collective responsibility, equal distribution of vulnerability and “ethical enmeshment?” In order to approach this question, we need to return to the issue of narrative’s power to inscribe meaning and bring social reality into being. The terms which Edkins, Butler and Carbado use to suggest forms of resistance and social transformation—“encircling the trauma,” “tarrying with grief,” “recognize and grapple”—are all redolent of a particular relationship to power and meaning. The relationship can be defined, using Michel de Certeau’s terms, as “tactical” rather than “strategic.” According to de Certeau, tactics and strategies represent two different ways of operating in relation to power, and two different ways of making meaning and narratives out of these relations. Dominant power, for example that of the state, relies upon a form of knowledge-as-power that is defined by an “ability to transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (36). As we have seen, complex narratives and identificatory processes all work to construct the nation’s “imagined community” as a readable space. This also works to establish a space of authority from which the state “postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats can be managed” (37). This stable position—with its clearly defined limits between “base” and “exteriority,” self and other—makes strategic operations possible. These “strategic” operations are defined as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible once a subject with will and power can be isolated” (37). Here, authority is contingent upon the power to produce and disseminate narratives, narratives that create a stable identity with clear inside/outside distinction. In order for this identity to become a readable space, any ambivalence
that might problematize this distinction between inside and outside, or self and other, must be erased.

Different narratives are produced when this type of power is lacking. In contrast to the “strategies” by which, for example, state power operates, a tactic is “an art of the weak” that “must play with the terrain imposed on in and organized by the law of a foreign power” (37). Tactics are associated with a lack of power, privilege and security and with incomplete knowledge. In everyday life, tactics might involve minute processes such as deciding when to turn the television on or off. In the most extreme and violent context of the attacks on the World Trade Center, tactics took the form of, for example, the phone calls from inside the towers, the missing posters displayed in the aftermath. They respond to a loss of power and certainty. We can see that the world of strategic narratives and predetermined answers was temporarily suspended as a result of 9/11. In the context of the attacks—the opening of “trauma time” and the disruption of stable narratives—First World nation states were also placed in the unusual position of having to rely upon tactics outside of the normal range of “politics.” However, the state was soon able to return to the more strategic mode by which its power more usually operates—rather than making new narratives, we returned to old ones. In the case of 9/11, the event was quickly transformed into a readable space through its absorption into narratives of patriotism and heroism. These narratives were then used to legitimize strategic and ethically questionable military action against those who were defined as targets or threats.

Therefore, we can begin to see that, as a form of resistance and exploration of alternatives, the “field of ethical enmeshment” or “self-relating” needs to be established tactically rather than strategically. It needs to involve negotiating uncertainty and ambivalence without erasing and depoliticizing it. As Butler puts it, “one must enter into collective work in
which one’s own status as a subject must, for democratic reasons, become disoriented, exposed to what it does not know” (*Undoing Gender* 36). This involves letting go of many assumptions about autonomy, stability, and the entitlement to security. This process will be uncomfortable, with no certain objectives or outcomes. We will move from clear convictions to a state of contestation with our own certainty. Ethical tactics operate by asking a set of questions rather than creating narratives that fit predetermined answers. We have to resist the temptation to re-inscribe the narratives that offer security as a privilege in return for sustaining the discriminatory effects of a “culture of violent solutions.” The gaps revealed when these narratives “fail” need to be viewed as signifiers of our relations to others and reminders of our collective responsibility.

Across all three chapters of this thesis, I reinforce the idea that moments of disruption, uncertainty and ambivalence, while very unsettling to a compulsively rationalizing character like Perowne and to the West in general, need to be encircled rather than erased. I interpret the political significance of these moments of ambivalence, suggesting that they reveal gaps in the narratives of social order that, in Edkins’ words, “pretends to wholeness and closure.” I also argue over the course of the chapters that *Saturday* itself resists closure through its structural incorporation of gaps between Perowne’s internal monologue and the third person presentation of it. McEwan’s use of the third person creates a textual narrative—subtly distinct from Perowne’s internal perspective—that is emotionally and ethically neutral. The effect of this is to slightly de-center Perowne’s perspective and continually frustrate his desire for complete knowledge or explanation. McEwan does not ask readers to identify uncritically with Perowne. Rather, the gaps in the text—what is revealed to be incomplete or limiting about Perowne’s way of looking at the world—become important sites for understanding and critiquing the way in
which, as subjects, we are involved in reproducing a particular version of social order in our daily lives.

Once we recognize this collective responsibility for the reproduction of the social order, we have to ask about the role of violence in forming and maintaining our communities. We have to question what kind of power imbalances are sustained when we legitimize certain forms of violence. Who or what benefits the most? Are unequal distributions of vulnerability redressed or manipulated? Whose lives are deemed more or less valuable—effectively more or less human—by narratives that seek to legitimize violence? Does our course of action work to diminish the store of violence, or merely displace it onto someone else? Does it acknowledge or disguise collective responsibility and enmeshment? Do our actions acknowledge or erase ambivalence with regards to relationships between self and other? Do our narratives project undesirable traits onto others while failing to examine these traits in ourselves? These are all questions that need to be asked if we are to commit ourselves fully to the search for a more ethical way of being in the world both as individuals and also, particularly, but not exclusively, in response to 9/11.

As I now move into a closer reading of Saturday, I want to look at the ways in which it dramatizes precisely this search. Saturday is set in a moment in recent history—the run up to the Iraq war—where such questions, as outlined above, conspicuously failed either to be asked at all or to be considered sufficiently legitimate to problematize the case for war in either Britain or the USA. The events of McEwan’s novel highlight the necessity of asking such questions if we are to find ways of diminishing, rather than escalating violence at individual, national and international levels. This is my argument in the final chapter, “‘Encircling’ Ambivalence,” where I elaborate upon the idea that the novel moves its main protagonist towards a new
awareness of his enmeshment with others. I look closely at the narratives used to explain Perowne’s decision not to press charges against Baxter and contend that this decision can be read as a critique of the “culture of violent solutions” as it operates on individual, national and international levels.

Before going any further, however, it is important to recognize the differences in the response to 9/11 and the Iraq war that occur between Britain and the U.S., not least because Saturday is written by a British author and set in London. Firstly, it is fair to suggest that the trauma of 9/11 itself was felt more directly in the U.S. It was an unprecedented attack on a supposedly impermeable nation. The arguments made above about the effects of the state’s re-inscription of narratives of heroism and patriotism in response to the trauma clearly apply more directly to the U.S. context; however, these processes are far from irrelevant to the British situation. As a diminishing world power that is experiencing loss of national autonomy and global influence, Britain is very much affected by the political climate and decisions made in the U.S. The case for war would undoubtedly not have been made by Britain alone. In this context, while the novel does not directly reference or describe the feelings and narratives that emerged in the U.S. after 9/11, it does very clearly engage with the global climate engendered by the U.S.-led actions taken in response to 9/11. Saturday reflects, and reflects upon, the culture of anxiety that continues to escalate in Britain today, in part through the anticipation of similar trauma.

Additionally, although the re-inscription of dominant narratives may have happened in a uniquely American way after 9/11, Edkins argues that many other nation states have commonly employed such strategies of re-inscription throughout their histories. Britain has historically been involved in similar processes of recycling trauma into narratives of national identity and security; one need only notice the ongoing adherence to narratives that present the two World
Wars as Britain’s defining moments to see this recycling effect at work. When Perowne looks out over the buildings in the square where he lives, he sees the Regency façade on the other side as “a reconstruction, a pastiche—wartime Fitzrovia took some hits from the Luftwaffe” (2). In effect, a visual narrative about national heritage is used to restore normality after the trauma of the Blitz. Perowne reads the reconstruction as a marker of the city’s resilience. However, at the end of the novel, Perowne observes fearfully that “London, his small part of it, lies wide open, impossible to defend, waiting for its bomb” (286). In this way, the text eerily anticipates the London bombing of July 7th, 2005—an event now known as “7/7,” a clear marker of its insertion into a post-9/11 narrative frame.

After this recent traumatic assault on everyday life in London, the novel now serves a perhaps more pressing purpose than it did at the time of publication. The ethical failures revealed by the U.S. response to 9/11 need to be guarded against in the context of the British response to 7/7. Unfortunately, however, similar mistakes seem to be being made. Instead of addressing questions of social privilege, racism, and alienation, the government adopted a strategy of increased security that is perceived as victimizing the Muslim community in the UK. In this respect, the points that I argue the novel is making—points about the value of ethical enmeshment and shared vulnerability as alternatives to further anxious isolation and security—are urgent and necessary ones.
CHAPTER ONE: MEDIA AND A “COMMUNITY OF ANXIETY”

Besides Perowne and Baxter, one of the most significant actors in the novel is the media—in particular the television and radio news. Media forms are woven into the fabric of Perowne’s daily routine, and engagement with them is presented as a blend of habit and leisure activity. For example, we are told that “with the idea of the news, inseparable from it, at least at weekends, is the lustrous prospect of a glass of red wine” (180). We see Perowne preparing a meal while half-watching the news with the sound “on mute” (180). We see him reading a book while “at the same time” listening to a radio story about Hans Blix addressing the UN (4). As this last example demonstrates, McEwan creates a sense of the novel’s social and political context without narrating large scale events directly. Instead, he incorporates references to real-life events and people, filtered through Perowne’s perceptions of, and meditations on, what he has heard, read, or seen in the news. Most importantly, the anti-war march that occurs alongside the novel’s plot places the fictional events into the context of a specific date in recent history—February 15th, 2003—shortly before the invasion of Iraq. Although the novel was published after the invasion had gone ahead, we can still read it as offering a kind of ‘history of the present.’ The text engages with a particular narrative frame of immanent terrorist threat, established and sustained by Western nation states and mass media since 9/11, and uses this frame to create a sense of recognizable contemporaneity for readers, particularly in Britain or America.

In addition to drawing upon this narrative frame in order to contextualize the events of the novel, McEwan also uses the events of the novel to critique this dominant narrative frame and the processes that construct it. As Saturday explores the ways in which the world of “politics” enters the sphere of the characters’ daily lives via media representations and narratives,
it notices that this process seems to establish a “community of anxiety.” The novel examines the limitations of this form of community, a community that emphasizes hierarchical and one-way relationships between individuals and structures or institutions, rather than lateral and two-way connections between people. Spectatorship replaces opportunities for active involvement in the public life of the community, and active critical thinking is replaced by compulsive and passive consumption of news media.

In order to demonstrate these limitations, it is necessary to understand three different but related elements that work together to produce both the imagined community of anxiety and the narrative frame of threat and insecurity. The first is structural. As Philip Smith suggests, media narratives provide a linking structure between the macrorealm of global or national events and the microrealm of individual consciousness, thought, and feeling. This structure facilitates imagined connections between individuals who are cognizant of a community in which events occur beyond their immediate knowledge or perception. Secondly, mass media’s imaginative structures also invite a particular style of engagement by individuals which, I will explain, is largely passive, intermittent, private and anxious. Thirdly, in terms of actual content, when individuals engage with these structures in these ways, they are more receptive to narratives about increased threat to, and need for, national security. These narratives then create a particular framework for understanding events, a framework that becomes inseparable from individual and collective perceptions of ‘reality.’ People expect and, to some extent, even desire events that fit into this narrative frame and ignore those events that do not. By paying very close attention to Perowne’s cognitive processes, the novel establishes a convincing critique of the type of community generated by Western news media. McEwan highlights the potential for this process to isolate, disempower and depoliticize private individuals while empowering structures
of state authority that profit from an anxious status quo. The state profits not least because narratives of urgent threat work to disguise the post-cold war reduction of national politics to “technical managerialism” rather than meaningful debates about how we might transform our world for the better (Hammond 88).

Structures of Media and Community

Before looking at the novel’s incorporation of the content of the particular narratives that have become prevalent in Britain since 9/11, we must first understand how Perowne’s acts of reading, watching, or listening to the news presuppose and therefore reproduce a certain structure of social order. His desire “to see how it stands with the world” is evidence of the belief that his individual existence is “tied to a generality” (180) of which he has no objective knowledge. In Imagined Communities, Anderson speaks of a ritual quality involved in reading a newspaper. The act connects the individual to a sense of something far bigger than him/herself even though “it is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull” (35). An “imagined community” is engendered because “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (35). We can see here that confidence in the “imagined community” is bound up with a linear conception of time where people imagine others like themselves reading about recent events “simultaneously.” The effect of this structure is soothing, creating a routine sense of stability, linearity, and belonging for the believers or “communicants.” Perowne, although an avowedly secular figure, clearly represents this almost religious attachment to the media. “Sunday morning” is spent not at church but with “the newspapers they deplore but always read” (275).
Forms of Engagement

However, reliance upon imagined connections between micro and macro levels places severe limitations on the community. The forms of engagement invited by mass media are largely isolating and passive because the structure is predicated upon private acts of imagination. As Michael Warner explains, the sense of imagined togetherness afforded by the media may in fact be disguising a greater need:

Mass media … have their own way of connecting people. They reach private individuals in their intimate spaces, in order to connect consumers directly to the global world of mass culture. We think we are being given solidarity with the world and do not notice that this imaginary commonality is in fact a substitute for the very kind of active, public solidarity of which we are so acutely deprived. (70)

Somewhat ironically, then, the kind of ‘community’ offered by the media is isolating because the media establishes links between individuals and social structures, commonly bypassing other kinds of community ties between individuals themselves. In a comment redolent of Warner’s argument about the way in which media offers a substitute for forms of “active public solidarity,” the novel asks, “does [Perowne] think he’s contributing something, watching news programmes, or lying on his back on the sofa on a Sunday afternoon” (184)? “Active, public solidarity”—whereby community is structured in practice through social interaction between individuals in public spaces—is foreclosed by a form of community that relies upon passive, private imagination. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that Perowne debates the war in private rather than engaging with the anti-war marchers directly.

This is neither to say that Perowne is simply apathetic and has no desire for an active role, nor that he is emotionally impervious to wider events. Quite the opposite is in fact the case:
the type of emotional engagement with the media that Perowne exemplifies is caused in part by his frustrated desire to play a more active or meaningful role. In an article in the *Guardian*, published on September 15th, 2001, McEwan specifically relates helpless, empathetic responses to news stories to the distance between individuals and the active world of state strategy making:

I suspect that in between times, when we are not consuming news, the majority of us are not meditating on recent foreign policy failures, or geopolitical strategy, or the operational range of helicopter gunships. Instead, we remember what we have seen, we daydream helplessly … we fantasize ourselves into the events. What if it was me? ("Only Love")

It is precisely because the active world of “politics” and “strategy” is removed from everyday life and only enters this sphere through media representations and narratives that private empathy seems to be the only available tactic for individuals who desire a connection to wider events.

This “helplessly” detached but emotionally engaged psychological state is explored in more detail in *Saturday’s* opening scene where Perowne wakes in the early hours of the morning and, out of his bedroom window, happens to see a burning plane flying low over London. Perowne is placed in an unusual position here. He is witnessing a unique event first hand, before it is recounted in the news and thus incorporated into a stable narrative form. However, although this is a novel experience, it is also strangely familiar and, in a sense, already mediated. His memory of 9/11 creates a particular interpretive frame for what he is seeing:

It’s already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again, the unseen captives driven through the sky to slaughter, at which time their gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed. (15)
This is the only point in the novel where McEwan makes direct reference to the events of 9/11. However, in another sense it is ever present, re-inscribed into Perowne’s consciousness of the threat of another attack. When he sees the burning plane, his first instinct is to imagine that he may be witnessing another 9/11.

Not only does the event seem to fit easily into the familiar narrative of expected attack, the structure of Perowne’s interaction with the event is also familiar. He watches traumatic events from a safe distance in a way that reminds him of his everyday experience of engaging with the media:

That is the other familiar element—the horror of what he can’t see. Catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all, and into all this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free. The fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against the fanatics. To escape the heat of that fire, which part of the plane might you run to? (15-16)

Here, the absence of human figures prompts Perowne’s empathetic imagination. He asks, as McEwan does in the Guardian, “what if it was me?” Perowne is characterized by his desire for knowledge, a desire, ultimately, for order and control. With this in mind, his imaginative leaps on board the burning plane do not simply signify compassion and concern for the passengers but, perhaps more notably, a desire to compensate for his own lack of knowledge and understanding and to appease his sense of helplessness and detachment.

He does manage to rationalize this thought process to an extent. Even at this moment of uncertainty, Perowne is still confident that the event can and will be transformed into a readable space by the media: “a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of
himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery. What then collapses will be his own ignorance” (18). He spends the rest of the day flicking the news on and off in the hope of discovering what the events mean and thus “collapsing his ignorance.” His desire to feel implicated and involved in the formation of meaning is also readable as a desire for a role in the formation of community—a community of shared knowledge with others brought about when the event is incorporated into a collective reality. Subjects can say, ‘I know what others like me also know, and we are all knowing this at the same time.’ However, such desire for collectivity can only be met by the media and so Perowne continues his vain search for a sense of active community through the isolating forms of mass media.

For McEwan, the fact that Perowne’s desire for collectivity can often only be ‘met’ by the media is problematic. However, McEwan does not dismiss the function of the media entirely. Whereas in a novel like *Amsterdam* (1998), McEwan offers a sharp, satirical critique of journalistic cynicism, manipulation and moral vacuum, he claims that 9/11 was “a heroic moment for journalism” (qtd. in Z. Smith 211). He reinforces this point in his own *Guardian* article, stating that “the derided profession of journalism can rise, and with immense resource to public tragedy” (“Only Love”). Given the way in which, as Anderson theorizes, media forms often reflect and help sustain the structure of imagined communities in everyday life, it is perhaps unsurprising that our desire for media narratives can increase in times of crisis and trauma—times when the “imagined community” perceives itself to be under threat and when linear narratives are threatened by the sudden eruption of “trauma time.” In the *Guardian*, McEwan suggests that media can administer to a public need and notes that engaging with the media can help individuals respond to the trauma of events such as 9/11. We have “no active role to play in these terrible events” and instead “we simply watch the television, read the papers,
turn on the radio again. Listening to the analysts and pundits is soothing to some extent. Expertise is reassuring” (“Only Love”). According to McEwan, engaging with the media can be a tactic for dealing with the shock and initial meaningless of the event, and with the reality that there is often nothing we can do.

In the novel, Perowne’s constant checking on the news story about the plane repeats many people’s experiences of witnessing the events of 9/11. It repeats their desire for the ordering effects of media narratives. Having said this, the novel is not set in this “heroic moment” of immediate media response to tragedy. As Zadie Smith responds to McEwan’s comment, after the initial crisis, “the moment turns quickly and depressingly” (211). During and immediately after 9/11, media narratives also repeated and disseminated the sense of traumatic invasion, and in fact continue to do so. The novel does not present Perowne’s engagement with the media as a tactic for dealing with initial shock and trauma; instead it is a “habit [that] has grown stronger these past two years” (180). The habit is an ordering tactic that has not only become almost compulsive, “a different scale of news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes” (180). This new frame of reference exaggerates feelings of anxiety, anxiety that is revealed to be disproportionate when Perowne discovers that the burning plane resulted from engine failure rather than terrorism. Upon this realization, he quickly forgets about the story; it is no longer relevant or newsworthy because it does not fit into the post-9/11 narrative of expected attack.

Projecting a Paranoid Reality

More disturbingly, before Perowne forgets about the story, he actually experiences a feeling of slight disappointment. McEwan suggests that the media is very much complicit in manufacturing Perowne’s disappointment: “you can almost hear in the introduction the
presenter’s regretful tone” (184). It seems that the form and structure of the media is somehow “disappointed” by the content of a less than apocalyptic story, suggesting a problem with the way that the “imagined community” generated by mass media is susceptible to manipulation.

Perowne’s disappointment is an interesting sensation that clearly has little to do with empathy or a desire for peaceful order and instead much to do with the need to have dominant narratives confirmed.

Elucidating this idea further, McEwan vividly portrays the potential for the “macrorealm” of “politics” to intrude upon an individual consciousness in ways that might not be rational or desirable. For example, Perowne senses that:

The government’s council—that an attack in a European or American city is an inevitability—isn’t only a disclaimer of responsibility, it’s a heady promise. Everyone fears it but there’s also a darker longing in the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a blasphemous curiosity … Please don’t let it happen. But let me see it all the same, as it’s happening, and from every angle. (180)

Here we can see a complex and ambivalent relationship between government, media, individual and collective imagination. Within this structure of relations, narratives of immanent threat can be seen to produce rather than simply reflect a fearful collective reality. Perowne is implicitly advised by the state to think of himself as a potential victim. He is able to identify as a victim to an extent because he has learned habits of empathy by routinely consuming media representations of distant trauma. Interestingly, however, Perowne imagines himself more readily as a potential witness—“please let me see it.” This additional combination of attraction and repulsion suggests a further contradiction in that the imagined “community of anxiety” both fears and desires media representations of “monstrous scenes.” The community is used to the
privilege of detached spectatorship, their sense of detachment clearly linked to security as a fact of life.

At the same time as being detached, though, the community is also dependent upon the “council” of a government that is complicit, if not deliberately involved, in manufacturing public fears and paradoxical desires, feelings that reinforce the need for the government’s system of apparent security. These fears become solidified because, as Jacqueline Rose explains, “paranoid impulses don’t just project onto reality as delusion; they affect reality and become a component of it” (28). The novel suggests one way in which this incorporation of paranoia into reality might happen by depicting the fear and dark expectation of an attack as “one thread that binds the days” (180). This binding effect reflects Edkins’ argument about the tendency for nation states to recycle trauma into a linear narrative that gives form and structure to collective reality.

Based upon this analysis of structure, style of engagement and narrative content, we can conclude that the media occupies a paradoxical position in the novel. The media is both a facet of everyday life that offers Perowne an (albeit illusory) sense of a stable social order and also a facet that sustains narratives that imply that this order is under threat. The novel highlights an endemic problem in Western culture: often the only tactic available for individuals who cannot influence the world of politics is to respond to this supposed threat by continually “consuming news” (“Only Love”) in sporadic, passive, and partially empathetic ways. Thus, anxiety continues to be manufactured, unabated by opportunities for “active public solidarity.” The manufactured nature of this public mood is revealed to be especially problematic when public anxiety is used by the state to secure the loyalty of the people and legitimize violence against those who are defined as threats or outsiders.
The Democratic Function of News

The arguments presented above are not intended to suggest that the press is merely a cipher for government propaganda, or that unified narratives are presented consistently, or even deliberately. The relationships between individual perception, collective perception, government, and media are in fact formed by a convergence of processes that are complex and ambivalent. We have also seen that media narratives play an important role in negotiating democratic consensus about legitimate uses of violence. William A. Dorman argues that “the press is the only institution that can reasonably be expected to make possible a robust debate over foreign policy, in general and the war option, in particular, in a timely enough way to make a difference in the choices made by policy elites” because the general public lacks the resources and, often, the inclination, to engage in seriously informed debate (12). As Philip Smith does, Dorman points out that “under democratic theory, a privately owned press unrestrained by government provides a free marketplace of ideas that make it possible for citizens (as opposed to subjects) to debate alternatives, become aware of abuses of state power, and, ultimately, hold the government accountable” (13). However, many commentators have noted the way in which this process broke down, on both sides of the Atlantic, in the run up to the invasion of Iraq (see Butler, Dorman, Hammond, Žižek).³

³ It ought to be noted that different narratives that made up the case for war were presented with contrasting emphases on either side of the Atlantic. In an analysis of the U.S. media’s treatment of the case for war, William A. Dorman argues that links between Iraq and 9/11, although unable to be substantiated, were strongly implied by the placement of references and news items that “provided a context from which such a connection could be made” (15). Furthermore, the trauma of 9/11 worked to limit criticism, promote a “deferential” attitude in the press and increase the public appetite for military action (15). In contrast, 9/11 was not the major reference point of legitimizing narratives in Britain, but was still an insidious presence, reminding us about the threat of another attack. The idea of avenging 9/11 was also de-emphasized, although there was evidently a strong sense of solidarity with the U.S. Instead, the arguments for war rested upon Saddam Hussein’s supposedly dangerous access to weapons of mass destruction and his willingness to use them against the West. Pro-war politicians also tried to present the invasion as a humanitarian intervention that would remove a leader guilty of gross human rights offences. In an essay about the British media debate, Philip Hammond identifies an underlying consensus that action would be painful and risky, but that the consequences of inaction were far more terrifying (91). However, he also argues that it was essentially “an impoverished and bogus public debate” based upon flimsy justifications and superficial
Saturday explores the limitations of this democratic system of legitimization from the perspective of one individual. Perowne is presented as losing faith in this system, not least because he is at least partly conscious of his compulsive and potentially manufactured relationship to the media. Although he desires an active role and wants to engage in informed debate, he is paralyzed by ambivalence and is unable to make any clear statement or objective judgment about the war: “Perowne has had ambivalent, or confused and shifting ideas about this coming invasion” (60-1). His ambivalence about the various arguments for and against the war is exacerbated by his loss of faith in the government and media structures that present these arguments to him: “he suspects he’s becoming a dupe, the willing febrile consumer of news fodder, opinion and speculation and of all the crumbs the authorities let fall. He’s a docile citizen, watching Leviathan grow stronger while he creeps under its shadow for protection” (184). The shadowy image used here hardly presents state power as entirely benevolent. Furthermore, the loss of the capacity for independent judgment questions whether the legitimizing process outlined by Smith and Dorman is really as rational and democratic as it purports to be in theory. If we recognize that Perowne has “lost the habits of skepticism, he’s becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn’t thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses he isn’t thinking independently” (185), we also contest assumptions about the autonomy of the “individual conscience.” The weight of “contradictory opinion” does not, in practice, help Perowne to make a rational decision about the right course of action, or to hold the government oppositions (91). Thus, he identifies the underlying factors to be paranoid speculation and fear, quoting Tony Blair’s argument that he was motivated to go to war by “the fear that one day these new threats of weapons of mass destruction, rogue states and international terrorism combine to deliver catastrophe to our world” (91). Conspicuously absent here is any suggestion that weapons of mass destruction are also possessed by those we would consider part of “our world”; absent is any acknowledgement that many “rogue states” were initially empowered by West, or that “international terrorism” may be related to global capitalism in any way. In short, these arguments fail to acknowledge that “we are involved with what we are fighting against” (Žižek 57) and instead displace the violent potential that we fear may exist in “our world” and displace it onto those we construct as enemies.
accountable. Instead, his ambivalence is presented as yet another factor that simply keeps him “consuming news.”

A form of ambivalence is also reflected in the narrative structure of the novel itself. Sometimes the narrative suggests gaps between Perowne’s internal monologue and the third person narrative of events. Sometimes observations about the impact of media on individuals appear in the narrative as thoughts that occur to Perowne himself—he “senses” or he “suspects.” At other moments, it is less clear whether the third person narrative is delivering a conscious internal monologue or commenting upon processes of which Perowne is not conscious. For example, the narrative asks, “does he think that his ambivalence—if that’s what it is—excuses him from the general conformity? He’s deeper in than most. His nerves, like tautened strings, vibrate obediently with each news ‘release’” (185). Given Perowne’s characterization of “an habitual observer of his own moods” (4), it is plausible to assume that he is at least partially capable of comprehending the processes that draw him into complicity. However, although he can often comprehend these processes in retrospect, he still seems incapable of controlling them or finding alternatives. Whether he is “for or against the war on terror, or the war in Iraq … Either way it amounts to a consensus of a kind, an orthodoxy of attention, a mild subjugation in itself” (185). McEwan reinforces the idea that “consuming news” does not, in and of itself, present Perowne with the means to contest state power and hold the government accountable. The cumulative effect is that his ambivalence—about competing narratives that seek to de/legitimize the planned war and about the function of the legitimizing process itself—leads to inaction and consent by default. Of course, another effect for Perowne is yet more anxiety, and yet more consumption of news in an attempt to erase this disruptive ambivalence through detached analysis.
McEwan not only presents Perowne’s ambivalence as a marker of his political paralysis, but also as something that disrupts his sense of autonomous selfhood. Perowne “experiences his own ambivalence as a form of vertigo, of dizzy indecision” (143). This description is significant because we can read his dizziness here as evidence of a de-centering of the stable ego. The effect is particularly disruptive given that, for Perowne, rational knowledge is synonymous with order, control and stability. He feels that his ambivalence depoliticizes him. But, if we redefine the terms of the “political” to signify moments of disruption of the social order and linear narrative of state “politics,” can this dizziness and vertigo not also be read as a useful “political” experience? Butler argues that, in order to begin to establish more ethical forms of community, “one’s own status as a subject must, for democratic reasons, become disoriented” (36); is Perowne not experiencing precisely this? From this perspective, Perowne’s dizziness points to gaps in the democratic mechanisms that supposedly endow sovereign individuals with the power to make the decisions that shape their communities. His ambivalence implicitly questions the narratives of state politics that pretend to rationality and closure. However, this is where the private nature of his ambivalence becomes all the more problematic. As an isolated individual, he cannot create outlets for a transformative “encircling” of his dizziness, ambivalence, and disruption. The public world of democratic “politics,” sustained by linear narratives, does not seem to allow a space or political voice for disoriented subjects. It posits two options—for or against—neither of which seem viable to Perowne. In the absence of alternatives, Perowne clings to the one idea that can erase his ambivalence and lessen his sense of responsibility: “the one thing that Perowne thinks he knows about this war is that it is going to happen, with or without the UN” (60).
The novel does, however, explore possible forms of political action that seek to influence the decisions of the government. Perowne’s ambivalent inaction marks a notable point of contrast with the anti-war protests that provide the backdrop to the novel’s events. The protests can be read as a form of the “active public solidarity” that Perowne seems to be so acutely lacking. However, the protests do not merely function as a critique of Perowne’s ineffectual position; the novel is not uncritical of the protests either. As Perowne views the protest marchers on the television, he sees the sign “Not in My Name” go by repeatedly. From one perspective, the declaration “Not in My Name” is an assertion of the active role of the individual in the democratic process. The slogan seeks to remind the government that it is supposed to represent the will of the people. However, Perowne is skeptical that the style of “democracy” represented by the protests is becoming indistinguishable from Western consumer culture. He notes that the sign’s “cloying self-regard suggests a bright new world of protest, with the fussy consumers of shampoos and soft drinks demanding to feel good, or nice” (71). Philip Hammond makes a similar statement in his essay, “Postmodern War on Iraq,” in which he argues that the debate about the war became “anti-political” because the matter was reduced to a question of personal conscience and speculation. Thus, he argues, “the slogan of the anti-war movement—“Not In My Name”—was less a political demand than an abdication of responsibility. War itself was seen as inevitable: the aim was not so much to stop it as to absolve oneself of blame” (93).

Hammond argues that the “antipolitical” nature of the debate fits into a post-cold war context in which western nation states have become devoid of a “shared framework of meaning”—i.e. something to define themselves against. Where politics used to be about “competing visions of the future” and different models of political community, since the
overarching dominance of global capitalism has been established, domestic politics is now reduced to “technical managerialism” (88). This means that, at home, “the political sphere is emptied of substance” (90). Thus, politicians look to the international sphere in order to create new meta-narratives about the need for humanitarian intervention into violent and oppressive situations and the urgency of the war on terror. These dominant narratives are supposed to restore a shared framework of meaning and “forge new connections with an individualized and depoliticized electorate” (90). Hammond explains that the dominant narratives of humanitarian intervention and the war on terror fail to forge these new political connections because they “bypass the realm of politics,” the world of interaction between people and competing ideas. Instead they appeal directly to the moral conscience and private fears of individuals. This bypassing effect creates an “anti-political” situation where people feel alienated and ineffectual. Perowne is a perfect example of this sentiment. His engagement with the media individualizes him because he is making isolated connections with structures and narratives instead of interacting with other people. The novel also shows us how he becomes depoliticized, not in the sense that he doesn’t care or doesn’t want to know about larger events, but in the sense that he feels that the system itself is hollow. He has no real influence and so feels that it doesn’t really matter either way what he thinks. He suspects, as Hammond argues, that the democratic system has become emptied of substance but does not know what to do about it. The possibility of imagining, let alone constructing, an alternative seems far out of reach.

In contrast, Perowne’s daughter, Daisy, retains her faith in the democratic system. She is firmly against military action and is frustrated by her father’s ambivalence. In an argument about the validity of the case for war, she demands that he exercise his democratic right to an opinion:
You’re an educated person living in what we like to call a mature democracy, and our government’s taking us to war. If you think that’s a good idea, fine, say so, make the argument, but don’t hedge your bets. Are we sending the troops in or not? It’s happening now. And making guesses about the future is what you do sometimes when you make a moral choice. It’s called thinking through the consequences. (193)

This is the most overt call to action in the novel, but the actions and consequences being discussed are far removed from the sphere of Perowne and Daisy’s daily lives since “they are fighting over armies that they will never see, about which they know almost nothing” (195). McEwan—via Perowne—identifies this as a privilege of life in the secure West:

And how luxurious, to work it all out at home in the kitchen, the geopolitical moves and military strategy, and not to be held to account, by voters, newspapers, friends, history.

When there are no consequences, being wrong is simply an interesting diversion. (198)

Here we get a sense that those in power will be held accountable for their decisions—as, with hindsight, we can see that they have been. However, Daisy and Perowne’s attempts to engage with the state-scale world of strategy-making appear, at best, merely symbolic and, at worst, presumptuous and self-important. The most active participant is really the media; it motivates the debate by appealing to moral conscience, facilitates the debate by providing information, and problematizes the debate’s foundations because both Perowne and Daisy’s views are comprised of “everything they’ve heard and read a hundred times” (191). Their roles in the debate about state strategy are de-legitimized by uncertain foundations of knowledge and detachment from consequences.

This can clearly be read as a critique of Daisy and Perowne’s privilege to engage in detached intellectualized debate. More importantly, however, the situation highlights flaws in
the democratic system itself whereby individuals are made to feel that political engagement amounts to making an individual and private moral choice. This is effectively an “anti-political” move because the significance of the choice is negated if its consequences are never brought to bear on the individual. Daisy and Perowne’s debate feels superficial and, as such, the novel seems to anticipate Hammond’s statement that, through the war in Iraq, “all the coalition has succeeded in doing is exporting the hollowness of its own political institutions somewhere else” (86). In this way, we can read Perowne’s ambivalence as giving the text a “political” quality that is different and potentially more radical than Daisy’s clearly stated anti-war message. The anti-war movement, as it is exemplified by the ostensibly “liberal” Daisy, does not question the form of political community upon which the debate rests. Her demand that her father state ‘for’ or ‘against’ mimics the false either/or reasoning of the government. Therefore the opposition to the war is potentially equally complicit in erasing rather than “encircling” the ambivalence and disorientation that gives both the text and the debate its potentially transformative “political” quality.

In the context of the difficulty of individual engagement with strategic narratives and public protest, the novel also explores a third more tactical option, represented by Perowne’s son, Theo. Theo resolves to try to keep the world of “politics” out of the frame of his everyday life, a tactic based upon the assumption that “the bigger you think, the crappier it looks:”

When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think closer in—you know, a girl I’ve just met, or this song I’m going to do with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto—think small. (35)
We might see Theo’s “thinking small” as a form of protest that blocks out manipulative media narratives and refuses to engage in hollow political rhetoric. We might also read this response as an affirmation of the value of individual human life in the face of global uncertainty, or a stoic determination to get on with things. Perowne also shows some resentment that he is rarely able to operate like his son. Perowne can still see a TV screen even while playing squash and asks himself, “Isn’t it possible to enjoy an hour’s recreating without this invasion, this infection from the public domain” (109)? He decides that “he has a right now and then—everyone has it—not to be disturbed by world events, or even street events.” He goes as far as to call this a “fundamental liberty” because it has to do with maintaining his “freedom of thought” (110).

However, from Butler’s perspective, we can see that this is not a right but another unevenly distributed privilege. “Thinking small” ignores the culturally and geographically specific conditions that allow Theo to separate the sphere of his immediate existence from the effects of global instability and violence. Simply put, Theo is taking advantage of a form of insulating privilege, and his failure to recognize this suggests a problematic sense of entitlement to security.

In terms of its critique of media narratives, community and forms of political action, we can see that the novel reaches something of an impasse. Through its examination of various responses and actions that are either encouraged or foreclosed by media narratives and political structures, *Saturday* offers a rationale for the tactics used by individuals trying to make a space to live in a culture of increasing fear and state-endorsed anxiety. These tactics include full or partial attention to the media, attempts or failures to empathize with those represented as victims, and attempts or failures to synthesize competing narratives in order to form an independent and morally valid opinion about what course of action the government should take. All three characters’ forms of political engagement, or lack thereof, are understandable but in some way
insufficient. The novel suggests that each reproduces aspects of the dominant social order in its own way. Daisy adheres firmly to narratives of individual democratic responsibility and “active public solidarity,” although we may question whether this does much more than appease her conscience. Although appearing perhaps more overtly politicized than her father, her refusal to accept his ambivalence as a viable political position reproduces the false stability of the democratic social order and its clear cut either/or reasoning. Theo responds to the climate of anxiety by insulating himself from it and removing elements that sustain it from his immediate perception. However, by doing so he takes advantage of a privileged form of security without questioning the way in which this might be denied to others. Perowne clings doggedly to his belief in the powers of the rational mind to order and make sense of events, if afforded a sufficiently detached perspective. However, when his desires for order and knowledge are not met, or he senses that his autonomous, meaning-making self is under threat, he retreats into isolating self-analysis and anxiety. This also represents a retreat from ideas that question the stability of the social order. In his impulse to order and control, he implicitly reproduces the social order.

*Saturday* certainly offers a comment upon the limitations of Perowne’s individual insularity, isolation, privilege and implicit consent. However, to read the novel purely in this way is to read in line with the individualizing and anti-political trends fostered by media and government. More significantly, then, we must read Perowne’s individual flaws as a logical extension of the type of community fostered by Western and nation states and news media, a community that pretends to wholeness, closure, and rational organization but is really predicated upon a fundamental ambivalence. Locating Perowne’s flaws in this context is not to argue that he is incapable, or excused from the task, of making significant ethical decisions, as we will see
in chapter three. From this perspective, though, a larger scale critique emerges. McEwan points readers toward the idea that mass media narratives about threats to national security sustain a depoliticized, individualized and passive “community of anxiety,” rather than affording individuals the opportunity to act decisively and take responsibility for their actions and choices at the level of human-to-human relationships.

McEwan provides no clear solutions as to what to do about this; however, I argue that the novel does afford readers the opportunity to “encircle” Perowne’s ambivalence and question its political significance. In this way, the novel makes a space—often unavailable in media debates—from which to begin grappling with the difficulty of imagining alternative forms of political community that must be based upon relationships between people themselves rather than on false assumptions about objective relationships between “individuals” and state structures or media narratives. This wider concern means that the novel is not just a retrospective debate about the run up to the Iraq war, but part of an ongoing discussion about the way community is imagined in Britain today.
CHAPTER TWO: DISRUPTED FRAMES

In the last chapter I explored the novel’s presentation of the media’s tendency to produce a passive “community of anxiety” and sustain a feeling of immanent threat. Perowne seeks to contain this sense of threat and anxiety through particular frames of perception and knowledge about the world he lives in. At the end of the novel, he looks over the square from his window, sees that it has been cleaned overnight and “tries to find reassurance in this orderliness” (281). We can see that the ordering effect of these knowledge frames relies heavily on the existence of a privileged, sovereign individual who is able to “transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (de Certeau 37). Perowne has a habit of indulging in an idle form of social analysis as he looks out from his window. He sees people who are “confident, cheerful, unoppressed, fit from private gym workouts, at home in their city” and contrasts them to “the various broken figures that haunt the benches” (281). He speculates about what causes people from all walks of life to become “drunks and junkies” but remains a detached observer, safe inside his fortified home. Perowne’s impulses to diagnose and intellectualize are evidence of his attempts to counter the sense of anxiety and threat, produced in part by the media, and instead render the world legible, and therefore knowable. This legibility is also contingent upon the ability to keep other perspectives marginalized, particularly if they introduce an element of disruptive ambivalence into the equation. As Edkins puts it, in a description that fits Perowne precisely, “in the rational west, we tend to seek certainty and security above all. We don’t like not knowing. So we pretend that we do. Or that if we don’t we could, given sufficient scientific research effort and enough money” (13). For Perowne, complete and objective knowledge is synonymous with complete control, and therefore any uncertainty disrupts his sense of autonomous self-hood. Nevertheless, although Perowne clings to knowledge as a form of
security and certainty, his attempts to order and control repeatedly fail, often because they are contingent upon excluding certain disruptive elements from the picture.

Arguably, Perowne spends so much time worrying about his detachment from, and disillusionment with, what he understands to be “politics,” he fails to notice aspects of the “political” that occur in his everyday life. Importantly, there are moments in the novel where Perowne’s organizational frame, his ability to know, and the stable sense of self based upon this knowledge, are disrupted by the insertion of a different, unknown perspective. As I will elucidate further shortly, this disruption happens most significantly when he comes into contact with other people, such as a group of Muslim women or a man cleaning the streets, who not fit easily into his social sphere. I am going to read these disruptive moments as evidence of the eruption of “the political” into the sphere of Perowne’s everyday existence—something he is at pains to prevent. In terms of their wider, extra-textual implications, we can see these moments of unsettlement as clues that can reveal the inherent instability of the social order. Therefore, they may also help us to re-imagine alternative forms of political community that seem to be precluded by the linear narrative of “politics” and by Perowne’s constant desire to frame and to know.

Perowne’s responses, or failures to respond to, these disruptive gaps in his framework of understanding are particularly revealing. When he encounters the Muslim women, he fails to recognize the validity or existence of different perspectives entirely; with the road sweeper, he quickly returns to the safety of diagnosis and clinical detachment. However, readers may very well recognize the partiality of Perowne’s views. These are moments in the text when readers are clearly not being asked to empathize uncritically with Perowne’s point of view. These are moments of “political” rupture in the narrative itself where the gaps between Perowne’s
perspective and the third person narrative of it reveal sites for ethical investigation by the reader. What is made legible or illegible from Perowne’s perspective? Does this il/legibility work to re-inscribe or resist dominant power? Do the interactions reveal and disrupt discriminatory privilege, or do they sustain its “negative identity significations”? What do the interactions reveal about the limitations of empathy as a way of understanding human relations?

Privileged Perspectives

When Perowne does venture out into the streets, he is conspicuously incapable of empathizing with and understanding people who are different or less socially privileged than him; that is, people who do not fit into his frame of reference. For example, while out driving, Perowne has to wait for three women in burkhas to cross the street in front of him. They appear only semi-human, unreal and unfathomable from his perspective:

The three black columns, stark against the canyon of creamy stucco and brick … have a farcical appearance, like kids larking about at Halloween. Or like Theo’s school production of *Macbeth* when the hollowed trees of Birnam Wood waited in the wings to clump across the stage to Dunsinane. (124)

These descriptive references to Shakespeare and Halloween are culturally juxtaposed to the women themselves, suggesting Perowne’s lack of available understanding. This lack translates into a moment of antipathy towards their culture as a whole: “Perowne guns the engine—but gently—then pulls the gear stick into neutral … He can’t help his distaste, it’s visceral. How dismal, that anyone should be obliged to walk around so entirely obliterated” (124). There is no empathetic connection between the women’s lives and his own, and therefore no way, or no need, for Perowne to imagine himself in community with them. However, Perowne is soon able to remove this challenge to his perspective from his thoughts because their difference poses no
sustained threat to him: “Let Islamic dress codes be! What should he care about burkhas” (125)? The moment is quickly depoliticized and reincorporated into the context of a vague notion of liberal tolerance.

However, readers can note the wider implications of this cultural disconnect. In the context of debates about the war on Iraq, and indeed the increased suspicion being directed at the British Muslim community since 7/7, this moment in the text is “political” because it represents a challenge to Perowne’s Western-centric way of seeing the world. This is an important challenge. In Postcolonial Melancholia, Paul Gilroy argues that Britain is suffering from a “failure of political imagination” that leaves it unable to accommodate other cultures within the definition of what it is to be “British” and sustains an environment of endemic racism (4-5). Perowne’s impatience may not seem overtly racist, but it certainly does not present him in a favorable light; this encourages readers to see his response as rather partial, particularly since his solution to “let [them] be” does not involve any alteration of his perspective. Therefore, although Perowne does not experience a “political” revelation, the gap between his interior monologue and the narrative presentation of him does not preclude readers from interrogating the larger political significance of the interaction.

Another “political” moment in the text is produced when Perowne is briefly able to think himself into the life of another. As Perowne walks to his car on his way to play squash, he encounters a man sweeping the streets and starts to vaguely empathize—an act that seems to occur more easily than in the previous example because the other man less culturally different to Perowne than the women in the burkhas. He thinks himself into the man’s position and sympathizes with him, wondering “what could be more futile than this underpaid urban-scale housework when behind him, at the far end of the street, cartons and paper cups are spreading
thickly under the feet of demonstrators gathered outside McDonald’s” (73)? Through this act of empathy, Perowne seems to both sympathize with the other man, recognizing his relative lack of privilege, but also marginalize him as engaging in “futile” work.

However, this act of partial empathy merely provides an initial spark for a potentially more significant recognition of social relatedness. As Perowne passes the man, they look right into each other’s eyes and “for a vertiginous moment Henry feels himself bound to the other man, as though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into each other’s life” (73). Perowne’s “vertiginous” feeling of being on a seesaw or axis with the other man calls his individual autonomy into question. The feeling de-centers Perowne’s stable ego and highlights its contingency, a feeling that Butler sees as a marker of our “enmeshment” with others and a reminder that we are always already in community because “we are, as bodies, outside ourselves, for one another” (Undoing Gender 22). The moment has a “political” quality in that it presents a challenge to the status quo—at least as it is perceived by Perowne. However, the challenge and significance of this vertiginous feeling can be missed altogether because it is radically instable and therefore resists representation and meaning. If the significance of the feeling is recognized, it is quickly retreated from because it poses a threat to Perowne’s (false) sense of autonomous self-hood. Typically, Perowne takes a step back from his “vertiginous” position on the edge of realizing that his position in the social order is related to that of the other man. Instead he starts making historical/scientific analyses that allow him to maintain critical distance from the man rather than develop a sense of their mutual relationship within the social order. The momentary disruption merely prompts him to consider:

How restful it must once have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life. And not to see
how the belief served your own prosperity—a form of anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one’s own position. (74)

Ironically, Perowne is arguably guilty of precisely this type of “negative identity signification.” Although he rightly recognizes that the older social model is no longer viable or fair, he can identify neither a clear alternative, nor his own vested interest in the status quo. Perowne concludes that “a queasy agnosticism has settled around these matters of justice and redistributed wealth … having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck” (74). Here McEwan is ambiguous about whether this is Perowne’s perspective or that of the narrator. Either way, for the reader, this feeling of queasiness marks a destabilized perspective and the contingency of current understandings of social organization. Subtly, this queasy sensation may suggest the potential for an alternative, if Perowne were to recognize its significance. However, as an effect of his privileged status—the fact that, for example, he does not have to sweep the streets—Perowne is able to forget this momentarily unsettling perspective and continue with life as normal.

The speed and ease with which Perowne is able to do this seems to reveal what Carbado would call a “problematic assumption about identity and entitlement,” an assumption that allows systems of inequality to be sustained without question. Perowne’s class privileges allow him to assume that social status is all about “luck” and has nothing to do with a state system from which he himself profits. No aspect of his own direct experience brings him into conflict with a dominant Western liberal understanding of social order; he must empathize with the marginalized if he is to understand the partiality of his assumption about equality of social opportunity. However, such empathy would bring with it a threat of disruption and uncertainty. No alternative forms of community seem available and therefore Perowne quickly re-inscribes a
dominant narrative of progress and order, musing from the comfort of his Mercedes that life “has steadily improved over the centuries for most people, despite the junkies and beggars now” (76). He drives through the streets “in a spirit of aggressive celebration of the times” (78). This fairly ironic description suggests Perowne’s alignment at this moment with the power of the state, its ability to exclude individuals from the benefits of the social order, and its self-congratulatory “presumption of impermeability.” In this way, McEwan can be seen to be offering a subtle critique of “what the First World is” through a revelation of the unequal distribution of social privileges within Britain. Perowne’s conspicuous complacency about equal opportunity is shown to be based upon a very one-sided narrative that is effectively complicit in reproducing a system of privilege.

Violence and the Social Order

Whereas Perowne emerges from these individual interactions with his confidence in both his own autonomy and perception of the social order in tact, he is soon to face a far more physically and psychologically threatening disruption. He will be forced to make ethical decisions that have real consequences. Soon after his detached observations of the Muslim women and the road sweeper, he takes a shortcut down a closed street to avoid being inconvenienced by the anti-war march. As a direct result, he is involved in a collision with Baxter’s car. Ironically, it is precisely his attempts to avoid having the protest march get in the way of his leisure activities—his symbolic desire to jettison the political—that casts him into a situation that raises the very same ethical questions about distributions of privilege, vulnerability, and detachment from consequences that ought to be considered in relation to military action as a form of state-legitimized violence. Baxter and Perowne’s collision has ethical significance because it binds the two men together, in terms of both the immediate confrontation and the
consequences that will later be played out. From the moment of the collision, Baxter and Perowne are inextricably linked to one another’s actions, not least due to the situation’s violent potential which, as Butler says, is the most extreme recognition of the co-dependence of human beings.

Once we recognize the co-dependency of Perowne and Baxter, we must question how power is distributed in the relationship. Different manifestations of power are used and abused by both sides, although the narrative reserves judgment about which methods are more or less legitimate. Baxter and his friends use both the threat and reality of physical violence allowed by their strength in numbers; Perowne uses his medical knowledge to diagnose Baxter and “read” the situation. Beyond the obvious drama of the narrative itself, the violence of this encounter reveals the fragility of Perowne’s previous assumptions about security, privilege, social order, and what he is capable of as an individual. What begins as a dispute over the meaning of the crash and who is responsible also becomes a space for the novel to examine some of the cultural logics that produce violence and question what kinds of response to violence or threat are legitimate or ethical. McEwan hints at a connection between the individual incident and the inter/national context by depicting the collision as eventually resulting in a military defeat for Baxter: “the general has been indecisive, the troops are deserting, the humiliation is complete” (100). This is not merely a stylistic enhancement; it points to connections between different scales of violence. As Elias suggests, in a “culture of violent solutions,” macro level violence implicitly encourages individual actors to also view violence as an appropriate form of conflict resolution. Thus, the slightly incongruous military metaphor, resonating provocatively as the anti-war protestors march in the background, reminds readers that the government is also preparing for war. Obviously there are differences in scale; however, the central ethical
dilemmas about the use and abuse of power and privilege, vulnerability and detachment, that are exposed in Perowne’s dealings with Baxter do function as a vital critique of the general failure to ask these questions in the run up to the war.

There are other clues in the text that point readers towards considering these local or small scale events in the context of debates about larger structures of power, violence and community. The novel raises the issue of the relationship between distance and responsibility as a factor in producing violent situations. The sense of responsibility is diminished when actors retain some distance from the violence they inflict—clearly in an issue of some import in debates about the legitimacy of wars in distant places such as Iraq. As well as exploring the connection between distance and responsibility as it plays into debates about the media and detachment, McEwan also returns to this connection at the moment when Perowne is in the greatest immediate danger. After he has been punched once and the three men are preparing to beat him, he resolves to try at all costs to remain standing and avoid being kicked because:

The foot, like some roughneck hick town, is a remote province of the brain, liberated by distance from responsibility. A kick is less intimate, less involving than a punch, and one kick never quite seems enough. Back in the epic days of organized football violence when he was a registrar, he learned a good deal about subdural haematomas from steel-tipped Doc Martens. (93)

Through these dense and provocative metaphors, we can see the plot of the novel finding ways to reference and critique situations, logics, and relationships that work to produce larger scale violence. The distance between the “foot” and the “brain” causes a dangerous disconnect between decision and action, a relationship that is likely to produce violence in a “remote province.” The geographical simile, “like some roughneck hick town,” evokes a larger
relationship between geographical location and freedom from responsibility for the bodily vulnerability of others. Although, as Butler argues, violence is always an exploitation of the co-dependency of bodies, violence can be more or less “intimate” and psychologically “involving” for the perpetrator if distance works to disguise this “primary tie” (*Undoing Gender* 22). This example suggests that abuse of this “primary tie” is at the root of all scales of violence. A relationship between an individual’s foot and brain can translate into “epic” and “organized” violence. Through these metaphors, McEwan plays with different scales of action and consequence, reflecting upon relationships between micro and macro levels of violence.

Another technique McEwan uses in order to place the events of the novel into a larger theoretical framework is to include a section which explains that “Perowne is familiar with some of the current literature on violence. It’s not always a pathology; self-interested social organisms find it rational to be violent sometimes” (88). Perowne muses that “among the game theorists and radical criminologists, the stock of Thomas Hobbes keeps on rising” (88). Hobbes’ understanding of social organization famously presents the argument that order can only be maintained by force, rather than by a sense of collective responsibility: “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 the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence” (88). Perowne meditates briefly that it is often not moral principle or ethical responsibility for others but rather state power and the violence it has at its disposal that really defines what we think of as the right or rational course of action. In McEwan’s use of the words “self-interested,” we can see a contrast between the forms of subjectivity that fit in with this dominant, state-centered model of sociality and the type of democratic de-centering of the self that underpins Butler’s notion of “ethical enmeshment.”
It may seem a little implausible that a man in the grip of three would-be attackers would think in this detached, analytical fashion; however, as we have seen, Perowne is characterized by his analytical frame of mind. McEwan also notes elsewhere that “a second can be a long time in introspection” (80). When threatened, he responds by trying to theorize the situation, a tactic that McEwan reveals to be somewhat limiting when it comes to actually understanding the nuances of human relationships. Perowne uses theory in order to explain and therefore control his relationship with Baxter; however, the situation that he finds himself in reveals the limitations of the state-centered explanatory and organizational model that Perowne is trying to apply.⁴ For example, Perowne notes that “drug dealers and pimps, among others who live beyond the law, are not inclined to dial nine-nine-nine for Leviathan; they settle their problems in their own way” (88). We can see a number of limitations with Perowne’s perspective here. Firstly, it reveals Perowne’s rather stereotypical middle class reading of Baxter’s working class appearance as synonymous with potential criminality. Because he has seen him leaving a strip club, he assumes that he must be a drug dealer or pimp, and therefore anticipates violence. Perowne also shows a tendency to locate certain individuals outside of the social order—“beyond the law”—while “freely grant[ing]” the state its violent monopoly and failing to consider the ways in which violence and the social order might be mutually productive.

Most importantly, when law and order is temporarily disrupted by the car crash, the narrative reveals the fragility, fictionality, and self-interested nature of many of Perowne’s assumptions and convictions about what constitutes a right or rational course of action. This is a “politically” important point because, as Rose notes, misplaced conviction is often a key factor in

⁴In his book *Why War?*, Philip Smith explains that accounts like Hobbes’ belong to a “rationalist über-paradigm” that explains war in terms of the operations of state powers. We can see why explanations like this might appeal to a rationalist like Perowne. However, Smith argues that this paradigm is insufficient because “the ‘state’ tends to be reified and hypostasized” (7). Instead, he argues that we need to pay attention attention to more messy and uncertain fields such as culture and psychology if we are to understand the causes of violent conflict.
escalating violent conflicts. Before the situation actually turns violent, Perowne’s first instinct is to appeal to the frameworks of morality and the law in order to justify his reading of events and legitimize his position as “one of the many victims [rather] than the original sinner” (89). However, the moral tone of Perowne’s statement merely seems to disguise a more self-interested response. Perowne’s sense of entitlement to the moral high ground works to justify his anger and indignation over the fact that “something original and pristine has been stolen from his car” and his plans to play squash have been “ruinously altered” (82). These self-absorbed and privileged sentiments are clearly not designed to elicit unreserved sympathy from the reader. Perowne is not presented as a morally pure figure here, something that Philip Smith establishes as one of the three criteria used to judge legitimacy of action. Instead, he is motivated as much by “hatred” as by a desire for justice:

Above all, there swells in him a peculiarly modern emotion—the motorist’s rectitude, spot-welding a passion for justice to the thrill of hatred, in the service of which various worn phrases tumble through his thoughts, revitalized, cleansed of cliché: just pulled out, no signal, stupid bastard, didn’t even look, what’s his mirror for, fucking bastard. (82)

However, despite this sense of being in the right, Perowne recognizes that his pseudo-moral perspective will most likely not be recognized as legitimate by the opposing party. As Smith notes, legitimacy is often a matter of negotiating a consensus rather than adhering to predefined moral absolutes. More significantly then, the balance of power and opinion is three-to-one in Baxter’s favor and Perowne realizes that his confrontation with Baxter is unlikely to be noticed by the police who are tied up with marshalling the anti-war march. Thus, the power imbalance also creates a threat of violence that negates Perowne’s moral framework because it is neither recognized by his opponents nor backed up by the power of the law. Beyond the help of the
state, and with his appeals to a shared moral framework de-legitimized, Perowne has to think “in immediate tactical terms” (84) and “he decides he’ll be better off feeling his way into confrontation, rather than troubling himself with ground rules” (83). From the point of view of de Certeau’s analysis, we can see Perowne engaging in “an art of the weak,” relying tactically on his intuition to second guess the mood and aims of an opponent who he is unable to transform into a “readable space” (37).

Having said this, his tactics are still defined by a belief in his ability to understand his opponents motives; Perowne responds to his vulnerability by beginning to analyze the situation from the familiar perspectives afforded to him by his medical profession—the only area of his life where he is accustomed to come into direct contact with people like Baxter. As well as considering literature on violence and pathology, he observes Baxter’s mental states, as he would in any of his patients. However, there is also an unfamiliar sense of co-dependency; both the ‘patient’s’ and also Perowne’s survival may be contingent upon his ability to think himself into the mind of another. Through this process, he begins to notice something that allows the balance of power to shift. Baxter seems to be exhibiting the symptoms of Huntington’s disease, an incurable genetic condition. Once Baxter’s involuntary actions allow Perowne to make a diagnosis, he makes use of the power to transform Baxter into a readable space and, in doing so, counters some of the uncertainties and weaknesses of his own position in the interaction. The diagnosis gives Perowne the opportunity to use his power of medical knowledge to manage the threat posed by Baxter by offering to discuss treatment options with him. However, this is clearly not a “humanitarian intervention” motivated by compassion or a genuine desire to help Baxter. In one sense, the novel suggests, this is another form of violence.
Although neither side is presented as blameless, the narrative makes it clear that Perowne’s eventual success and survival has been based upon a strategic manipulation of power, even “shameless blackmail” (95). In the context of a threat of violence, Perowne feels justified in abandoning his usual code of medical ethics and taking advantage of a terminally ill man’s “hunger for information, or hope” (97). He does not question his right to intervene in this way. Instead, he manipulates the trauma of Baxter’s incurable illness for his own ends and treats it as an “intellectual game of diagnosis” (91), albeit one with high stakes. He is able to do this only by dehumanizing Baxter as a lost cause, reduced to little more than a faulty piece of biological equipment:

There’s no way out for him. No one can help. But Perowne knows himself to be incapable of pity. Clinical experience wrung that from him long ago. And part of him never ceases to calculate how soon he can safely end this encounter. Besides, the matter is beyond pity. There are so many ways a brain can let you down. Like an expensive car, it’s intricate, but mass-produced nevertheless, with more than sixty billion in circulation.

(99)

The very real and immediate threat of violence mixes somewhat paradoxically with the capacity for clinical detachment enabled by the power of Perowne’s medical knowledge. The situation is highly ambivalent; Perowne’s resort to clinical detachment is both a defense mechanism against violence and a form of violence in itself. This curious blending of vulnerability and power prevents Perowne from either desiring or being able to engage empathetically with Baxter as a human being. In this way, we can begin to see how these apparently contradictory feelings of threat and detachment work together to create the conditions that enable and, from Perowne’s perspective, justify his ethically questionable course of action.
Once Baxter recognizes the legitimacy and power of Perowne’s knowledge and his right to intervene, roles change from contingent and potentially violent co-dependency to something more stable and familiar, even pre-scripted. Perowne asks Baxter for his medical history and Baxter has “accepted Perowne’s right to interrogate. They’ve slipped into their roles and Perowne keeps going” (97). The power balance shifts and Baxter is now dependent upon Perowne who becomes endowed, figuratively, with unearthly power. Perowne imagines Baxter thinking that “they are together, he and Perowne, in a world not of the medical but of the magical. When you are diseased it is unwise to abuse the shaman” (95). There is evidence here that Perowne’s arrogant “presumption of impermeability” is returning. In the end, Baxter senses that the balance has shifted too far and that “he’s been cheated of a little violence and the exercise of a little power” and decides to call back his accomplices in order to attack Perowne again (99). However, by this time Nark and Nigel have wandered off and Perowne is saved, able to drive off in his barely-scratched Mercedes and make it to his game after all, humiliating Baxter without making good on his promise to help Baxter by providing him with new information.

As Perowne leaves the scene of the crash, he also leaves behind any sense of responsibility for Baxter and his condition. Just as he barely questions his right to intervene, he also fails to consider or imagine the consequences of his intervention. However, his abjuration of responsibility merely disguises rather than dismantles his now unavoidable relationship with Baxter. The future safety of Perowne and his family has now become dependent upon Baxter’s actions. What later appears to the rest of the family as a random act of invasive violence appears from the perspective of Perowne and the reader to be a continuation of Perowne and Baxter’s earlier power struggle. Once Baxter invades his house, Perowne notes fearfully that “it is, of
course, logical that Baxter is here” (213) because he desires revenge for his earlier humiliation and also, possibly, further news of the new Huntington’s treatment.

This plot development dramatizes a cycle of violence that is produced when different form of power—specifically physical force and detached knowledge—are abused. Baxter abuses his three-to-one advantage in order to make Perowne feel vulnerable at the scene of the crash. Perowne responds to this threat by manipulating Baxter’s vulnerability to an incurable illness, something that he is at pains to keep secret from his cohorts. Baxter’s humiliation then produces a desire for revenge via another violent intervention into Perowne’s house. This intervention eventually forces Perowne and his son to throw Baxter down the stairs, almost killing him. After this, Perowne is presented with various opportunities to continue the violent cycle and take revenge on Baxter. He is called upon to operate on his injuries and it thus presented with an opportunity to abuse his medical authority again by, it is implied, killing Baxter on the operating table. Perowne is also given the option to press criminal charges. These two options are readable, respectively, as illegitimate and legitimate forms of violence. The first is outside of the law; the second is state-sanctioned. However, Perowne abjures both—a decision that seeks to end rather than perpetuate the cycle of violence and retribution. Instead, as I will argue in the next chapter, Perowne’s decision it is motivated by a new understanding of his own role in, and enmeshment with, Baxter’s fate. This self-implication helps him to establish a new framework of empathetic connection rather than clinical detachment. Perowne arrives at a new sense of responsibility for diminishing trauma and suffering. In the next chapter I will explain in more detail the way that this new framework emerges both during and as a result of the traumatic invasion of the Perowne family home, and suggest ways in which the novel’s conclusion might
leave a space for a new understanding of what it means to be part of an ethically enmeshed political community.
CHAPTER THREE: “ENCIRCLING” AMBIVALENCE

When Baxter intrudes into the Perowne household, he breaks Perowne’s elderly father-in-law’s nose, holds his wife at knife point, and forces his daughter to remove her clothes and recite a poem. After all this, at the end of the novel, Perowne decides not to press criminal charges against Baxter. Why? What is the significance of this decision, both for the plot of the novel and the wider context with which it is engaging?

It is clearly possible to argue that the trauma felt by the Perowne family legitimizes a course of punitive legal action against Baxter. However, McEwan implies that there is a key argument to be made against this course of action: to put Baxter on trial would be a form of state-sanctioned violence against a sick man who already has “a diminishing slice of live worth living” (288). Furthermore, Perowne feels that he is not an entirely innocent party given his abuse of authority at the scene of the crash. Again, it is possible to argue that this earlier abuse too was a legitimate course of action because it was a last resort against the threat of immanent violence. Perowne’s wife, Rosalind, voices the possible objections of some readers who might also feel that the family is entitled to take revenge when she says “of course it wasn’t an abuse of authority. They could have killed you” (277).

However, McEwan reminds readers, through Perowne’s thoughts, that “this was not the conclusion he wanted her to reach” (277). On another level, this is not the conclusion that the narrative directs readers towards, either during or after the crash. The narrative, like Perowne’s recounting of the crash story to his wife, “arrange[s] the details to prompt her in another direction” (277). Perowne selectively arranges details about his encounter with Baxter so as to create a story about his own culpability that would add legitimacy to his impulse not to press charges. Similarly, McEwan must arrange the novel’s narrative carefully in order to persuade
readers that Perowne’s decision is commendable and plausible within the context of a basically
realist novel. At both textual levels, then, we can see the function of narrative in the process of
making judgments about what courses of action are legitimate and correct. That is to say, the
way that the story is arranged makes a difference to the judgments we as readers make about
both the characters and their actions.

If, as I am arguing, we are able to view Perowne’s decision not to press charges as a
critique of the “culture of violent solutions” that has been reproduced on a global scale by the
military response to 9/11, it is important to recognize the complexity of the narrative frame that
McEwan uses in order to explain and legitimize this decision. In fact, rather than constructing
one dominant explanatory model, McEwan incorporates a combination of incomplete narrative
frames, none of which are singularly sufficient. Instead, these incomplete frames exist in a
totality that resists wholeness and closure. For example, neither clear cut morality nor selfless
compassion alone offer convincing legitimizing narratives. Perowne does not consider himself
to be in a position to grant moral judgment or exoneration because “he’s responsible after all;
twenty hours ago he drove across a road officially closed to traffic, and set in chain a sequence of
events” (288). The questionable nature of his earlier actions, thus acknowledged, de-legitimizes
any claim he might make towards being a purely innocent party—the latter claim being
important since, as Philip Smith establishes, one of the three key criteria that can legitimize
violence is that the violence be carried out by a selfless and “pure” figure against an “evil other”
(110). As another possible frame, Perowne does acknowledge an element of human empathy
motivating his decision; as he gets older he finds himself “watch[ing] a dying man with a closer,
more brotherly interest” (288). However, he is still inclined to dismiss this as “weakness,”
perhaps pointing to a cultural tendency to denigrate potentially transformative feelings of shared
vulnerability. The dismissal also resists presenting Perowne’s decision as an overly magnanimous gesture. By showing that simplified, one-sided, moralizing narratives fail to produce an entirely coherent account of Perowne’s motivations, McEwan maintains and encircles, rather than erases, the situation’s ongoing ambivalence.

As I will explain shortly, in the state of ambivalence experienced by Perowne and recreated for readers by the narrative structure, there exists a choice about whether to construct Baxter as a demonic other or outsider, or to see him as part of a narrative that contains Perowne’s own mistakes and abuses of power. It is important that Perowne himself comes to a realization of the latter since, as Žižek argues, in order for justice truly to be done, “it has to ask how we ourselves, who exert justice are involved in what we are fighting against” (57). Žižek highlights the importance of “self-relating” and the “inclusion of oneself in the picture”—elements that have been destructively absent from the dominant western response to 9/11. From this perspective, I argue that we can understand Perowne’s decision, brought about by a kind of ethical “self-relating,” as signifying an alternative framework for action that critiques the contemporary “culture of violent” solutions.

In order to avoid over-simplifying this conclusion, it is important to look closely at the moments in the text out of which Perowne’s decision arises and also the narrative tactics used to describe this process. For instance, McEwan de-chronologizes his telling of the events that occur after Baxter has been thrown down the stairs, a structural technique that emphasizes the confusion and ambivalence surrounding Perowne’s decision making process. McEwan leaves a gap in the narrative and only returns to the story once Baxter has been taken away in an ambulance. Gaps such as this one also allow McEwan to make use of structures whereby Perowne’s experiences are not narrated as they happen in “real time,” as they are in the rest of
the novel, but instead through his later reminiscence. This form of narration has a number of effects. It gives a sense of traumatic events being characterized by resistance and disruption to direct knowledge and linear narrative. Following the eruption of what Edkins calls “trauma time,” Perowne’s ordering and rationalizing impulses are disrupted and he finds himself in a state of ambivalence. He is not immediately able to define the right course of action, much like his experience of deliberating about the war. Via this temporal disruption, the narrative sustains provocative moments of suspense and ambiguity about what Perowne will do with his victim status. The ambivalence of the situation is maintained for as long as possible, therefore keeping the reader in a position of not knowing the full story. Rose, following Freud, suggests that unknowing “grounds the origins of ethical life” (20). The lack of knowledge sustained by McEwan’s narrative technique prompts readers to speculate about various possible actions and outcomes, a process that amounts to an important ethical investigation about personal and collective responsibility, and about the potential for mechanisms of state power to increase rather than diminish the collective store of violence, suffering and vulnerability.

Out of all the trauma, uncertainty, and ambivalence of Baxter’s attack on the Perowne family, Perowne’s decision not to press charges eventually emerges as “one small fixed point of conviction [that] holds Henry steady” (287). McEwan is careful to point out that Perowne’s conviction “began to take form” when his family attempts to restore normality by sitting down to a meal after the police and medics have left. The decision “finally settled” when he is taking Baxter’s pulse in intensive care after operating on him. These two moments are especially significant because they focus on relational ties and connections between people whose framework of everyday security has been disrupted. Ties are revealed in particular through physical touch as well as shared grief, mourning, and vulnerability. As Butler argues, these are
all feelings and experiences that can be mobilized in order to create a sense of collective responsibility for discovering less violent and more ethical forms of community.

In this respect, McEwan’s descriptions of the Perowne family in the immediate aftermath of their ordeal are vitally illuminating. They hold with the opening lines of McEwan’s September 15th *Guardian* article, in which he states, “Emotions have their narrative; after the shock we move inevitably to the grief, and the sense that we are doing it more or less together is one tiny scrap of consolation” (“Only Love”). The descriptions in *Saturday*, which initially focus on feelings and physical sensations rather than decisive actions and rational thoughts, also speak to the forms of community that may be revealed in the wake of traumatic disruption to a supposedly secure domestic space. For the shocked family, the simple presence of others is all that is immediately required: “no one wants to be alone, so they remain in the sitting room together, trapped in a waiting room, a no man’s land separating their ordeal from the resumption of their lives” (237). Here we can see that the traumatic experience has exposed a gap between what they are now experiencing and what they are accustomed to think of as the everyday social order. In order to counteract this sense of alienation from reality, “what meets their needs is touch—they sit close, hold hands, embrace” (237). These physical sensations reassure them that they are indeed part of a larger whole that, although it can represent a threat, can also offer security. The bodies that have recently made them so isolated and vulnerable now place the family members outside of themselves and into community with each other. McEwan observes that the family’s experiences have given them a heightened sense of themselves as constituted by relational ties; they exist as a “web of kindly social and familial relations without which they’re nothing” (238). The narrative reflects this sense of collective identity by referring to the characters as “they” for the first time. The brief and subtle shift in perspective underscores the
idea that the trauma has revealed the fictive or contingent nature of each character’s sense of autonomous individual selfhood and brought them closer to a sense of shared vulnerability.

As well as relying upon physical presence and touch, the family begins to go back over their memories of the event in such a way as to restore some sense of order. However, the trauma seems to resist its own telling and “sudden bursts of urgent, tearful recall are broken by numb silences” (237). The family desires narratives that will define their shared experience and recreate a collective reality: “They want to have it all again, from another’s point of view, and know that it’s all true what they’ve been through, and feel in these precise comparisons of feeling and observation that they’re being delivered from a private nightmare” (237). If we apply Butler’s questions about what forms of community are created through the use of violence, we can see that Baxter’s violent actions have had the effect of isolating, individualizing, and therefore disempowering members of the family: “they were overrun by and dominated by intruders because they weren’t able to think and act together; now at last they can” (238). By narrating the event together, the family effectively begins a process of recognizing and working through the trauma in order to rebuild themselves as a community. Their sense of solidarity through shared suffering can then become a foundation from which to take action in response.

However, as Edkins argues, the emergence of narratives about traumatic events, particularly narratives about group solidarity, often represent moments when the status quo is reinscribed and more ambivalent feelings are erased. Outsiders and enemies are defined and condemned. As the family reassembles itself as a unit and the balance of power shifts back into their favor, the text seems to resist reinforcing a simplified narrative about a random, malevolent invasion of the house by a dangerous stranger or outsider. Perowne seems reluctant to simplify events in this manner because of his unique involvement with Baxter and also perhaps because
of his self-analytical tendencies. Instead, McEwan’s narration of the event itself and his presentation of Perowne’s ruminations in the aftermath provide the reader with further opportunities to productively “encircle” the ethical ambivalence of Perowne’s relationship to Baxter. As I will explain in the next section, Perowne is involved in an uncomfortable process of “self-relating” through which readers are given the sense that he moves towards a new appreciation of his responsibility and involvement, a new awareness of his lifestyle privileges, and a new understanding of the way his earlier abuse of authority has contributed, unexpectedly, to the continuation of a cycle of violence.

Shifts of Power and Perspective

One of the most immediate effects of Baxter’s arrival in the house is that Perowne experiences a heightened consciousness of his own class privilege. His “negative identity signification” is disrupted and he has to begin imagining how his privilege may impact upon Baxter. Perowne cannot remain detached and is instead forced to rely upon intuitive tactics and a desperate, self-motivated version of empathy. He “tries to see the room through [Baxter’s] eyes” and realizes that “the scale of retribution could be large” (213). Baxter simply says, “fucking size of this place” (216). However, Perowne’s diagnostic impulse remains and he attempts, once again, to manage the threat by adopting a detached perspective. He deduces that “Baxter is a special case—a man who believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences. And that’s simply the frame. … No amount of love, drugs, Bible classes or prison sentencing can shift him from his course” (217). The “course” here is a reference to the inevitability of Baxter’s deterioration due to Huntington’s disease. Baxter’s pathology seems to place him beyond the reach of the social, scientific, religious or legal help and control—as signified by the phrase “love, drugs, Bible classes or prison sentencing”—that the liberal state is
able to offer. This pathologizing impulse helps to locate Baxter outside of the machinery of the liberal state and he becomes “other” to the liberal humanist position exemplified by Perowne for most of the novel. However, this “frame” appears too simple because it excludes Perowne himself. Therefore, it also potentially works to disguise Perowne’s own ethically questionable involvement, or responsibility for, any of Baxter’s violent reactions.

Having said this, there is evidence that, during the attack, Perowne is moving towards a greater sense of his responsibility and re-evaluating his earlier decisions. He begins to let go of his over-reliance upon the explanatory models offered by science and, rather than remaining clinically detached, places himself into the picture:

But for all the reductive arguments, Perowne can’t convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family … Perowne himself is also responsible. He humiliated Baxter in the street in front of his sidekicks, and did so when he’d already guessed at his condition … He used and misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse. The responsibility is his. (218-19)

This analysis moves us towards the idea that unsympathetic misuse of authority can produce unexpected violence further down the line. Perowne is unable to disentangle himself from the volatile relationship that he established earlier with Baxter by telling him stories about false clinical trials. Later on, Baxter’s demand that he be shown the studies places Perowne in another impossible position. Negotiation becomes impossible because, if Perowne admits to Baxter that he lied earlier on about the hopeful new developments, this confession will only produce more violence.

At this point, Perowne is saved by luck, as, of course, he must be if the narrative is to afford readers the chance to consider his response to trauma. While Baxter is upstairs with
Perowne, he is abandoned by his accomplice and so Theo is able to rush upstairs to his father’s rescue. Together, they throw Baxter down the stairs in what the novel presents as a desperate and therefore legitimate act of self defense. It is presented as legitimate in the sense that the act meets Smith’s criterion that “violence must be a last resort, restrained to minimum levels and there should be no peaceful alternative” (110). The legitimacy of the act is further underscored by the policeman’s response to Theo’s question about whether they have “committed any crime in throwing Baxter down the stairs” (240). The detective laughs “out loud” and touches the comatose Baxter with his foot while saying, “I don’t think he’ll be making a complaint and we certainly won’t be” (240). The policeman’s somewhat callous attitude points us towards the idea that Baxter’s violence has had the effect of dehumanizing him in the eyes of the law. By contrast, Perowne and Theo’s violent act does not call their humanity into question because their act functions alongside the system that insists upon the right to security in one’s own home.

Unlike Baxter’s invasion of the house, their violent act does not place them outside of the state. However, although Perowne and Theo’s violent act is presented as necessary, understandable and legitimized by the state, McEwan resists an unambiguous presentation of Perowne and Theo as heroes. Their violence is not celebrated and, in the end, Baxter is not demonized or dehumanized; instead the narrative allows a number of moments of sympathy for him. For example, when Perowne looks into Baxter’s eyes as he falls, he experiences a moment of empathetic connection:

[Baxter] 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 his eyes an accusation of betrayal. (236)

McEwan uses this suspension of time in order to create a contrast between this moment and the earlier scene in the street where Perowne looks into the eyes of the road sweeper and feels a "vertiginous" sense of connectivity. Whereas earlier Perowne is able to deny that his class privilege has anything to do with the other man’s lack of privilege, this time he arguably begins to appreciate the enmeshment of his advantages with the disadvantages of another. We can read this as another eruption of the "political," a sudden and radical change in perspective that can often be linked to traumatic experience and the perception of "trauma time," time that both "expands" and remains "suspended." In the expansion of this moment in the narrative, a sense of Perowne’s ethical responsibility is revealed, to both Perowne and the readers, alongside the empathetic connection. Perowne is confronted with his own "betrayal" of Baxter and realizes that "he, Henry Perowne, possesses so much—the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family … 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" (236). Perowne’s brief feelings of empathy, compassion, connection, and responsibility exist in an instance that exemplifies Butler’s theory about ethical enmeshment; the feelings expose a reality in which Perowne and Baxter are clearly part of the same field. The feeling of connectivity is also an important factor in explaining Perowne’s later decision not to press charges against Baxter.

However, the sympathy that Perowne feels for Baxter is short lived and McEwan seems to appreciate that mere calls for sympathy with one’s tormentor are not likely to provide sufficient counter-narratives to dominant and emotive ideas about victimhood and retribution, particularly when this victimhood is supported by legal frameworks and processes. As we have
seen, Perowne does experience a moment of sympathy for Baxter as he falls down the stairs and as a result then decides to tend to him and call an ambulance; however, in the aftermath of the events, he undergoes a “shift in sympathies”:

The sight of the abrasion on Rosalind’s neck hardens him. What weakness, what delusional folly, to permit yourself sympathy towards a man, sick or not, who invades your house like this. As he sits listening to the others, his anger grows and he begins to regret the care he routinely gave Baxter after his fall. (239)

Perowne’s “shift in sympathies” dramatizes a moment in the emotional narrative at which the grief, weakness, and vulnerability of the family—something that Butler sees as a basis for understanding the co-dependency of human bodies and the forms of community and ethical imperatives created by this co-dependency—is redirected into anger towards an outsider or enemy. Perowne’s anger arises out of a narrativizing process—“as he sits listening to the others”—and also from his witnessing the marks on his wife’s body that remind him of Baxter’s violence. Can Perowne really be expected to extend empathy and compassion beyond the “web of kindly social and familial relations” towards someone whose own capacity for empathy and compassion seems to have been called into question by his readiness to perform violent acts? In this way, the novel illustrates the challenge presented by the type of community theorized by Butler: can the forms of togetherness revealed in this individual family’s moments of shock and grief be extended outwards into a society that can hardly be categorized as a “kindly web” of social relations?

Butler’s response is to insist upon the necessity of collapsing inside/outside distinctions that mark and objectify certain people as different. When we mark certain people as different, we can often obscure the need to view all human beings as equally entitled to a “livable life”
(Undoing Gender 8). This can hinder the achievement of the “unconditional solidarity with all victims” that Žižek calls for. He maintains that, rather than clearly delineating separate identities and actions, both sides in such an ethically ambiguous debate must be understood as “belong[ing] to the same field” (50-1). When Perowne is called upon to operate on Baxter’s injuries, the plot development allows McEwan to emphasize the two characters’ ongoing involvement. Baxter is not detached from Perowne’s field of influence and left to exist as an abstract villain. On the contrary, Perowne comes into intimate contact with him in a way that makes Perowne directly responsible for Baxter’s survival. He literally enters the other man’s brain. However, rather than presenting this as a metaphor for an act of empathy or a humane intervention, McEwan actually emphasizes Perowne’s clinical detachment. Perowne’s actions in performing the successful operation are predetermined by an established code of medical ethics. The act of operating on Baxter does not humanize him from Perowne’s perspective; Baxter becomes nothing more than an injured brain, framed by surgical drapes. This framing mechanism is obviously useful to an extent; Perowne operates successfully. More significantly, though, through this framing process, Perowne is also able to detach himself from any sense of prior context and forget the ambivalence of his relationship with Baxter. He is “delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future” (266). Thus, he is able to forget the idea that he might be capable of abusing his medical authority as he did earlier. After the operation, Baxter becomes human again; his head is bandaged and “the patient’s identity is restored, when a small area of violently revealed brain is returned to the possession of an entire person” (264). Once Baxter becomes “an entire person” again, it becomes much more difficult for Perowne to make a detached decision about what course of action to follow.
Much like his confused feelings about the legitimacy of the war in Iraq, Perowne finds it hard to decide whether or not to use state-sanctioned violence against Baxter. Perowne’s decision-making process is disrupted because “he’s feeling too many contradictory things, he’s alive to too many contradictory impulses” (271). These thoughts and feelings de-center Perowne’s sense of rational autonomy; McEwan allows readers to envisage Perowne’s psychological alterations as “driven by the same power that’s making the space in the long room ripple, as well as the floor beneath his chair” (271). Because of the destabilizing effects he is experiencing, Perowne is motivated by an impulse to erase the ambivalence of the situation and maintain the clinical detachment he felt while operating: “He needs to stay here [next to Baxter’s recovery bed] and, in his usual manner, break [his feelings] down into their components, the quanta, and find all the distal and proximal causes; only then will he know what to do, what’s right” (217). This description quietly satirizes Perowne for his desire to remain clinically detached. The ironic touch here holds with Patricia Waugh’s observation that McEwan’s fiction often asserts that “science cannot obviate the need for complex human judgement and personal immersion in the messiness and contingency of human circumstances and relationships” (65).

We can see that McEwan highlights both the pragmatic usefulness and the dehumanizing danger of clinical detachment. Perowne must detach himself in order to operate successfully; however, earlier in the novel, Perowne is characterized as more compassionate than some of his colleagues who make callous and dehumanizing comments such as “there go the music lessons” while operating on a patient’s brain. McEwan points readers towards the idea that this sort of detachment can also be a form of violence if it is not tempered by human compassion.

Such compassion is exemplified in one of the key moments out of which, we are told, Perowne’s decision not to press charges emerges. Perowne is left sitting by Baxter’s bed, taking
his pulse: “far more than a quarter of a minute passes. In effect, he’s holding Baxter’s hand while he attempts to sift and order his thoughts and decide precisely should be done” (271). Here, the physical touch—depicted as “primal contact”—works as a metaphor for the sense of compassionate connection and responsibility that needs to guide Perowne’s process of decision-making. Furthermore, McEwan does not only emphasize the importance of this “primal contact,” he also depicts the literal and messy entanglement of Perowne and Baxter’s bodies.

When Perowne later takes a shower—“he imagines fine bone dust from Baxter’s skull lodged in the pores of his forehead—and soaps himself vigorously. As he’s drying, he notices that even in poor light, the bruise on his chest is still visible” (272). These descriptions serve as physical evidence of his engagements with Baxter; these engagements are marked on, and in, Perowne’s body and, crucially, in his imagination. With these levels of engagement acknowledged, distinctions between self and other are made literally impossible. This image of Baxter’s bone dust lodged in Perowne’s skin works as a metaphor for the relationship between bodily enmeshment and implicit vulnerability to violence, a relationship that underpins Butler’s ethical formulations of the way that we must begin to re-imagine new forms of political community.

Rather than merely emphasizing Perowne’s trauma and victim status as signified by the bruise Baxter gave him, the bone dust draws attention to the more ambivalent aspects of their relationship; that is, Baxter’s condition and Perowne’s manipulation of it.

Importantly, even as Perowne is moving towards a clearer decision, the ambivalence of the situation is maintained and “encircled.” Perowne locates his own actions within a larger picture and appreciates that “by saving Baxter’s life in the operating theatre, [he] also committed Baxter to his torture. Revenge enough” (288). Perowne also understands the potential for acts of revenge to negatively impact both victim and perpetrator: “they’ll all be diminished by whipping
a man on his way to hell” (288). Whether or not Baxter is punished before his inevitable death from Huntington’s, he and Perowne are still tied together because Baxter’s fate is dependent upon Perowne’s choices about how to use the dual powers afforded to him by his surgical influence and his ‘innocent victim’ status. The former is “one area where Henry can still exercise authority and shape events. He knows how the system works—the difference between good and bad care is near-infinite” (288). Here, McEwan draws attention to the potential for Perowne to influence the standard of Baxter’s healthcare in the future and, in so doing, resists giving the novel a tidy moral ending that entirely convinces readers that Perowne has done the right thing and will leave it at that. Perowne recognizes the potential violence of the “system” itself and is thus presented with the option to abuse his power of knowledge and influence in a similar yet more detached way than he did at the scene of the crash.

In this way, Perowne and Baxter’s relationship remains open-ended rather than fixed. When we become aware that Perowne could work violently within the system, we must reshape our attitude to violence and question the assumptions and narratives that legitimize it. The pseudo-conclusion of this strand of the narrative leaves us with a deeper and more involved understanding of the way that violence can function within the social order rather than simply as an outside threat to it. The repositioning of violence in this way can also have important implications for the way we view community as a field in which all bodies exist together in a state of common vulnerability and for subsequent choices we make about how to distribute vulnerability more equally, both locally and globally.
CONCLUSIONS

*Saturday* concludes with Perowne drifting off to sleep as dawn approaches. Time seems to pause as Perowne is suspended between days, and between wake and sleep. This in-between moment becomes a space of contemplation and possibility. McEwan suggests that Perowne has become de-centered: “he feels himself turning on a giant wheel, like the Eye on the south bank of the Thames” (282). In his de-centered state, it is suggested, Perowne is able to see things that he would not ordinarily be able to. He is “poised on the edge of perception” (282), on the edge of the rationality that he prizes so highly. In these last moments, his thoughts range over the events of the day, and of the last century. He also looks to “a future that’s harder to read, a horizon indistinct with possibilities” (286). Unable to diagnose or intellectualize at this moment of weakness and exhaustion, Perowne conceives of a world that cannot be explained. So, given this lack of available explanation, what kind of world does the novel’s conclusion anticipate or gesture towards?

As befits the circular reflected by McEwan’s use of the London Eye metaphor, the narrative returns to one of the notes upon which it began: “And now, what days are these? Baffled and fearful, [Perowne] mostly thinks” (3). As a narrative response to 9/11, *Saturday* reflects an uneasy tension between faith in the status quo of the liberal democratic order, and knowledge of its contingency and failures. McEwan does present a generally positive view of Western democracy; however, he is not idealistic. For example, Perowne speculates but is unable to answer the question of why it is that some people function productively within the social order while others fall through its gaps. He is unable to explain away and “cure or disperse this enfeebled army haunting the pubic places of every town” (282). McEwan’s use of the term “army” here points to the idea that the social order is always in a state of embattlement,
needing to be continually reinforced, often by excluding those who do not seem to ‘fit.’

However, we are left with the feeling that Perowne might be reconsidering the terms of this reinforcement. In contrast to some of Perowne’s earlier celebrations of progress, at the end of the novel, feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability are emphasized as Perowne moves between considering himself, his family, the city, and the wider political sphere. For Perowne, the only certainties are those that promise change. He and his wife will move into old age. The children will move away. The city will continue “in its humdrum way” until it is “inevitably” attacked. The war will begin; Perowne suspects its date is already fixed “as though for any big outdoor sporting event” (286-7). The meandering narrative of this closing section presents all these contexts—personal, national, international—as part of the same field of vulnerability. This feeling of vulnerability is ethically significant because it reminds us that all these spheres are interdependent. Given this vulnerable interdependence, the comparison of the war to a sporting event appears all the more flagrant in its disregard for human life. However, the comparison is perhaps not so much jingoistic as it is an apt comment upon the modes of spectatorship, encouraged by Western news media, which disguise shared responsibility for violence.

Perowne’s mood at the end of the novel, however, shifts his perspective in a way that media debates about the war have been unable to. Perowne looks out over the square and pictures London “waiting for its bomb,” but also imagines that “Baghdad is waiting for its bombs” (286-7). Here McEwan uses the similarity between these two phrases to emphasize an important sense of shared vulnerability and global interdependence.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Perowne, with his anxious awareness of this reality, exhibits a strong desire for ordering narratives. Early in the novel, McEwan establishes Perowne’s lack of patience with the novels that his daughter encourages him to read: “it interests
[Perowne] less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained. The times are strange enough” (65). However, it is possible to argue that Saturday doesn’t quite seem to achieve either reinvention or explanation; it mainly reflects a particular view. Perowne’s may not be an ideal view, or a view that all would subscribe to, but it is fair to say that Perowne does represent many of the characteristics of “what the First World is” (McEwan qtd. in Z. Smith 226). He is rich; he values rationality and detached objectivity; he desires control and explanation; he is fearful of difference; he tends to claim selfless and universal motives for his actions; at the same time, he tends to avoid thinking about how his privilege is involved with others’ disadvantage. By maintaining a gap between Perowne and the narrator, the text resists wholeness and closure in terms of its perspective. Through this narrative tactic, McEwan implicitly argues that we resist the impulse to order and explain everything. McEwan shows that uncertainty produces disruptive anxiety, and yet he insists that excessive certainty, on the other hand, is dangerous; it is a step toward violence against those who do not fit into the ideal frame. Thus, the narrative warns us to “beware the utopianists, zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order” (286). Rather than reinventing an “ideal social order,” the conclusion of the novel encircles the weaknesses and false promises inherent in current models of political community, their failure to offer the security that they purport to, and their tendency to instead produce violence and insecurity.

Saturday offers no solutions here, but it does inhabit a space where the limitations of current liberal humanist understandings of social organization are revealed and contested rather than sutured over, as nation states are apt to do, especially in the wake of traumas such as 9/11 or 7/7. Importantly, as the likes of Butler and Edkins argue, this sight of failure and weakness could also be the basis upon which a new type of solidarity might be imagined. This is not a
solidarity that includes or excludes along lines of nationality, culture, or social status; instead it promotes “unconditional” support for all victims of violence, as advocated by Žižek. Such a form of solidarity is only possible if we come to a new state of honest self-awareness about where we, as individuals and nations, stand in relationship to violence.

By the end of the novel, McEwan suggests that Perowne has begun this process of “self-relating.” Although *Saturday* does not, on first reading, seem to present a clear anti-war message, McEwan does construct a narrative frame in which different forms and scales of violence can be compared and contested. The feelings aroused over the course of Perowne’s traumatic experiences with Baxter seem to have influenced his thinking about the war: “Where’s Henry’s appetite for removing a tyrant now? … Harder to recall, or to inhabit, the vigour of his row with Daisy—the certainties have dissolved into debating points” (287). We are left with uncertain conclusions as the narrative asks “will he revive his hopes for firm action in the morning” (287)? Perowne experiences a heightened sense of his own limitations as an individual who is unable to control or determine the consequences of his actions:

> All he feels now is fear. He’s weak and ignorant, scared of the way consequences of an action leap away from your control and breed new events, new consequences, until you’re led to a place you never dreamed of and would never choose—a knife at the throat. (287)

These unexpected consequences problematize Perowne’s view of himself in relation to violence. McEwan seems to suggest that if we are aware that violence can emerge unexpectedly as a consequence of our own actions, we might find it harder to project responsibility for violence outwards in order to “save us the effort of ambivalence” (Rose 19). By presenting Perowne’s decision not to press charges against Baxter as emerging from “the effort of ambivalence” rather
than morally self-assured conviction, McEwan opens up an important space for exploring alternative ways of responding to violent interventions that have been foreclosed by the military response to 9/11. The story of Perowne and Baxter problematizes simple victim/perpetrator distinctions. In terms of this story’s wider significance, McEwan’s emphasis upon ongoing ambivalence, unknowingness, and complexity contrasts with dominant, oversimplified logics that narrow down the debate about the war on terror into two options—“with us or with the enemy.” If we break down this dichotomy, as we surely must, then we have to learn to live with discomforting uncertainty about who ‘we’ are. Rather than responding to uncertainty and vulnerability with increased security and violence, we must embrace a state of openness. Then, and only then, might we be able to re-imagine, and reinvent, a less violent world.
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