

The Privilege of Ambivalence: *Saturday's* Henry Perowne and the War on Terror

Jax Lee Gardner

Synopsis

This essay considers the relation between personal privilege (class, race, nationality, sex) and political ambivalence toward the Iraq war as it manifests in the protagonist of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. Henry Perowne "feels culpable somehow, but helpless too" in his shifting opinions of the coming invasion. Throughout the text we are shown Henry's multiple perspectives regarding Iraq. Such ambivalence is, in itself, a form of complicity in war. Henry neither tangibly opposes the actions of the government (as the protesters do), nor does he consider sacrificing any of his creature comforts in support of the war (as the soldiers do). I argue that this sort of complicity is even more dangerous than articulating a clear political opinion, as it takes no account of the consequences of a particular course of action. The war in Iraq will likely never be made personal to Perowne. This distance, born of privilege, grants Perowne the power to equivocate on his feelings depending upon the interlocutor with whom he is engaged. Such equivocation reveals an inability to command an opinion about the situation in Iraq, or to find peace in the personal and political consequences of an opinion. To further problematize Perowne's ambivalence, I look at how other characters (Tony Blair, Jay Strauss, and Daisy Perowne) are juxtaposed to Henry. To this aim, I engage both criticism concerning *Saturday* and political science research regarding British attitudes toward the imminent invasion of Iraq in 2002-03.

Biography

Jax Lee Gardner graduated in April 2011 with a Master's Degree in English from Western Michigan University. Looking forward to a career in academic administration and public policy, she is interested in the intersections of literature and real-world politics. She has applied this focus to issues of post-feminism, queer theory, and the contemporary LGBT movement. Specifically, she has examined the cultural underrepresentation of black lesbians and radical queer parents. In addition, Jax is interested in scholarly responses to the "war on terror." At current, she is reading novels responding to 9/11, and is compelled by the juxtaposition of privilege and political ambivalence.

Essay

In an article for *The Guardian*, published near the one-year anniversary of September 11th, Arundhati Roy tackles the subject of the "grief of history" by examining other nations that have been affected by radical events transpiring on other September 11^{ths} throughout the last century. Roy assures readers that "this historical dredging is not offered as an accusation or a provocation. But just to share the grief of history....To say to the citizens of America...welcome to the world." It is true that the western world has had a difficult time accepting the events of

9/11 with much in the way of global perspective. America subscribes to a doctrine of exceptionalism, and, as such, cannot stand to be the recipient of the kind of terror that it daily inflicts on smaller, less politically stable nations. Citizens of the U.S. (and of powerful allies like Britain) would do well to recognize their personal privilege in an effort to inflict as little harm on others by resisting governmental complicity and asserting political agency in the democratic process. Self-reflexivity, however, is essential to any execution of this course of action. Much scholarly attention has been focused on the militaristic might of the western right wing since 9/11, and it seems that the *a priori* tenets of western liberalism have undergirded much of this criticism of the conservative movement. I think, though, that in addition to critiquing reactionary militarism, practitioners of western liberalism would do well to interrogate the guiding principles of that doctrine in an effort to more fully realize the position of relative safety and privilege most of its followers inhabit. Without such inquiry, those subscribing to the liberal movement are arguably as hypocritical as those they're critiquing.

Ian McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* - set amid the massive anti-war protests of February 15th, 2003 - offers the perfect backdrop against which to explore these limits of western liberalism in the twenty-first century. A well-timed snapshot of the intellectual elite in post-9/11 London, *Saturday* metaphorizes the moral plight of political ambivalence, and, in so doing, gives us a springboard for investigating the relationship between privilege, responsibility, and post-9/11 global politics. McEwan, through his presentation of protagonist Henry Perowne, defends the purposefulness of political ambivalence. This is problematic, though, because political ambivalence must accompany deep and actionable self-reflexivity concerning one's privileged status, in order that liberalism not duplicate the kneejerk political rhetoric that it so often critiques. Though in the full version of this essay, I explore various aspects of 2003 liberal British politics, I'll focus here on liberalism's impotence as a real political "movement" today, by showing how Perowne's liberalism is characterized by resistance to other ideological stances, and not by an actionable, originating political stance. To do so, I look at three figures in the text, each of whom exemplifies a different approach to the war. By putting Perowne's ambivalence into conversation with the more rigid stances of Tony Blair, Jay Strauss, and Daisy Perowne, we see the ways in which Perowne's non-commitment evades accountability and fails to achieve egalitarianism, both personally and politically.

Andrew Foley, in "Liberalism in the New Millennium: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," asserts that "McEwan is interested in the dilemmas facing the contemporary liberal: how to accept one's involvement in the world without compromising one's individual autonomy; how to balance personal freedom and personal responsibility; how to manage one's private life in the context of urgent global issues" (139). While these are clearly the stakes of the novel, Foley argues further that McEwan is an effective liberal in a post-9/11 global world, thereby substantiating the belief that liberalism is an effective political strategy. He writes: "If *Saturday* returns to the fundamental liberal concern of the individual's right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'...it does so in the altered circumstances of a globalized world in which ...life, liberty and happiness are seen to be under threat from a number of new hostile forces" (139). I would argue instead, however, that for Perowne, liberalism is less political choice than convenient excuse. I find that Perowne's political ambivalence functions as a means of eliminating guilt and moral accountability for his privileged position in the hierarchy of globalization. Perowne metaphorizes the elitism of western liberalism, which – contrary to Foley's argument – fails to

be conscious of the degree to which it privileges itself over all other ideologies. This privileging of the elite experience has manifested in a number of liberal doctrines, such as that found in the Enlightenment model of progress, as well as in the more recent notion of “American exceptionalism.” Western liberalism exists only in juxtaposition to other, more unified, political ideologies. As such, its efficacy as a political stance is limited to that of resistance. We see this in Perowne, as his political opinions exist only through the negation of the opinions of those around him. Henry finds it interesting that “he’s a dove with Jay Strauss, and a hawk with his daughter” (198). As such, his politicking is rendered impotent, but (ironically) Perowne feels his stance is superior to other, more tangible stances on the impending invasion of Iraq.

The best way to exemplify my argument vis-à-vis Perowne’s brand of liberalism and its relegation to resistance is by looking at how McEwan juxtaposes Henry with characters who hold more unitary political opinions toward the Iraq war. Tony Blair, Jay Strauss, and Daisy Perowne represent well-known stances prevalent during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq: the liberation of Iraq from Saddam (Blair), the American move toward preemptive war against nations that harbor terrorists (Strauss), and the anti-interventionist pacifism of the activists represented at the 15 February 2003 protests (Daisy).

We first encounter Tony Blair in a flashback Henry Perowne has to a brief meeting in 2000, during which Blair mistook Perowne for a famous artist. Henry tried to correct Blair: “you’re making a mistake,’ Perowne said, and on that word there passed through the Prime Minister’s features for the briefest instant a look of sudden alarm, of fleeting self-doubt...A hairline fracture appeared in the assurance of power” (146). Richard Brown, in “Politics, the Domestic and the Uncanny Effects of the Everyday in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*,” suggests that through this story “Perowne and by implication, McEwan do[es] what the...marchers...may not have been able to do, directly confronting the Prime Minister as an individual with the uneasy accusation that he may have made a mistake – not just about...Henry Perowne...but by implication also about...[Blair’s] support for America in the Iraq war” (90). Thus Brown contends that Perowne is set up as a foil to Blair’s naïveté. While there is a side of Perowne that does stand in opposition to the policies of Tony Blair, however, I argue there’s another side of his political lens that actually recalls the motivations that Blair cited as justification to ally Britain with the United States during the build-up to the 2003 invasion. Therefore, in Perowne’s ambivalence, we often see a similar naïveté to that of Blair.

Understanding Blair’s liberalism as it informed his opinions on the Iraq war, then, might help us to identify the shortcomings of Perowne’s lack of a stance. Unlike the Bush/Cheney machinations happening in America in early 2003, subsequent research into the personal motivations of Tony Blair has shown that, in addition to creating a safer domestic front, the British Prime Minister was truly moved to action by the human rights abuses happening in Iraq. According to Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, in “Blowback’ for Britain?: Blair, Bush, and the War in Iraq,” “the prioritization of so-called human security underlined the confidence of Blair concerning the universality of certain Western political values” (211). We can look to Blair’s own words about the Iraq situation (prior to the invasion) in order to more closely understand his perspective on how creating war might save lives. On 18 March 2003, Blair said, “September 11th has changed the psychology of America, it should have changed the psychology of the world. Of course Iraq is not the only part of this threat. But it is the test of

whether we treat the threat seriously” (qtd. in Hoggett 419). Harkening back to Arundhati Roy’s proclamation to America, “welcome to the world,” one could argue that Blair is so entrenched in a privileged subject position that he actually seems to be saying, “World, welcome to the horror that is America post-9/11.”

What is at once most sad and dangerous about Blair’s position is that it seems to stem from a legitimate loss of perspective concerning the violent terrorism affecting many non-western countries on a daily basis. Additionally, as Kennedy-Pipe asserts, “the horrific level of civilian casualties in Iraq belies the human security argument for regime change, the one remaining justification for the war” (219). I can appreciate that Perowne sees through Blair’s motivations, but he isn’t able to proffer a viable alternative to solidify his misgivings regarding the government’s plan. This is the structure of his intellectual resistance to taking a cohesive stand on Iraq. While he can appreciate Blair’s concern for the torture and fear that the Iraqi citizens lived in under Saddam, he can also appreciate the civilian and military casualties inevitable in such an invasion. Because he positions himself as the diagnostician of society (instead of a member of the masses himself), he interacts with other political views in a spirit of condescension and objectivity. Tony Blair (and even, to a lesser extent, George W. Bush) hatched the invasion of Iraq out of a sense of national pride and personal (political) integrity, but, as Paul Hoggett cautions in “Iraq: Blair’s Mission Impossible,” “integrity is a dangerous thing; it so easily slips into an attitude of moral superiority in which rightness and goodness become identified wholly with self. Experiences, facts, that threaten this attitude have to be got rid of. We call this ‘self-deception,’ but the arts of self-deception are very subtle” (424). By allowing Perowne to tell the Prime Minister of Britain that he’s “made a mistake,” McEwan recognizes that Blair is deceiving himself in his authority, but I argue that McEwan never adequately addresses this failing in Henry’s own “self-deception.”

In contrast to the human-security concerns of Tony Blair, Jay Strauss, Henry Perowne’s anesthesiologist colleague and personal friend, is an American who seems to wholeheartedly subscribe to the Bush doctrine of “preemptive war” on Iraq. According to Perowne, Jay Strauss is:

a man of untroubled certainties, impatient talk of diplomacy, weapons of mass destruction, inspection teams, proof of links with Al-Qaeda and so on. Iraq is a rotten state, a natural ally of terrorists, bound to cause mischief at some point and may as well be taken out now while the U.S. military is feeling perky after Afghanistan. And by taken out, he insists he means liberated and democratized. The U.S.A. has to atone for its previous disastrous policies – at the very least it owes this to the Iraqi people. (101-2)

Indeed, Henry himself notes that “whenever he talks to Jay, Henry finds himself tending towards the anti-war camp” (102). With Strauss, the grim reality of a western invasion to “liberate” the Iraqi people from Saddam becomes glaringly obvious. As such, Perowne sidesteps his own sympathies toward the plight of the Iraqis in order to undermine Strauss’ pro-war attitude. Hoggett explains that because “Iraq became a giant social engineering project, the hubris behind this reforming zeal being entirely invisible to its authors,” as in the case of George W. Bush and Tony Blair (422). Furthermore, Hoggett contends “that human society might prove recalcitrant to such a project, that intervention might simply produce a

collapsed state within which intercommunal violence dangerously escalates” (422). These are the considerations that Perowne makes when engaging with Jay Strauss’ perspective. But I argue that simply allowing that things could turn out badly (particularly since this novel is written with McEwan’s 2005 hindsight) doesn’t make Perowne’s refusal to articulate a clear position on the war somehow more politically justifiable.

In stark contrast to his anti-war position with Strauss lies Perowne’s “hawk” stance with his daughter, Daisy Perowne. Nowhere else in the text does Perowne fully articulate his complex political position better than in the fight he has with Daisy, upon her arrival at the family home. Likewise, no one in the text so overtly calls Perowne out on his refusal to accept responsibility for his own privilege as Daisy does in this heated debate. Daisy has been out with the marchers and is shocked to learn that her father is, perhaps, supportive of the impending invasion. Daisy yells at her father, telling him: “you’re saying let the war go ahead, and in five years if it works out you’re for it, and if it doesn’t, you’re not responsible. 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” (193). Daisy’s frustration stems from her understanding that the politically responsible thing to do is to take a stance. She interrogates his ambivalence, asking, “are we sending the troops in or not?...making guesses about the future is what you do sometimes when you make a moral choice. It’s called thinking through the consequences. I’m against this war because I think terrible things are going to happen. You seem to think good will come of it, but you won’t stand by what you believe” (193). In the passage, Daisy critiques Perowne’s privilege, his refusal to take responsibility, and the dangers of “hedg[ing his] bets.” In an interview about the novel, McEwan describes this fight between Henry and Daisy as representative of the fight he was having within himself about the Iraq issue. McEwan says, “I was very torn by it, so she represents one bit of me and Henry represents some other bit. It was like two voices in my head” (qtd. in Ross 91). I would argue, though, that by casting Henry as the unified narrative voice throughout the text, we aren’t set-up to side with Daisy in this fight. The same is true for the encounter with Blair, as well as Henry’s relationship with Strauss. McEwan has carefully built up Henry’s political ambivalence as the ideological norm (if not the political ideal) in this text, which perpetuates the limits of Perowne’s contemporary British liberalism.

There is one moment, however, that I find profoundly destabilizing for Perowne, and that occurs during the home invasion at the novel’s climax. The Perowne family is taken hostage by a mentally unstable man, Baxter, who holds a grudge with Perowne. Henry is considering whether or not to give Baxter alcohol in an effort to capitalize on his handicap and debilitate him, which is “a choice, a calculation Perowne in his terror finds he can make” (219). Here, McEwan shows us how choices are easier to make when we are confronted by concrete ramifications, not just abstract global consequences. This realization continues to alter Perowne’s way of thinking, as, concomitant to pushing Baxter down the stairs, Henry realizes that he “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...and who is soon to have even less” (236). This is where I think the process of self-reflexivity *could* begin for Henry Perowne. The elite liberalism he represents is lulled by an overwhelming (though largely unconscious) belief in his own superiority. This superiority manifests in a political ambivalence, which maintains its elitism by questioning and resisting other, more unified, political stances.

Unfortunately, Henry fails to undergo a significant change in his self-perception, despite the threat of terror posed to him by Baxter's home invasion. Instead, the novel closes where it began, in a space of self-satisfaction, familial security, and personal privilege. There are dangers inherent to the stances expressed by Blair, Strauss, and Daisy Perowne. Yet in espousing an opinion, they each demonstrate a willingness to take risks: once articulated, a position can be proven wrong. Thus a concrete political opinion equals a vested stake – for better or worse – in the impending war. Conversely, Perowne's political ambivalence – informed fully by the nebulous tenets of western liberalism – shelters him from any future fallout of having aligned himself with one stance or another.

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