POST-9/11 BRITAIN IN IAN MCEWAN'S "SATURDAY"[1]

***Abstract**: Among other undeniable consequences, the unprecedented terrorist events of September 11, 2001 gave birth to a new fictional form whose entrance in literary history was done under a title that preserves the reference to the reality that produced it. Thus, the so-called 9/11 terrorist attacks against America created the "9/11 novel" as a distinct type of fiction in the post-9/11 real world of lethal and highly symbolic terrorist violence. The present paper aims at gaining insight into the complex matter of the 9/11 novel with specific reference to one such instance of fictionality, i.e. the novel published by the British novelist Ian McEwan in 2005 under the title* "Saturday". *The main objective of this endeavour would be that of analysing the British perspective on such an event of worldwide proportions and significance.*

***Keywords**: 9/11 novel, trauma, media coverage.*

It is an undeniable fact that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 radically altered the collective mindset of the West by virulently introducing the trauma and its shocking effects in the consciousnesses of millions and millions of citizens around the world. The increased traumatic potential of the terrorist event that opened the new millennium was fuelled by the fact that, beyond its purely physical dimension, it implied the transition from the so-called 'old terrorism' to the 'new one' that Baudrillard identifies with the evil twin of globalization – a new type of terrorist violence, more lethal and symbolic at the same time.

Initially, the 9/11 terrorist attacks created a sense of spiritual paralysis, disbelief and narrative void caused by a perceived failure of the language to represent such an atrocity. But, however traumatic an experience may be, the people involved (either protagonists or spectators) find themselves struggling to regain balance and the major instrument for achieving it is, paradoxically, the action of remembering the trauma in order to overcome it. In this context, it is useful to underline that there has always been a close connection between *literature* and *trauma* in the sense that writing about a traumatic experience empowers one to mitigate the shock and encourages the human being subjected to a painful experience to move further. In the case of the terrorist attacks in question, though both their immediate and the subsequent effects were highly disturbing, there emerged the need to recreate this trauma at a fictional level in an attempt at understanding it. As a consequence, it could be argued the 9/11 terrorist attacks against America marked not only the beginning of a new stage of terrorist violence ('postmodern terrorism'), but also the emergence of a particular genre of fiction (the '9/11 novel') conventionally conceptualised as a "powerful and efficient attempt to erect a virtual tower of rhetoric to replace the actual ones that had been knocked down" (Melnick, 2009: 25). The huge amount of interest attached to the 9/11 novel derives from it being considered a necessary ingredient in the political and aesthetic project of mapping and imagining how human solidarity looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for other citizens of the world. The principal idea in this context is that creating works of literature designed to fictionalise a traumatic event can definitely be regarded as a way of annihilating the shocking potential ensuing from such an event by endlessly replaying the trauma back and making sure that it belongs to the past.

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Since the attacks in question were targeted not only against their direct victim, but also against the entire world watching them[1], there have been numerous cultural contributions to the shaping of this new type of novel [2]. It is not our intention to deal with all of these fictional works in this paper, nor to comment on the characteristics of the '9/11 novel' at a general level. Our preoccupation lies with a country-specific fictional response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks that was produced in the British physical and cultural territory: Ian McEwan's 'Saturday'.

On the political level, in the aftermath of the attacks, UK authorities openly condemned them and displayed solidarity by supporting the USA in the war on terror against Iraq. However, terrorism is a phenomenon that should be understood and projected against a larger background than that of the usual triangle (public authorities – terrorists – mass media); it would be equally important to see how the literary discourse of the day perceived and conceptualised the same reality. One of the exemplars of post-9/11 fiction created by a British novelist in the post-9/11 world is *Saturday,* published by Ian McEwan four years after the attack took place. Set in London at a temporal distance of two years from the actual attacks, McEwan's novel takes up the challenge of representing the post-9/11 cultural climate from a British perspective; it therefore contributes significantly to the contemporary debates of the post-9/11 world and to the investigations into the opportunity of eliminating violence from the lives of twenty-first-century individuals who find themselves living in a culture of global terrorism. The manner McEwan chooses to represent the contemporary state of things with its psychological distress is not to feature out the big picture of the world at large, but to focus on a single day in the lives of a few British characters whose involvement with the real 9/11 event was restricted at the level of spectatorship. The day in question is not typical or everyday, but rather "heavy with significance in the capital [London], the centre of the political protest" (Guignery, 53); it is 15 February, 2003, the day on which hundreds of thousands would march in the capital of the United Kingdom in protest against the British authorities' decision to support the USA in the 'war on terror' against Iraq. As we will see further on, it is this anti-war demonstration that provides a constant political backdrop to the story (although it is always kept at some distance, whether on television or on the streets).

McEwan figures out the phenomenon of terrorism in its global dimension by projecting it against a personal reaction and interpretation of events and by constructing his novel around what happens to a male protagonist, Henry Perowne**,** on that particular Saturday. The true meaning of the novel, however, should not be restricted to that. *Saturday* places the reader in the middle of one man's life, in the middle of his family and professional life, or, better said, in the middle of a reconfiguration of his life that he was forced to perform after the attacks. For achieving this goal, the British novelist delineates an interesting character study: he is a respectable man who leads a decent and respectable life; the Henry Perowne that we meet in *Saturday* is a good professional - "he's renowned for his speed, his success rate and his list – he takes over three hundred

[1] According to a widespread theory in the field of terrorism studies, beyond their highly visible physicality, terrorist acts possess a *communicative dimension* (i.e. they are intended to communicate a message to a wider audience than the direct victim targeted).

[2] Monica Ali (British) - *Brick Lane*, David Llewellyn (Welsh) - *Eleven*, Joseph O'Neill (Irish) - *Netherland*, Frédéric Beigbeder (French) – *Windows on the World*, Paul Auster (American) – *Brooklyn Follies*, Don DeLillo (American) – *Falling Man*, John Updike (American) – *The Terrorist*, Phillip Roth (American) – *Everyman* etc.

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cases a year" – *Saturday,* 2005: 24 -, he is happily married to Rosalind, a corporate lawyer for a newspaper constantly trying "to steer her newspaper away from the courts" and the daughter of John Grammaticus, a famous poet; last but not least, he is a proud father – he remarks with satisfaction that "someone has written somewhere that Theo Perowne (*n.r.* his son) plays like an angel" (*Saturday,* 2005: 26). On a personal level, Perowne's Saturday is close to banality; from the remaining memories of the soon-to-be-closed workweek to the usual Saturday routine activities (a squash game, a visit to his mother (who has almost entirely lost her mind)) as well as the errands of this particular day (shopping, cooking, going to hear Theo's band rehearse), McEwan slowly and carefully narrates what Perowne does and thinks, and what happens to and around him.

Thus, McEwan's novel can successfully be ranked with the distinct category of one-day novels that have become so famous in British (and not only) literature (for example, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*). But there is more to *Saturday* than that. The way in which this novel addresses the traumatic experience (to be more precise, the trauma of witnessing how the sophisticated Western way of life is being attacked with its own instruments) reveals itself to the readers from the outset. The fictional Britain that McEwan reconstructs in his novel is under constant threat, a menace that is provoked by the poignant awareness that a post-9/11 individual's life has come to be governed by apocalyptic terrors following a traumatizing event such as the 9/11 attacks. In the earliest hours of that Saturday morning, one perceives find public terror at its highest point when Perowne is not able to make sense of something he sees in the sky, "something amazing"; he sees "fire in the sky (…) travelling along a route that he himself has taken many times in his life', which is undoubtedly a plane "in the final approaches to Heathrow" (*Saturday,* 2005: 14). The spectacle that is unfolding before his eyes "has the familiarity of a *recurring dream*" (*Saturday,* 2005: 15, my emphasis); this is precisely the reason why it assumes nightmarish dimensions. His watching the scene is clearly mediated by the memory of his having endlessly watched the images of the hijacked planes crashing into the Twin Towers on television and, what is more important, the public and personal trauma that, ever since and precisely because of that event, has become a part of daily lives. The airplane as both an instrument and a symbol of destruction governs Henry's mind; if once a mere symbol of technological advancement, planes have assumed a new dimension in the post-9/11 world, becoming weapons against humanity:

> "It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there 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" (*Saturday*, 2005: 16).

The scene looks like an impending catastrophe, but Perowne is helpless to do anything about it. Once again, he finds himself in the position of a spectator who is forced to watch a spectacle of terror and finds himself incapable of taking any action in order to prevent it. Visibly horrified by the event unfolding before his eyes, he still remains calm and distanced from it; his attitude cold be the result of what Jacques Derrida described in an interview with Giovanna Borradori as "the repetition of televised images", which creates a kind of "neutralizing, deadening, distancing of traumatism" (Borradori, 2004: 87). Furthermore, what intrigues Perowne and makes him watch the scene as it proceeds is "the horror of what he can't see. Catastrophe

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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 this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free" (*Saturday,* 2005: 16). The same idea of watching catastrophe from a distance while being forced to imagine human death is conceptualised by McEwan in the first essay he wrote in response to these attacks:

> "We saw the skyscrapers, the tilting plane, the awful impact, the cumuli of dust engulfing the streets. But we were left to imagine for ourselves the human terror inside the airliner, down the corridors and elevator lobbies of the stricken buildings, or in the streets below as the towers collapsed on to rescue workers and morning crowds. Eyewitnesses told us of office workers jumping from awesome heights, but we did not see them. The screaming, the heroism and reasonable panic, the fumbling in semi-darkness for mobile phones - it was our safe distance from it all that was so horrifying. No blood, no screams. The Greeks, in their tragedies, wisely kept these worst of moments off stage, out of the scene. Hence the word: obscene. This was an obscenity. We were watching death on an unbelievable scale, but we saw no one die. The nightmare was in this gulf of imagining. The horror was in the distance"[1].

Both the fictional character (Perowne) and the novelist (McEwan) seem to be horrified by their inability to visualise, to imagine the direct consequences of inflicting violence on human bodies. Moreover, the horror of the activity of watching a catastrophe derives from what defines as "the morally ambiguous activity of watching" (Cilano, 2009: 32). Watching, from a distance, events that you can't stop or control is a factor that produces terror and fear; fear is a result of uncertainty and ignorance, and, in this case, it is produced by the interaction between what one can see and what one can only imagine.

Perowne's exit solution is embodied by his attempt to *imagine*; after all, imagination is a method of gaining access to certain hidden aspects and a 'failure of the imagination' is officially considered to be one of the possible causes of the disaster[2]. A combination between fear and curiosity ("Everyone fears it, but there's also a darker longing, in the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a blasphemous curiosity" - *Saturday,* 2005: 176) leads to Perowne's empathic reconstruction of the scene and imagining of the reactions of the actors:

> "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? The pilot's end might seem less lonely somehow. It is pathetic folly to reach into the overhead locker for your bag, or necessary optimism? Will the thickly made-up lady who politely served you croissant and jam now be trying to stop you?" (*Saturday*, 2005: 16).

The hijacker, he imagines, is "a man of sound faith with a bomb in the heel of his shoe" (*Saturday,* 2005: 17) who commits a crime against humanity, but he also considers himself to have done a crime when standing "in the safety of his bedroom, wrapped in a woollen dressing gown, without moving or making a sound, half dreaming as he watched people die" (*Saturday,* 2005: 22).

The reactions provoked by the spectacular image of the fire in the sky show that Henry is unsettled by the threat this vision presents to his city - which he considers

[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/12/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety.
[2] ****9/11 Commission Report*, p. 353.

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a masterpiece, a major achievement of civilization -, his family, and his entire way of life. His restlessness is the main factor that makes him watch the news in order to find more details about the event; the news report finally brings him the information that the plane had not been hijacked by terrorists, but rather had a small engine problem: "a simple accident in the making. Not an attack on our whole way of life then" (*Saturday,* 2005: 35). In spite of the reassuring information brought to the viewers by television channels, Perowne's reaction to the incident and the immediate connection he establishes between the scene and the 9/11 events betray the extent to which the 2001 hijacking and crashing of planes have affected the lives of the Westerners and their perspective on the world. That this holds true even for a Londoner living in a city that has passed through multiple terrorist incidents is both a proof and a result of the singularity of those terrorist attacks. At some point in the novel, Perowne ironically states that "As a Londoner, you could grow nostalgic for the IRA" (*Saturday,* 2005: 34). The statement might generate some kind of surprise when uttered by a Londoner, by a citizen whose country has been constantly confronted with attacks organised by the Irish group. The idea it conveys is that there is a clear difference between the paradigm of the 'old' type of terrorist violence, and the paradigm of the so-called 'new terrorism', which is more spectacular and lethal at the same time.

According to Jacques Derrida, the power exerted by the 9/11 events on the consciousnesses of the individuals derived not only from the fact that they represented an attack against a powerful country that "plays a virtually sovereign role among sovereign states", but also from "the threat of the worst *to come*" (Derrida, 2004: 94). When seeing the plane on fire on the London pre-dawn sky, Perowne thinks immediately of the worst; as the day progresses, he keeps gathering information from news reports about the event so as to make sure that it would not assume catastrophic dimensions. The fact that he approaches the image in such a way is a proof of his feeling helpless and powerless both in front of the past and in front of the future. Moreover, his attitude is perhaps intended to be a reflection of the importance modern man grants to the mass media:

> "It's a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety. The habit's grown stronger these past two years; a different scale of news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes" (*Saturday,* 2005: 176).

In the post-9/11 era, it is but ordinary to mediate reality through what Michael Shapiro defines as "pre-texts of apprehension"; "the meaning and value imposed on the world is structured not by one's immediate consciousness but by the various reality-making scripts one inherits or acquires from one's surrounding cultural/linguistic condition", as Shapiro states (Shapiro, 1989: 11). When confronted with the spectacle of a fire in the sky, without having the slightest idea of what it really is, Henry associates his lack of knowledge and inability to formulate an opinion with not having watched the news reports: "They must have missed the media coverage" (*Saturday,* 2005: 14), he thinks to himself as an excuse for his and his family not being aware of what is happening around them in the middle of the night. This statement launches the hypothesis of a double symbiosis: on the one hand, between the mass media and the audience, with the latter growing more and more dependent on the former for informing purposes; on the other hand, but not less important, the highly debated symbiosis between the mass media and terrorist violence, as conceptualised by Perowne in what follows:

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> "Just as the hospitals have their crisis plans, so the television networks stand ready to deliver, and their audiences wait. Bigger, grosser next time. Please don't let it happen. But let me see it all the same, as it's happening and from every angle, and let me be among the first to know" (*Saturday,* 2005: 176).

As important as what has already been said is another 'pre-text apprehension' that filters into Perowne's interpretation of reality: the American Presidency's narrative of defining the 9/11 event as an attack on the Western way of life[1]. The same words are uttered by Perowne, who, after finding out the real origin of the fire in the London sky that has troubled his morning quietness, states: "Not an *attack on our whole way of life then*" (*Saturday,* 2005: 36, my emphasis). Thus, *Saturday* conveys the message of continuity and recovering from the spiral of both political and personal violence. Some time after the event, Henry Perowne continues to feel at ease in the operating room and rather comforted by the "repetition" (*Saturday,* 2005: 40) of domestic rituals, which he performs in a patient and efficient manner. Personally, the main character refuses to consider that the world has fundamentally changed:

> "How foolishly apocalyptic those apprehensions seem by daylight, when the self-evident fact of the streets and the people on them are their own justification, their own insurance. The world has not fundamentally changed. Talk of a hundred-year crisis is indulgence. There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate change, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger, poverty and the rest" (*Saturday*, 2005: 76-77).

While the city, this "grand achievement of the living and all the dead who've ever lived here (…) won't easily allow itself to be destroyed" (*Saturday,* 2005: 77). Perowne sees terrorism as part of the picture, and people will have to adapt to its particulars in order to keep on performing their routine activities. Terrorism is not the sole problem of mankind. This conclusion is obvious from a short presentation of his son reaction to the events. Even if Theo (a 16-year-old blues musician at the time of the attacks) is violently torn apart from his artistic world by the violence of the terrorist attacks ("the September attacks were Theo's induction into international affairs, the moment he accepted that events beyond friends, home and the music scene had bearing on his existence" - *Saturday,* 2005: 31), eighteen months after their occurrence he has the capacity to transform what seemed to be an impending catastrophe into a matter of a rather personal nature: when seeing the fire in the sky, the first idea that comes to his mind is of a fellow band member who was supposed to travel by plane that night.

The solution this novel proposes to the alternative of terrorist violence is human communion and communication, which would construct a firmer sense of self and security. Henry Perowne feels the need to have his family around him and, when confronted with some dangerous instance of urban violence, fights to protect its members. By transmitting this kind of message, this novel "strives to restore hope in the possibility of action and human solidarity, trying to keep alive humanity in each of us" (Mihăilă 2007:78).

Conclusion

Literature possesses the power to aestheticize traumatic experiences for the purpose of understanding and overcoming them, and the novel that has been the focus

[1] http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/bush.speech.text/index.html

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of our analysis stands as a clear sample of this capacity. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* contributes to the understanding of the post-9/11 world through the fact that it strives to respond to the uneasiness that characterizes the consciousness of twenty-first-century citizens who were the witnesses of terrorist events that simply defied representation and understanding within the Western cultural imagination.

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