Daydreams and Utopian Desire. Intertextual Echoes Between Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* and *Saturday*

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Abstract

Readers of both *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Saturday* (2005) by Ian McEwan may notice the presence in the latter novel of some allusions to the former. Starting from these intertextual references, this essay proposes the pivotal role of the motif of utopia for the comprehension of both the relationship between the two novels and that between literature and science in the background of each. Utopia is evoked on the allegorical and figurative levels in the first work, while in the second it is only mentioned in order to be denied. Both novels begin with positions of rejection of the traditional conception of utopia, but then go on to illustrate the gradual emergence in the protagonists' thought of a desire for a better life, for social change in which themselves, with their choices and their families, become models for collective action. Indeed, utopian desire is the driving force behind the plot of both novels, through daydreams which have a dual function: a regressive one which tracks back to a lost golden age and, following Bloch's thought, an anticipating function, through the "encounter with themselves" for the protagonists and through their recognition and affirmation of the utopian desire.

Keywords

Utopia; Utopian desire; Ian McEwan; *The Child in Time*; *Saturday*

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Introduction

The contest between literature and science has very ancient roots, already found in the Aristotelian division between theoretical, practical and poietic sciences[1], but it was not a constant in Western culture. The debate resurfaced over the centuries, with peaks of greater intensity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the decades in which the gap between the two fields of knowledge was widening apace with the historical and social changes brought by the industrial revolution and the two wars. In 1959, Charles Percy Snow published a pamphlet which set forth the definition of "two cultures", and which can be considered a portrait of the decades in which the scientific revolution, the loss of trust in the idea of progress, and the specialization of the hard sciences had weakened the dialogue between the humanistic and scientific fields[2].

In recent decades, the collaboration between science and literature has become less and less feasible due to the hyperspecialization of each area of knowledge – which encouraged «disciplinary developments in well-defined areas» (Ceserani 2010: 51)[3] – and the identification of a

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[1] See Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book 6.

[2] On the resonance of *The Two Cultures* see also Huxley 1963.

[3] All translations from Italian texts are mine.

third culture – that of social sciences[4] – alongside the two traditional ones.

However, in contemporary literary and scientific production there are some trends that demonstrate how the dialogue between these two areas of knowledge is far from being weak. For several decades, physics, biology, mathematics, neuroscience, and many other disciplines have also shown their «interest in the texts and methods of literature» (*ibid*.: 1), and equally numerous are the literary works that deal with issues drawn from scientific research[5]. While on the one hand science tries to become more and more "readable" and, just as in the past, borrows formal and rhetorical strategies from narrative in order to reach wider audiences, on the other hand the fictional universes of literary production have increasingly welcomed investigations and digressions imported from other fields of knowledge.

Most of the issues regarding the relationship between literature and science emerge several times in Ian McEwan's production: his involvement in issues related to scientific achievements, the limits of human reason, and environmental problems, is evidenced as much by his essays and journalistic works[6] as by his literary ones. For example, in *The Child in Time* (1987) the achievements of quantum physics and the investigation of temporal manipulations play a key role; in *Black Dogs* (1992) there is a central dialectic between reason and religion; biology and neurosurgery become key themes in *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Saturday* (2005); and the motifs of the end of the world and ecological emergencies recur in *Or Shall We Die?* (1983), *The End of the World Blues* (2006) and *Solar* (2010). Each of these works testifies to the complementarity and constant interference of scientific knowledge in

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[4] See Kagan 2009.

[5] See Horton 2013: 684.

[6] For an overview on this production see http://www.ianmcewan.com/science.html.

McEwan's research for new models of knowledge and understanding of reality[7].

My choice to narrow the field of investigation in this contribution to two specific works, *The Child in Time* and *Saturday*, is mainly due to the relationship that McEwan himself creates through one intertextual reference as well as some allusions to the previous novel, which makes the reflection on utopianism a central element for the comprehension of both the relationship between the two novels and that between literature and science in the background of each.

The explicit presence of the reflection on utopianism in *Saturday*, along with the clear allusion to *The Child in Time*, sheds light upon the apparently opposite journeys of the protagonists, both in regard to each other and as well as concerning the relationship with their deuteragonists. With the term "utopianism", I refer to Sargent's definition (1994) of a «social dreaming […] that concern[s] the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision[s] a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live» (*ibid*.: 3). As we will see, both novels, set in a London with dystopian traits, begin with positions of rejection of the traditional conception of utopia rooted in Thomas More's work, but then go on to illustrate the gradual emergence in the protagonists' thought of a «desire [for] a better life, for order, unity, and simplicity» (*ibid*.: 28) in which they themselves, with their *choices* and their families, become models for collective action[8].

The premises from which the two narrations start are different: the conviction of already living in the best of all possible worlds for the protagonist of *Saturday* – a materialist with a blind trust in progress –

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[7] Head 2007: 15. On the relationship between literature and science in McEwan's production see also Head 2007: 200-208; Malcolm 2002: 155-181; Cojocaru 2016: 59-65; Rees-Jones 2005: 331-340.

[8] As Moylan observes (2014: 216), in utopian production «the focus on everyday life and not simply on larger social structures and the related stress on utopia as a process of continuous production and reproduction rather than an imposed blueprint».

and the total detachment from reality, the complete distrust and disinterest for the destiny of the world and of humanity in *The Child in Time*. In both novels the main characters start with a static and immutable vision of reality, which results in disengagement and a condition of passive witnessing. We will see how both works, albeit through different strategies, illustrate a «cycle of hope, failure, despair, and rejection of hope altogether, followed by the renewal of hope» (*ibid*.) which represents «the basic pattern of attitudes to social change» (*ibid*.).

Since McEwan repeatedly emphasizes the dangers of utopianism – such as political totalitarianism and religious fundamentalism[9] – this reflection highlights the necessarily conflictual and contradictory nature of every desire for social change. In the process of the gradual emergence of the utopian impulse – intended here as a desire which reflects, acts and tries to give sense to the ordinary experience of everyday life[10] – we will see how the author uses a series of anti-utopian images, which play a critical role with regards to every form of utopianism in *Saturday* and as well as towards the deuteragonist's precise utopia in *The Child in Time*[11].

The attention to daily life and the link between individual and collective experience in the realization of «the best of all possible societies» (Bloch 1996, II: 624) can be seen from the choice to make the family sphere of the two protagonists a reflection of anxieties and of the turbulence of two phases of historical transition, which can be considered as the driving force of the utopian tension in the two narrations[12]: the Thatcher era of 1983-1987 in the case of *The Child in Time*,

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[9] See Sargent 1994: 24-26.

[10] See Jameson 2005.

[11] On the concept of anti-utopia as a critique of utopia and utopianism, see Moylan 2000, in particular pp. 121-133 and Baccolini – Moylan 2004: 35-51, in particular pp. 40-42.

[12] See Jameson 2005: 15: «on the one hand, its very existence or emergence certainly registers the agitation of the various "transitional periods" within which most Utopias were composed (the term "transitional" itself conveying this sense of momentum)». The centrality of the idea of transition is also

and the post-9/11 state of global alarm in *Saturday*. Strictly related to these phases of transition and change, as noted by David Malcolm (2002: 104), is another motif which criss-crosses the two works on the historical, personal, and figural levels: that of the loss and caducity of life which in turn makes the motif of the time pivotal in the two novels – emphasized both in terms of representation and content[13] – and which makes childhood one of the key figures in the reflection on utopianism.

The Child in Time and *Saturday* are works which represent the dialectic between desire (utopian impulse) and what contradicts it (Jameson 2005: 84), or, recalling the words of Remo Bodei (1994: XV), novels that are placed «beyond the pleasure principle of the old utopias and beyond the 'reality principle', meant as the passive acceptance of the already-given». In both cases the utopian desire will be the driving force which will push the plot forward through daydreams that have a dual function: on one hand a regressive one, since they reproduce traumas, and on the other hand, following Bloch's thought, they are anticipators, which lead the protagonists towards the encounter with the self and the full understanding and affirmation of the utopian desire. In the end, it becomes clear that on a metatextual level the dialectic between the two principles refers to the reflection which is in the background to the novels: the possibility of interaction and reconciliation of the humanistic and scientific perspectives. Even starting from the perspectives of two antithetical protagonists, we will see that McEwan's novels converge on the same utopian conception: it is a tension towards an ideal of social change, which involves the plan of history, the collective plan that begins from the self and from daily experience, from that which Bloch defined, indeed, as the encounter with the self.

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highlighted in *Saturday*'s epigraph, in the quote from *Herzog* by Saul Bellow: «What it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls».

[13] See Marcus 2013: 83-98; Slay 1994: 205-218; Edwards 1995: 41-55.

Utopia and the search for a higher order
in *The Child in Time*

Both McEwan's novels begin by distancing themselves from one of the traditional conceptions of utopia, the golden age that must be recovered. *The Child in Time* does this by starting from the central motif of the loss: loss of a child – a daughter, due to a kidnapping –, loss of childhood[14], which echoes in the insistent motif of the loss of the past *tout court*. In the narration intertwine the contrasting stories of the protagonist Stephen Lewis, writer of children's books, and that of Charles Darke, his publisher, friend, and a leading politician, supported by the incumbent Prime Minister as a possible successor. McEwan uses the dialectical comparison between their stories to distance himself from a utopian vision focused on the past, on regression to a lost condition, and it is no coincidence that the only moment in which a meeting between the two friends takes place is in the garden where Darke chose to isolate himself to relive his childhood:

> Stephen had the time to notice that his friend had not, as he had first thought, actually shrunk. He was slighter and suppler in his movements. He had grown his hair forwards into a fringe, and cut it short behind the ears. It was his wide open manner, the rapid speech and intent look, his unfettered, impulsive lurching, […] the abandonment of the ritual and formality of adult greetings which suggested the ten-year-old. […] Charles jumped in the air: 'It's not a nest, stupid. It's my place, my own place!' (*Ibid.*: 104)

The cottage garden in which the publisher and his wife Thelma choose to eschew the pressures of working life, after Darke's resignation

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[14] See McEwan 1992: 34: «*Lemonade* is a message from you to a previous self which will never cease to exist. And the message is bitter. […] Whether you wanted to or not, you've communicated with them across the abyss that separates the child from the adult and you've given them a first, ghostly intimation of their mortality. Reading you, they get wind the idea that they are finite as children».

from some political posts, is a "masked utopia" [15] which hides «dystopic drifts» (*ibid*.: 13), since the renunciation of public life only apparently results in a recovery of an eternal adolescence, or in a conquest of Cockaigne, a land only made up of games and lightheartedness[16]. The other side of the coin – the cause of Darke's eventual failure, which leaves suicide as the only alternative – is the loss of all social belonging and, at the same time, the loss of freedom within the system which he himself had created. Darke's experiment is therefore the clearest anti-utopian figure used by McEwan, who regards every escapist design with disenchantment, since they necessarily lead to alienation and isolation, without effects on the future of the community.

Darke's attempt at self-sufficiency, at detachment from the here and now of the surrounding life, is mirrored by Stephen's condition in the whole first half of the work: isolated in the apartment that his wife Julie had left after the abduction of their daughter Kate, Stephen lives in a crystallized and irretrievable past that is his paternal and family life *tout court*:

> Through the window he saw not an enclosed car-park and baking limousines but, as from two floors up, a rose garden, playing fields, a speckled grey balustrade […]. *This was a lost time and a lost landscape* – he had returned once to discover the trees efficiently felled […]. And since loss was his subject, it was an easy move to a frozen, sunny day outside a supermarket in South London. (McEwan 1992: 14)[17]

Here, Stephen begins to daydream, and the resulting flashbacks of his life from his youth to more recent years signal the re-emergence of a

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[15] See Ilardi – Loche – Marras 2018.

[16] See McEwan 1992: 47: «Put it this way […] Charles has an inner life. In fact, more than an inner life, an inner obsession, *a separate world*. […] Mostly he denies it's there, but it's with him all the time, it consumes him, it makes him what **he** is. What Charles *desires – if that's the word –* what he needs is quite at odds with what he does». (Emphasis added).

[17] Emphasis added.

lost past and the impossibility of return[18], not surprisingly culminating in the totally illusory encounter with his daughter Kate[19]. At the same time, these dreams have an anticipatory function[20]: before this meeting the protagonist ascends to a climax built on acts which repeat the trauma. These acts assume an ever-increasing degree of unconsciousness for the whole first part of the work and anticipate what awaits him in the end, the arrival of another child.

From the conscious choice to fake Kate's birthday celebrations to mix-up with a student in a primary school, Stephen experiences a crescendo of passivity, drawn by the regressive force of trauma[21].

In this phase, as it is for Darke, Stephen's desire is still unattainable, reducible to pure fancy, and it has not assumed the universal feature of the *imagination* that it will gradually acquire[22]: in the case of Darke the proof is given by the fixation on the recovery of childhood, generated in

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[18] See McEwan 1992: 99: «The patchouli had jolted him. It was the scent of a dreamily self-destructive girl he had known in Kandahar. He had been shaken by the commonplace of irreversible time. […] If he could only live in the present he might breathe freely. But I don't like the present, he thought, and picked up his things.».

[19] The episode takes place in the same chapter VI (McEwan 1992: 132-145). *Ibid*.: 145: «By dementedly living through the very reunion that preoccupied him constantly, Stephen came to feel that if he had not exorcised his obsession, he had blunted it. He was beginning to face the difficult truth that Kate was no longer a living presence, she was not an invisible girl at his side whom he knew intimately […]».

[20] See Bloch 1996.

[21] See McEwan 1992: 119-120: «To buy a toy would undo two years of adjustment, it would be irrational, indulgent, self-destructive; and weak, above all, weak. It was the weak who failed to maintain *the line between the world as it was and the world as they wanted it to be.* Don't be weak, he told himself, try to survive. […] You might never come back. He did not go, but he could not stop himself wanting to go. Solitude had encouraged in him small superstitions, a tendency to magical thought.».

[22] See Jameson 2005: 44-45.

him by Stephen's first novel, *Lemonade*[23], while in Stephen's case the proof can be found in the fact that the desire that motivates all of his actions is still egoistic, particular, and individual[24]. And as for his friend, also for Stephen both private and public life are characterized by passivity, isolation, and regression[25]. His own art of writing, devoid of its previous universalizing capacity, is reduced to a mere instrument for the reform of children's education. Moreover, it is in the service of an authoritarian policy whose the pedagogical principles he does not share. Indeed, Stephen agrees to take part in the works for an *Authorized Childcare Handbook* and becomes one of the signatories, only to discover, before the conclusion, that the *Manual* has already been fully written by the Prime Minister, and the sessions in which Stephen has passively participated for months, «appear[ing] plausibly alert for two and a half hours» (*ibid*.: 13), turn out to have only formal value[26].

In this respect, too, Darke and Stephen's stories are closely interconnected, and the epilogue of Darke's experience is presented as a possible narrative for the story of the protagonist. Both are pawns of a political design with which they do not agree, but in which they participate out of pure selfish interest or just because of their inability to oppose a system of which they disapprove[27]. Both passive and indifferent to the social consequences, they will, however, find two different ways out of the same condition of personal and collective stagnation and immobility:

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[23] See Edwards 1995: 42.

[24] See Jameson 2005: 44-48.

[25] See McEwan 1992: 10: «The art of bad government was to sever the line between public policy and intimate feeling».

[26] From the first pages, the meetings of the subcommittee are also the moments of his daydreams, focused mainly on his lost condition (see McEwan 1992: 12: «Stephen ran memories and daydreams, what was and what might have been»).

[27] See Charles' words: «'You idiot! I stood for this programme. A majority elected me because of it. It doesn't matter what I think. I have my mandate – a freer City, more weapons, good private schools'» (McEwan 1992: 40).

> Life on earth was to continue after all and so, […] but Stephen honestly did not mind that life on earth was to continue. […] The universe was enormous, he thought wearily, intelligent life was spread thinly, but the planets involved were probably innumerable. Among these who stumbled across the convertibility of matter and energy there were bound to be quite a few who blew themselves to bits, and they were likely to be the ones who did not deserve to survive. The dilemma wasn't human, he thought lazily, […] it was in the very structure of the matter itself, and there was nothing much to be done about that. (*Ibid.*: 37)

In contrast to Darke's escapist solution, Stephen gradually acquires awareness of the role of the self and of consciousness in the understanding and transformation of reality, intended as «an undivided whole of which matter, time, even consciousness itself, would be complicatedly related embodiments» (*ibid.*: 114). In terms of the dialectic between the two perspectives – humanistic and scientific – which emerges in several occasions, the turning point in the novel is represented by the dialogue between Stephen and Thelma, Charles's wife and a theoretical physician who has devoted much of her research to the nature of time. It is during the first meeting with Thelma – a dialogue in which McEwan allusively recalls the comparison between the two cultures that these intellectuals represent[28] – that the close connection between consciousness, space, time and matter, emerges, and it will become focal in the rest of Stephen's story[29].

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[28] See *ibid.*: 45-46: «Reality, whatever that word means, turns out to be a thousand times stranger. Who do you want? Luther? Copernicus? Darwin? Marx? Freud? None of them has reinvented the word and our place in it as radically and bizarrely as the physicists of the century have. […] Shakespeare would have grasped wave functions, Donne would have understood complementarity and relative time. […] And they would have educated their audience too. But you "arts" people, you're not only ignorant of these magnificent things […]».

[29] *Ibid.*: 45: «[…] particles appeared to be 'aware' of each other and seemed – in theory at least – to communicate this awareness instantaneously over

It is after the dialogue with Thelma, in fact, that the key episode of the whole novel, which furnishes the basis for McEwan's utopianism and its scientific premise, takes place: another one of Stephen's daydreams, «a dreamer who knows his dream for what it is» (*ibid*.: 58), opens a space-time parenthesis through which the protagonist is transported back to the weeks following his conception, only to witness a discussion between his parents as they decide whether to carry him to term. This is an episode that, as Edwards (1995) has noted, has a dual effect, with consequences for his past and future. For his past, because when Stephen catches the gaze of his mother, it is at this moment that she realizes that she must give birth to that unexpected son, thus founding his own past; and for his future, since the protagonist himself, after losing consciousness due to the shock of the paranormal experience, wakes up in the cottage where his wife Julie lives after their separation and conceives with her that child of whom he will only learn in the last pages, when he returns after nine months to the same house where the child is being born.

> They had two possibilities, equally weighted, balanced on a honed fulcrum. The moment they inclined towards one, the other, while never ceasing to exist, would disappear irrevocably. He could rise from the bed now […]. He would lock the door behind him, securing his independence and pride. […]. Or something could be risked, a different life unfolded in which his own unhappiness could be redoubled or eliminated. Their hesitation was brief, delicious before the forking paths. Had he not seen two ghosts already that day and brushed against the mutually enclosing envelopes of events and the times and places in which they occurred, then he would not have been able to choose, as he did

immense distances; how space and time were not separable categories but aspects of one another, and likewise matter and energy, matter and the space it occupied, motion and time».

now, without deliberation and with an intimacy which felt both
wise and abandoned. (McEwan 1992: 63-64)

This scene is followed by a vision of two possible narratives («the
forking paths», *ibid*.: 63) mentioned by the narrative voice: on one side
the ghost of Stephen rising from the bed and closing the door behind
him initiates a series of invisible events («and innumerable invisible
events were set in train», *ibid*.: 64), and on the other the real Stephen who
stays with Julie and «he did not doubt that what was happening now,
and what would happen as a consequence of now, was not separated
from what he had experienced earlier that day» (*ibid*.).

The choice of the double bed as the place of temporal bifurcation is
particularly significant: the insistence of the narrative voice in the
previous pages on the need not to leave the bed, the accurate description
of the atmosphere that surrounds it, the juxtaposition of «different
spaces, different places that are incompatible with each other» (Foucault
2011: 27) which characterizes it and all the reflections that will emerge
during the union with Julie – but which will cease to exist outside the
bed, as though by enchantment – confirms that it is a counter-place, an
heterotopia. This episode not only recalls Darke's failing experiment in
the cottage garden, it also originates the utopian impulse, intended as a
tension towards an ideal of a better life in an individual and collective
sense, which will be definitively realized at the end of the novel[30]:

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[30] See McEwan 1992: 61-62: «In it, or on it [the bed], his marriage had
begun and, six years later, ended. […] Here he had taken part in the longest,
most revealing and, later, most desolate conversations of his life. He had had
the best sex ever here, and the worst wakeful nights. He had done more
reading here than in any other single place […]. He had never lost his temper
so thoroughly anywhere else, nor been so tender, protective, comforting, nor,
since early childhood, been so cared for himself. Here his daughter had been
conceived and born. […] All the worst and the best things that had ever
happened to him had happened there». It should not be forgotten that
Foucault considered the double bed as the primary heterotopy par excellence
(see Foucault 2006: 13).

Home, he was home, enclosed, safe and therefore able to provide, home where he owned and was owned. Home, why be anywhere else? Wasn't it wasteful to be doing anything other than this? *Time was redeemed, time assumed purpose all over again because it was the medium for the fulfilment of desire*. […] Not governments, or publicity firms or research departments, but biology, existence, matter itself had dreamed this up for its own *pleasure and perpetuity*, and this exactly what you were meant to do, it wanted you to like it. (McEwan 1992: 65)[31]

The union which gives life to the new child, defined as a *desire that gives meaning to time*, overcomes the nihilism derived from the loss of Kate: it is the not-yet-conscious which begins to delineate the specific object of the utopia and is «anticipation of the [...] better life opportunities» (Bodei 1994: xvii) that will gradually emerge in the second part of the novel. It is the moment in which the past – intended as a Paradise lost – is overcome. What the reader witnesses is the «coincidence of the moment with eternity» (*ibid*.: xix), but also the existence of «a future that had not yet become constitutively in tension in the present» (*ibid*.). The two strictly interrelated and specular episodes, at the pub The Bell and in the bedroom, represent «"the great moments" in which the curtain of temporality is torn», in which it is possible to grasp «the fullness of the sense of goals» to which hope tends (*ibid*.).

The insistence of the narrative voice on the possible narratives, its explicit reference to Borges' bifurcating paths, is also the moment of the «weakening of the absolute reality» (*ibid*.) necessary for utopian hope. It is the moment of «breaking down prejudices according to which the real comes first, and then *possibilia* follow as waste or abortion of them» (*ibid*.).

The two episodes are evidence of the fact that McEwan chooses to start from the possible to build a reality that «ends up appearing as a compatible set of simultaneous *possibilia* (something analogous to the

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[31] Emphasis added.

Leibniz compossible) whose more or less stable combinations or configurations can vary and be subjected to incessant endless changes» (*ibid*.: xix-xx).

The final scene is the moment in which the utopian message of the novel becomes manifest through the birth of the child and the new family: «in the wild expansiveness of their sorrow they undertook to heal everyone and everything, the Government, the country, the planet, but they would start with themselves; and while they could never redeem the loss of their daughter, they would love her through their new child, and never close their minds to the possibility of her return» (McEwan 1992: 202). It is no coincidence that the episode takes place once again in that same bed where the utopian desire had originated.

The months which separate the two meetings of Stephen and Julie – that which originates the utopian desire and that which affirms it through (re)birth – are the necessary interval for both of them, for their encounter with their selves (Bloch 1994: 1077, III), for the understanding of their own goal, meant as a liberation from what they do not want to be, a moment of openness to the new and to self-realization.

The reader learns of Julie's path only indirectly and summarily in the last pages. Instead, it is possible to witness the path of Stephen as he gradually frees himself from inertia – which finds correspondence in liberation from the screen, from video dependence, therefore from the position of passive and indifferent spectator he had occupied throughout the first half of the novel – and reacquires control of himself and of his role. On the level of the public sphere and of the effects on collective life, the moment of encounter with the self is reflected in the transgression of the Prime Minister's imposition and Stephen's consequent resignation from the work of the subcommittee, with the early disclosure of the already existing version of the *Childcare Handbook*.

It is the moment of recognition of himself with the others and, in particular, of his own relationship with generations to come: the initial alienation is replaced by hope, which reconciles in Stephen his being and having-to-be, and by ethical commitment, which is the basis of the

recovery of an intergenerational bond[32] and lays the foundation for the conclusive establishment of the utopian desire.

The full reconciliation of these elements – time, conscience, matter, and the search for a goal that combines the individual plan with the collective one – lies in Thelma's explanation of the implicate theoretical order. The dialogue between the physician and Stephen after the paranormal experience of the vision of his parents at the pub The Bell is readable first and foremost as an illustration of the limits of existing theories of time in relation to episodes like the one experienced by the protagonist. From Einstein's theory of relativity, which is based on continuity and causality (or determinism), to quantum theories, based on non-continuity and non-causality, Thelma highlights the need according to these approaches to consider time as an entity, to separate it from space and matter:

> I've heard it argued that the very way our brains are wired up limits our understanding of time, just as it holds our perceptions to only three dimensions. That sounds like pretty dim materialism to me. And pessimistic too. But we do have to tie ourselves to models – time as liquid, time as a complex envelope with points of contact between all moments. (McEwan 1992: 113)

At the same time, Thelma hints at David Bohm's new theoretical approach, which seeks an implicate order in which existing theories can be reconciled[33]: Bohm, distancing himself from the linear and deterministic conception of time, had in fact illustrated his holistic cosmic vision, in which everything is connected to reality in its entirety and every single element of the universe can reveal information about

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[32] The recovery of this bond is also demonstrated by Stephen's newfound opposition to the pedagogical reform to which he has passively contributed. The quotations from the *Manual* in epigraph to the chapters of *The Child in Time* gradually reveal the government's reactionary and authoritarian stance toward the education of the new generations.

[33] For an in-depth analysis of Bohm's theory in relation to *The Child in Time* see Head 2007: 70-90.

any other element of it, corresponding, I would add, to that «synchronic totality» mentioned by Jameson (2005: 80).

> In terms of the implicate order one may say that everything is enfolded into everything. This contrasts with the *explicate order* now dominant in physics in which things are *unfolded* in the sense that each thing lies only in its own particular region of space (and time) and outside the regions belonging to other things. (Bohm 2005: 224)

Bohm's theory, in addition to matter and space, involves in the implicate order also consciousness and individuals, as elements which participate in the entirety of the universe and contribute to giving it sense, thus helping to explain the meaning of the utopian desire with which the novel ends: «As a human being takes part in the process of this totality, he is fundamentally changed in the very activity in which his aim is to change that reality which is the content of his consciousness» (Bohm 2005: 266).

It is therefore through the dialogue between Stephen and Thelma and through her reference to Bohm's theory that the two perspectives – humanistic and scientific – reach a full integration in the utopian ideal:

Stephen and Julie's story – which participates in and the reflects the whole life of the universe and of humanity –, their path towards a rediscovery of their responsibilities in an individual, intergenerational and consequently collective and universal perspective, recalls in the end the way in which their union and their action is reflected in a larger design and is part of it. The link between their experience and the collective consciousness of humanity allows us to read the final scene in a new light and invites the reader to change perspective and look at their story from above, from another planet, setting forth its cosmic and universal scope:

> Beyond the bed was the window through which they could see the moon sinking into a gap in the pines. Directly above the moon was a planet. It was Mars, Julie said. It was a reminder of a harsh world. For now, however, they were immune, it was before the

beginning of time, and they lay watching planet and moon descend through a sky that was turning blue. (McEwan 1992: 207)

Art and science in *Saturday*'s utopianism

The first chapter of *Saturday* plays a key role in the decoding of the rhetorical mechanisms implemented by the narrative voice and in understanding the relationship with the previous novel. The choice of introducing the narration with a backstory, which takes place in a semi-dreamlike dimension in the middle of the night, an episode both chronologically and factually unrelated to the events of the day, confers on the first chapter an anticipatory value[34]. In terms of content, the initial chapter brings up first and foremost the continuity with some key motifs of *The Child in Time*, such as the dream, time, the intergenerational relationship, and their utopian correlatives. On the rhetorical level it is possible to observe, instead, a double phenomenon: on one hand there is a process of negation, both explicit and allusive, of the ideals and theories affirmed by the previous work, realized through a dense network of parallels between the motifs of utopia – especially those religious and political – and that of the synchronic totality of an interconnected whole; on the other hand, there is a gradual divestment of the narrator's point of view and the consequent deconstruction of his rationalist and materialistic perspective, which becomes decisive in establishing a productive dialectic with the artistic and humanistic point of view of his two children.

It is the same narrator who suggests the anticipatory function of the first chapter, in a kind of declaration of poetics attributed to his son Theo, a hint at Theo's key role in the interpretation of the work: «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 small, closer in […] then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto – think small» (McEwan 2005b: 33). If, on the one hand,

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[34] See McEwan 2005b: 6: «he's dreaming or sleepwalking».

the invitation to think on a smaller scale steers the reader toward giving a greater weight to the small daily events that are the object of the narration, on the other hand it is also readable from a metatextual perspective, giving to the first chapter an exemplary function for the entire novel. The motto "think small" echoes in the image of «the world in a grain of sand» (*ibid*.: 26), of «a microcosm giving you the whole world» (*ibid*.) which returns twice in the text, suggesting the universal value of Perowne's day[35]. Regarding the relationship with *The Child in Time*, the reader immediately notices how everything – from the protagonist's life to his vision of reality – suggests the will to overturn the premises from which the previous novel began. Henry Perowne is an antithetical figure compared to Stephen Lewis: he is a successful doctor, whose familial, professional, and social lives exemplify utopian perfection. Given the centrality of the domestic element in both novels, the opening description of «the Perownes' own corner» in terms of «a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square [...] enclosing a perfect circle of garden - an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables» (*ibid*.: 7-8) is significant. As these few lines denote, the narrator's point of view, which mainly uses internal monologue and stream of consciousness, is the lucid and detached one of a man of science, a «coarse, unredeemable materialist» (*ibid*.: 109) moved by a blind trust in progress which leads him to consider the big city, including the one in which he lives, «a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions [...] entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work» (*ibid*.: 7).

Alongside these initial signs of reversal, there are other points of contact with the previous work, starting from the choice to open *Saturday*'s narration, too, in a London with dystopian traits[36].

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[35] See McEwan 2005b: 103.

[36] The first pages of *The Child in Time* offer a glimpse of the social and environmental degradation of the British capital, with references to the crowds of "licensed beggars" who roam threateningly in the streets, the presence of

Particularly important is the episode which Perowne witnesses half-sleep before dawn, while he is looking out of the window. The combustion of an airplane above Heathrow airport, initially interpreted as a phenomenon of planetary proportions, «a meteor burning out in the London sky» (*ibid.*), gradually acquires the traits of a nightmare (*ibid.*: 16), of a show that has «the familiarity of a recurrent dream» (*ibid.*), not only because all passengers have imagined what would happen if they were involved in a plane crash at the beginning of a flight, but above all because after 9/11, videos, newspapers, and documentaries had expanded the imaginary around plane accidents to the point of creating a familiarizing effect: «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 this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free» (*ibid.*: 19)[37].

The episode has other two focal functions, in addition to the anticipatory one of the daydream, a harbinger of the misfortune that will afflict the Perowne family in the last chapters and therefore inaugural of a climate of tension that will underlie the entire narrative until the episode of violence in which the doctor's day culminates. First, it has the function of warning the reader about the unreliability of this narrator – alert, lucid, detached, and objective, but who is misinterpreting the events happening before his eyes, since within few hours he learns from the tv and radio news that it was a simple plane breakdown. Second, it establishes the relationship between the two elements of the point of view and empathy, intended as the recognition of oneself in others, a guiding element towards the emergence of the utopian impulse.

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armed policemen, and the increasing privatization of health and education. The international scene is marked by the Cold War, and the nuclear threat reaches particularly high levels during the Olympics that Stephen follows on the screen, during which the clash between an American and a Russian athlete soon turns into a diplomatic case, making evident the risk of an international conflict.

[37] Emphasis added.

During the description of the plane accident, the narrator's insistence on Perowne's effort to adjust his point of view («he revises his perspective outwards to the scale of the solar system», *ibid*.: 15), to revise his scale of measure («he revises the scale again, zooming inwards this time», *ibid*.), to observe the facts from a different perspective («the slowing changing perspective», *ibid*.: 18) becomes a warning to the reader, since the excessive distance – which Perowne himself defines as a safe distance from the place where the action takes place – does not allow him to adequately interpret what is happening. If read in relation to the events of the day, these premises reinforce the anticipatory value of the episode and create an important common thread with what will be the narrator's point of view on people, objects, and events. The protagonist's perspective is also fundamental for the interpretation of another leitmotif that criss-crosses his day and that draws attention to the way in which the same "safe distance" extends from the private sphere to the collective one, involving the axiological level: the several parallels with *Mrs Dalloway*[38] suggest that we can find in the tv and radio news which mark the main episodes of Perowne's day the equivalent of the Big Ben bells which in Virginia Woolf's novel were used to suggest the interrelationship between individual time – that of the private sphere – and monumental, collective time[39]. The tv screen on which Perowne watches the main events of the day is one of many expressions of the same motif of his detachment and his passivity, and it generates a further link between the private and the collective dimensions. The way in which he talks about his son Theo's «initiation […] in front of the TV» (*ibid*.: 30) corroborates the function of tv news and leads us back to the safe distance introduced during the conversation about the 11th of September, the moment of «Theo's induction into international affairs» (*ibid*.): «These days he scans the papers for fresh developments the way he might a listings magazine. As long as there's nothing new, his mind is free. International terror, security cordons, preparations for war -

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[38] See Brown 2008: 80-93.
[39] See Ricoeur 1985: 100-152, II.

these represent the steady state, the weather. Emerging into adult consciousness, this is the world he finds. (*ibid.*)».

This image of the rapid overview of newspapers, combined with guides for entertainment shows, echoes in the following scene in which the point of view and empathy return to the fore. The scene at the fishmonger's – where Perowne goes to organize the family dinner – during which he gazes from above at the tangle of bodies that still move in the cages, acquires an allegorical significance especially after the long series of beatings, tortures, kidnappings, and assassinations by the Chinese state that had been evoked on the road just before, passing in front of the embassy. Perowne cannot help but observe how «it's fortunate for the fishmonger and his customers that sea creatures are not adapted to make use of sound waves and have no voice. Otherwise there'd be howling from those crates» (*ibid.*: 103). The embarrassment of Perowne, who looks away, is significant. The scene mirrors his sense of guilt during the plane crash witnessed passively from the window, even if he also «goes on catching and eating them, and though he'd never drop a live lobster into boiling water, he's prepared to order one in a restaurant» (*ibid.*).

In parallel to the episode of the Twin Towers, the need for a safe distance defined as «key to the human success and domination» (*ibid.*) returns in contrast to «the close hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force. And what you don't see...» (*ibid.*). The process of deconstruction of the protagonist's point of view continues through the dialectic with the two children and intersects with the motif of time, pivotal in this case, too, in the understanding of the axiological dimension and in Perowne's gradual acquisition and comprehension of his own role in relation to the public sphere. In the first chapter, it is in Theo's thought that readers can again find an allusion to the conceptions of time and *possibilia* proposed in *The Child in Time*, like a tile in the mosaic of references to the previous work and its implicit negation:

As Henry understands it, Theo's world-view accommodates *a hunch that somehow everything is connected*, interestingly connected, and that certain authorities, notably the US government, with

privileged access to extra-terrestrial intelligence, is excluding the rest of the world from such wondrous knowledge as contemporary science, dull and strait-laced, cannot begin to comprehend. (McEwan 2005b: 29)[40]

The clear reference to the cosmic interconnection of all things elaborated by Bohm, rejected by Perowne, is corroborated by the parallels with the two "problems of reference"[41] mentioned in the previous pages recalling and denying Stephen Lewis' supernatural time experience:

If Perowne were inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations, he could play with the idea that he's been summoned; […] he should acknowledge a hidden order, an external intelligence which wants to show or tell him something of significance. […] That it should be him and not someone else is an arbitrary matter. […] The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what his psychiatric colleagues call a problem, or an idea, of reference. An excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance. In Henry's view such reasoning belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis. (*Ibid*.: 18)

This network of references, combined with the logical experiment of Schrödinger's Cat[42], takes us back to the meeting at the cottage between Stephen and Julie as it alludes to the coexistence of two *possibilia*, two parallel worlds, one of which ceases to exist when he makes a choice, a moment in which «a quantum wave of probability collapses» (*ibid*.: 19). This is a conception of the world quite distant from

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[40] Emphasis added.

[41] See McEwan 2005b: 18: «The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what psychiatric colleagues call a problem, or an idea, of reference. An excess of the subjective».

[42] See McEwan 2005b: 24.

Henry's, who, as he himself repeats, is convinced that «a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery» (*ibid*.: 24). Embracing utopianism, therefore, will also entail Perowne's understanding of his own role, the role of his own choices, in determining not only the individual future, but also the collective one.

The relationship of the two novels around the theme of time acquires additional declinations that allow further cross-reading with *The Child in Time*: while in the latter the sense of loss was placed in the foreground, in *Saturday*, narrated from the point of view of a "self-made man", whose fast-paced career and family life made it possible to reap the benefits of an utopian existential balance, the loss emerges only implicitly. In this case, as well, there are signs of an ambiguous perspective on the same theme, emerging from the comparison with his son Theo, whose youth and aspirations become the emblem of a lost self for Perowne[43]. His mention of the frustration and repressed desire felt looking at Theo's guitar is understandable a few chapters later, in one of the episodes which most explicitly refer to the utopian desire, when the surgeon goes to listen to the band's rehearsals of a new single:

> There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself. Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever - mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state. But only in music and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalisingly conjured, before fading away with the last note. […] a

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[43] See McEwan 2005b: 27-28.

> Utopian community briefly realised in the Schubert Octet […] And here it is now, a coherent world, everything fitting at last. (ibid.: 140)

During the rehearsals Perowne recalls different types of utopia, among which, during the narration, he has woven multiple parallels to distance himself from those ideals of perfection that resulted in totalitarianism, violence, limitations of freedom at different levels[44]: religious ideals, from the Islamic to the Christian ones, but also political ideals, primarily socialist ones, degenerated into the massacres of Hitler, Stalin, Mao[45]. Like Bloch, who recognizes in music one of the places for the encounter of the self with others[46], a place of the awakening of the utopian spirit[47], McEwan composes a dense web which, denying utopian totalitarian conceptions, introduces the aesthetic one, which finds expression in the great works of art. This aesthetic utopian conception creates a thread which runs from Perowne's relationship with his son to the relationship with the daughter Daisy, the one who most explicitly expresses a humanistic perspective in the novel.

The presence of the *fil rouge* that leads from Theo to Daisy is confirmed in the dialectical confrontation with her wherein lies the most explicit denial of *The Child in Time*: here is revealed the ambiguous

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[44] See Sargent 1994: 24: «The tendency in this century has been to equate utopia with force, violence, and totalitarianism. […] The basic position is definitional. A utopia is a blueprint of what the author believes to be perfect society, which is to be constructed with no significant departure from the blueprint. It is perfect […]. But it is impossible because there is no such thing as a perfect society, and even if there were, it could be constructed since it would require perfect people and we know there are no perfect people».

[45] See McEwan 2005b: 220: «And what was their body count, Hitler, Stalin, Mao? Fifty million, a hundred? […] Beware the utopianists, zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order. Here they are again, totalitarians in different form, still scattered and weak, but growing, and angry, and thirsty for another mass killing».

[46] See Bloch 1996: 1058, III.

[47] See Bloch 2000: 192.

relationship with the repressed element, the great aspirations of fearless men to whom it refers.

> What were these authors of reputation doing - grown men and women of the twentieth century - granting supernatural powers to their characters? He never made it all the way through a single one of those irksome confections. And written for adults, not children. In more than one, heroes and heroines were born with or sprouted wings – *a symbol, in Daisy's term, of their liminality; naturally, learning to fly became a metaphor for bold aspiration*. […]. *One visionary saw through a pub window his parents as they had been some weeks after his conception, discussing the possibility of aborting him*. (*ibid*.: 57)[48]

Here, together with the more explicit reference to the key episode of *The Child in Time*, we find the same criticism of people prone to supernatural thought already associated with psychosis, to faith, to the search of a systemic interrelation of the cosmos, which Perowne connects to the «excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with your needs» (*ibid*.: 18). The car accident with Baxter, as a metaphor for Perowne's first encounter with otherness, precipitates the transition from the initially distant and passive perspective, the sphere of the gaze, to one of human contact and direct immersion in reality. In the encounter with Baxter, empathy assumes a pivotal role in the process of deconstructing Perowne's perspective: the set of consequences generated by this episode will lead not only to a revaluation of the portrait of Perowne on the public level, and consequently of his role as a doctor, but they will have as a final result the reconciliation of the different perspectives defended by him and his children. The episode establishes a direct line to the professional sphere, since the solution to which Perowne resorts for a (temporary) salvation from the aggression of the gang of delinquents is the diagnosis of a neurodegenerative disease in their leader Baxter. The way Perowne improvises the existence of a therapy for the illness with the sole purpose of distracting

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[48] Emphasis added.

the aggressor is a sign of the immorality with which he uses Baxter's fears to acquire a position of domination, confirming, moreover, his lack of empathy.

The process of deconstruction of his point of view culminates with the irruption of Baxter and his gang in the house, interrupting the apparent utopic perfection of the place where Perowne, after years, had managed to recreate a semblance of unity and familial peace lost after the break between his daughter and his father-in-law, the poet John Grammaticus. The way in which violence and the danger from outside threaten Perowne's utopia are a sign of the greater extent of his actions, which involve not only the domestic microcosm but also his public and professional life and the collective one: the main effect of the individualism which motivated his desires and choices is to throw the consequences on the entire family. As Perowne realizes in the last pages, the salvation of the individual cannot be treated separately from the safety of others: Perowne's insistent denial of the idea of a «synchronic totality» (Jameson 2005: 112), of an interconnected whole in which individual actions are reflected and have an impact on a larger scale, is here definitively overturned[49].

The event in which the evening culminates, continuing the allegorical reading suggested by the initial «think small», therefore creates a dense network of links with the motifs on which the narrator's reflections have mainly insisted: intergenerational cooperation – which emerges firstly from the possibility through his choices to guarantee a different world to his children and his nephew, since the same aggression during the evening also brings to light Daisy's pregnancy – and, on a larger scale, the international one, given the repeatedly-stated support for Iraq invasion.

In the same allegorical perspective, the way in which the family manages to face the gang's violence is also the clearest expression on the

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[49] See McEwan 2005b: 221: «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».

allegorical level of the novel's utopic message, once again found in the familial relationship: the work of harmonic cooperation which defeats the menace is also the first expression of the «coherent world, everything fitting at least» (*ibid*.: 141), the «dream of community» (*ibid*.) capable of neutralizing the evil and which will reach its highest expression when it includes the aggressor's salvation too. First, Daisy's poem creates empathy with Baxter and lays the foundations for a dialogue with him. Second, Perowne, thanks to his medical knowledge, reuses the trick of a cure for the man to calm him and, finally, Theo's intervention stops the attacker.

The divestment of Perowne's materialistic and rationalist perspective is confirmed in the concluding pages which, circularly, show him in his room in the same initial nakedness, a condition which now assumes a new sense of uneasiness, of vulnerability repeatedly insisted and which, with a reference to biblical Genesis, we can read in terms of acquisition of awareness with respect to his initial vision of reality[50].

Doubts and fears for himself and for the others take the place of the assertive tone, of the certainties and the detachment of the first chapter. Perowne's initial sense of guilt during the scene of the plane crash and his unexplained gloom throughout the day[51] foreshadow the eventual encounter with the self and the awareness of a desire which for the first time is spontaneously addressed to the salvation of the other. The turning point of his new awareness can be found in a gesture that symbolically recalls the importance of human contact, when Perowne holds his offender's hand just before the surgery in which he will save

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[50] The insistence on the gesture of covering his nakedness is also emblematic. Recalling its Biblical value, it emphasizes his sense of vulnerability: «At the end of this day, this particular evening, he's timid, vulnerable, he keeps drawing his dressing gown more tightly around him» (*ibid*.: 219).

[51] McEwan 2005b: 101: «Saturdays he's accustomed to being thoughtlessly content, and here he is for the second time this morning sifting the elements of a darker mood».

his life[52]. Instead of revenge against Baxter – mentioned by his wife in reference to the same surgery – Perowne prefers his salvation, on a medical and penal level[53].

On the allegorical level – which reproduces the relationship between the country and the terrorist threat in that between the family and Baxter – it is not difficult to recognize a further emergence of the ideals denied on the content level for the whole novel, and an expression of the utopian image already highlighted in the musical harmony realized by Theo's band: after the encounter with Baxter, Perowne embraces the ideals of the demonstrators met some hours before, towards whom he felt «the seduction and excitement peculiar to such events; [...] tens of thousands of strangers converging with a single purpose conveying an intimation of revolutionary joy» (*ibid*.: 51).

In an imaginary dialogue with his daughter, one of his daydreams, Perowne confirms that he has allowed an individual's private story to change his mind («you've left one man's story turn your head», *ibid*.: 221), and that his «certainties have dissolved into debating points» (*ibid*.): it is another form of affirmation of an empathy that the individual stories of literature had failed to generate in him, with implications on the public and professional level[54]. In the last lines, the possibility of reconciliation between his perspective and that of his children also emerges more clearly on the macro-textual level: recognizing in Baxter the capability to arrive where Daisy has long been trying to lead her

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[52] On the centrality of this gesture see McEwan 2005b: 208-209: «It's quite unnecessary because the monitor's showing a reading in bright blue numerals - sixty-five beats per minute. He does it because he wants to». And after: «It began to take form at dinner, before Jay rang, and was finally settle when he sat in intensive care, feeling Baxter's pulse» (*ibid*.: 221).

[53] See McEwan 2005b: 221: «Baxter has a diminishing slice of life worth living […] Henry can make these arrangements, do what he can to make the patient comfortable, somehow».

[54] The concluding talk with the young patient Andrea makes clear Perowne's desire to exercise a greater empathy towards his patients, in contrast to his distraction in the first chapters.

father, to find and seize in her recitation of the Arnold poem the magic which Perowne has not yet managed to feel and perhaps will never feel («Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live. […] Baxter heard what Henry never has, and probably never will […]», *ibid*.: 222) allows the surgeon to recognize his claim on his own conscience, «his claim on life, on a mental existence» (*ibid*.).

The connection created by narrative voice among this magic, Baxter's desire to live and «the codes of his being, [...] his genotype, the modern variant of a soul» (*ibid*.) sets forth in the end the convergence between literature and science in the common investigation of human universals, allegorically represented by the relationship between Perowne and children:

> What lucky individual was chosen to represent us all? Who is the universal person? The answer is that […] here we contemplate the metaphorical convergence of these two noble and distinct forms of investigation into our condition, literature, and science. That which binds us, our common nature, is what literature has always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to. And it is this universality which the biological sciences, now entering another exhilarating phase, are set to explore further. (McEwan 2005a: 19)

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