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**Desperado Literature: A Rewriting of Fear as Terror, as
Illustrated by Ian Mc Ewan's *Saturday* (2005)**

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There are two traditions, we might argue, in the history of literature: the *fairy-tale tradition* (as I call it) and its opposite. The fairy-tale tradition sees the world as making sense, as leading to the happy fulfillment of expectations. Boy meets girl, boy courts girl, wins girl, marries girl – in simple or complicated arrangements. The fairy-tale tradition hinges on a linear storyline which inevitably leads to a definite denouement. The modernist movement is the first attempt at opposing the fairy tale tradition, at proving that life is not a system ('a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged' – Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*), but chaos ('a luminous halo surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' – Woolf again). After nineteen centuries of stories built upon incidents that led to a denouement, modernism, stating in essence that we can do without a coherent story.

But what else is there to tell if not a tale? A mood. What is that mood? In order to be interesting, it has to be tense. In order to be tense, it is more often than not governed by fear. How do authors account for that fear if there is no story to explain it? For modernist writers like Woolf, Joyce, and Conrad, fear is a personal and internal experience. It is a vague state of intense anxiety; it is in the air. The modernists broke the fairy-tale tradition of more or less balanced chronology, and replaced it with more abstract and internal notions of fear, anxiety, the appearance of madness. The change was operated in the name of intensity, of verisimilitude, and of life-likeness. Once the break with tradition had been declared, the fairy-tale pattern, the structure of the narrative had to withdraw, for a while at least.

Desperado literature begins with the discovery that the internal, personal fear of the modernist tradition can be, and is, organized and institutionalized by the community into terror. Instead of one hero fighting his inner nightmare, Desperado literature describes whole societies of them. No more utopic story of clear beginnings and endings, but a dystopic mass of incidents which go on indefinitely. The story is beyond the hero's

control, and the hero experiences terror – which is systematic fear. Literature has migrated (if we consider first modernism, and then postmodernism) from the system of the well-told story to the chaos of terrifying intensity.

Literary notions of fear in modernism built slowly into terror, which became visible with the Desperado dystopias (George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, William Golding, Doris Lessing, Anthony Burgess, Kazuo Ishiguro, Alasdair Gray, etc). What was a confused feeling that heroes could not put into words is today building numberless alien universes. It all started with the impact of political totalitarianism, but politics is not the only cause of terror being so richly represented in literature. Terror today is a reverse of the older belief in the future of the race. We have traveled a long way from Darwin. We no longer believe this is the best world ever. Instead, we see the worst ahead. No story, however well told, can alleviate that.

Under the circumstances, what could the Desperadoes do? What they definitely could *not* do was live like Leopold Bloom, wrapped in their memories. Desperado writers (coming in the 1950s, after the near collapse of the novel under Joyce & Co) learned their lesson: they use fear wisely, to create suspense within a well told story, and have rediscovered today the pleasures of narration, as opposed to 'experimental' stream-of-consciousness psychological analysis. A new kind of story was born. We still know the future from the very first page. The past still comes back to haunt the hero, since without this past his present story would be so much poorer. Most of the plot, however, rediscovers the strength of the present incidents. Things happen again outside the hero, under our avid eyes (avid of action, of narration, not just memories of old stories). As I have often said, the Desperado hero (and reader, we might add) is incident-addicted. The consequences of the modernist experiment, which broke down the long-standing tradition of the fairy-tale story, have been counteracted by the Desperadoes. Desperado literature tells a story, and unlike the modernist experiment, that story is not just a record of fear among other perfectly human emotions; it is a discovery of terror, a view of a dying human species, described in exquisitely shaped, unbelievably rich and various literary masterpieces, relying on rewriting the entire past of literature.

With the return of narration, is anything different, or are we going back to pre-modernism? However much we may mistrust the growing industry of postmodern

labeling, they do have a point. There is a major change from modernism to postmodernism, and it certainly does not take us in the least back to the fairy-tale tradition, to that conventional perception of time as linear; that is the assumption that the past causes the present, and the present must lead to some future. Since the theory of relativity, all our truths have become tentative, limp. There is an unknown dimension to every statement, a margin of imprecision, which – with the Desperadoes – is growing larger than reality. That imprecision is the future.

This new, uncertain future is linked in Desperado literature with the theme of terror. All those implied in the process of literature (author, reader and their immaterial projection – the hero) live in suspenseful fear of the future. The story will have an ending, only this time we no longer anticipate it with the delight that all goes well with the world, and the hero often ends unhappy, alone or even dead. This new suspense is a torturously slow revelation of terror, the promise of a disastrous denouement we are in no hurry to reach. I am talking now about technical terror, a powerful tool of the Desperado text. I am not prepared to say that Desperado authors deliberately set about using this new approach just for the sake of opposing modernism (which all literary ages do to their immediate predecessors). The change was prompted by the course of history, by the change of society, the change of the basic man-woman cell, the change of whatever the stories were all about. If there is terror in the Desperado text, it all comes from outside of the literature: it is in the air, it is a mood we all experience nowadays. What Desperado writers see is the existential terror that there is no future for the human race. This rejection of the future is not new. It may easily have started with Jonathan Swift's Yahoos. It was an isolated fantasy in the previous century, and it is a commonly shared nightmare today.

William Golding (*Lord of the Flies*) sensed the theme and an impressive number of editors refused his book at first – which means they refused to recognize the theme as valid. After Golding, explorations of existential terror flourished in all kinds of books, from serious literature to wildly prophetic science fiction, TV serials, and bestsellers. No author today can fully ignore the theme. One example of such a writer, burdened by the direction humans are heading, is Ian McEwan, particularly in his latest novel *Saturday* (Doubleday, 2005).

Ian McEwan (born 21 June 1948) instills all the obsessive fears of this hardly begun third millennium into the stream of consciousness technique. His is a novel at once a work which breaks from the Desperado tradition by offering a trust in love and family ties, while at the same time adhering to the Desperado theme of violence and terror. It moulds every character, and we see each of them as moments of the main hero's stream of consciousness. The book is the stream of consciousness – rendered in the third person – of a neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, who feels he fails himself and his family precisely because he is incapable of violence. The protagonist talks to himself about "the pre-verbal language that linguists call mentalese" (81). McEwan's novel definitely avoids using it. The modernists, especially Joyce, worshipped the impression of the pre-verbal, the feeling that we read thoughts while they are being born, in the process of their verbalization, that each word can change a fate. McEwan is a true Desperado from that point of view: he must have clarity and orderly language at all costs. The fear of losing his audience is strong. On the other hand, he would not even find modernist devices enough. Henry thinks a lot, it is true, but he would not be described at all if all he did was to meditate on his past (like Leopold Bloom); McEwan places him in the middle of more or less suspense, a story (linear, lazy, boring at times, but moving towards a peak), something his reader can sense if he does not feel like sharing the lyricism of existence. The word has lost its modernist power. Suspense of the narrative – in this case focusing on a terror of violence – has come into power.

The 2003 February Saturday Ian McEwan describes – from early dawn to the very early hours of the following Sunday – is drowned in violence. Fifty-year-old Henry lives in a world that stifles him, and he struggles hard to prove to himself that he has the energy to handle it, to strike a (very fragile) balance between being a helpless victim or a victim in control. Because a victim undoubtedly he is, and the suspense comes from his constant effort to keep up appearances: we expect him to come to harm or to break down under the burden of violence at any minute, on every page.

The difference between the modernist Clarissa Dalloway – also afraid of the violence around her in her one-day story in London – and the Desperado Henry Perowne lies in the respective cause of their fear. Clarissa is afraid for herself: she is afraid of her own death and is trying to keep her past alive in her thoughts. Henry is a doctor. He is

burdened by the fate of mankind. However deeply he may believe in and cherish the progress of medicine, in the back of his mind he knows that violence will bring about the extinction of the species. We are dealing here with the terror (not just a fear) of violence.

This terror has one major effect at the level of literary technique: in spite of the stream of consciousness, McEwan does not focus on interiority. In Virginia Woolf's novels – in spite of her fragmentary telling – we could reconstruct the hidden story of the heroine's sensibility and anticipate a denouement. With McEwan there is no hope for, and gradually we even lose interest in, an explicit denouement. We do not really care what will end the story. All we care about is the *telling*. This is the Desperado feat. While modernists proudly proclaimed the change, it did not really take place until the Desperado, under the pressure of terror, taught us that the past was food for the moment, the future was certain death, and all we had was the *story of horror told by the present*. A meaningless future will kill the present, but – for the brief space of the story – we are allowed to find refuge in this frail present we mistrust. The convention of time (the chronology of earlier novels, the suspense of waiting for the end, in the future) is dead. Modernists claimed the fairy-tale should be wholly rejected, while still keeping elements of it well rooted in the back of their minds. Ian McEwan – a genuine Desperado author – makes his hero meditate on a present which has lost all hope of being continued and/or concluded. This hopelessness of author/hero/reader as far as a clear denouement is concerned explains the fear (of emptiness, of doom) that takes the place of narrative delight.

From the very first page of *Saturday* every narrated incident has a grain of violence, and the reader is under the constant pressure of terror. Just as in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, McEwan's *Saturday* has its own Big Ben in the plane. It begins as an accident which might require Henry's immediate presence at the hospital, when he wakes at 3:40 in the morning to witness the crash of an unknown plane and watches it burn in the sky above London, and grows throughout the novel into a threat to the whole city, country, even planet. Henry is at first concerned with what he can or must do for the casualties. As the day progresses, his fear becomes more political and philosophical: terrorism might strike again. Man is destroying his own species. A minor detail is thus woven into the texture of the whole novel which revolves single-mindedly around

violence. All through the first half of the day, Henry follows the news, wondering whether this is just a sad accident (there turn out to be no casualties) or an act of terrorism. We leave the novel with the question unanswered. And the threat stays with us, too. New York, London (which was to happen after the novel had been published, fulfilling its prophecy as it were), and what next? Our own town, our very home?

The plane on fire that starts Henry's day in the guise of a 'comet' then turns into an accident that reclaims his professional ability and finally threatens to destroy his entire way of life. The episodic character Miri Taleb, an "Iraqi professor of ancient history" with "torture scars" and "a whinnying giggle that could have something to do with his time in prison" seems to represent two threats in one: totalitarianism and terrorism (60, 61). After an inexplicable arrest some years earlier, Taleb spent ten months being "moved around central Iraq between various Jails. He had no idea what these moves meant, and no means of letting his wife know he was still alive. Even on the day of his release, he didn't discover what the charges were against him" (61).

The violence of his past is inherent to his character. Both he and the plane are connected, both in the Henry's mind and in the reader's, with the Londoners' protest against England joining the UN war against Iraq. The marchers actually force Perowne to cross Baxter's path in the morning (when he is going to his squash game and a traffic mistake causes him to mildly brush against the young man's car, it being Baxter's fault). These marchers have no idea that they are protesting indirectly in favour of maintaining Saddam's world of torture and totalitarianism. McEwan views politics, which for him always imply violence, terror and fear on some level, with a sad smile and infinite pity for its victims on both sides.

All through this tale of terror and horror (both muffled by the hero's claim that he is unafraid), Henry keeps dreaming of a utopia while living in his own dystopia: what marvels man has created, these beautiful convenient towns and these miraculous cures for all disease. He is a surgeon of the brain. He feels privileged he can mend minds even though he has not got the faintest idea how they work. He tries to be practical – as a doctor should be – but his immaterial, metaphysical, existential terror overwhelms him. He knows that once his Saturday is over, Sunday will only be worse.

The story unfurls slowly and quietly, almost uninteresting in its common incidents. A twenty-three-year-old daughter comes home after half a year in Paris – pregnant and with a first, almost published, volume of verse. An eighteen-year-old son leaves school to pursue in music and seems to have a brilliant future ahead of him. The family gather home on a Saturday evening. They are waiting for Rosalind's father, the poet John Grammaticus, who is expected to be reconciled with his granddaughter Daisy after two years of estrangement. All these things happen without surprising anyone. The only surprise is Baxter's violence, which could threaten the family's future but in the end leaves them unscarred.

The details of the book seem unimportant, merely incidental. If we go back, though, with the knowledge that the author has a point to make – that we live in a futureless world of terror – we notice that nothing on the page is meaningless. The death of the future did not result in terror for modernists because they drew on their lyrical interiority, they fell in love with the miracle of their minds. McEwan's hero is aware that the mind is not really a refuge: it can break down as we speak. Baxter is an example, and Henry's own mother, Lily, suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease is another.

Even Henry's wife Rosalind's history is driven by violence: her mother died in a car accident when she was sixteen. Until she meets Henry, Rosalind lives in the companionship of the memory of her mother. It is Henry, although he was too young to operate on her himself at the time, and was a mere accessory for the surgeon, who delivers her both from the tumor on her pituitary gland (which blinds her for a few hours, scaring her to death) and from her solitude. It is also Henry who both causes and resolves Baxter's attack on her life, which is, in fact, the only point of suspense this novel has.

Henry's children instill in him resentment and awareness, even fear, of his own mortality. Daisy, the "postgraduate aspiring poet," comes home from Paris with a "first volume of poetry to be published in May" and an early stage pregnancy, with the prospect of marrying an Italian archaeologist and move to their own villa in London (51). Both she and her prospective husband fill Henry with resentment. The author repeatedly stresses the neurosurgeon's indignation and attempts to "shrug off" his "fatherly possessiveness" (52). Henry is more than unwilling to allow his daughter to embark

upon her own adventure – starting a family and building her own life – because that would be the end of his fertile cycle, which is what his medical mind keeps insinuating.

Henry's son, Theo, a blues musician at eighteen, reminds us of Doris Lessing's dropouts in *The Sweetest Dream*, but, unlike Lessing's rebellious teenagers, Theo is already a grown up. He has found his way. His father likes his new found maturity. So, when Theo is the one who uses violence to render Baxter powerless, and succeeds, Perowne feels as betrayed as when he notices Daisy is pregnant (Baxter forces her to undress in front of everyone in the room). Both his children are pushing him out of life and into "the long process by which you become your children's child," on the certain path to death (31).

Baxter, the punk in his mid-twenties who forces Perowne to experience his mortal nature ahead of time, is actually dying faster himself. This story is not at all about his revenge for Henry's having humiliated him in front of his fellows. It is true Perowne manages to get the better of Baxter by merely guessing he is suffering from Huntington's Disease and indirectly promising him relief. He escapes a fearful beating and goes to his game of squash. Throughout the day, he keeps catching sight of Baxter's car now and then. At the end of the day, we realize that Baxter has trailed Perowne, has waited for the right time, has attacked his wife when she came in, last of all, and – Perowne thinks – has come to redeem his pride. The truth is Baxter is as confused as we are. He has no idea what he is doing in this story. McEwan, on the other hand, does. Baxter serves a point. He demonstrates that the human machine can go wrong, and when it does, it is the beginning of both political terror (he is a small Saddam here) and physical violence (he comes incredibly close to killing, destroying the family, the basic cell of a society Perowne has so far worshipped so).

As opposed to the destruction Baxter announces, Rosalind and Henry are the sort of couple that can rarely be found in early Desperadoes (Huxley, Orwell, Golding, Burgess). It reminds us again of Lessing's *The Sweetest Dream*. It is true that even earlier Desperadoes like Ishiguro refuse a world based on love in the family. Love and the couple are usually banished from the tale. McEwan's *Saturday* (and the latter part of Lessing's above mentioned novel) makes it an act of courage to place all the bets on happiness in the couple. Love has a right to be narrated. It is the novelist's fate to try and

recapture romance, and it is because of one kind of terror or another that he fails. The Desperado novel is hopeless. *Saturday* is no exception to that rule.

Henry's *Saturday* is fairly simple, but it does not lead to what he expects at all: a game of squash, a visit to his mother, shopping and cooking for the evening meal with the family. Then the violent attack smashes the routine and terror makes everyone aware how afraid they are of death. Henry thinks he gets the better of this fear when he operates on Baxter – after the latter falls and is unconscious – ends up saving his life. Baxter is saved from death only to be introduced to the antechamber of hell: he will deteriorate and die in agony. Henry calls it his own revenge. Only this novel is not at all about crime or punishment. It is McEwan's view of a world terrorized by violence, which has killed all hope of a fairy-tale future for mankind. Our idyll with the future is dead. With the death of this future, the present succumbs to terror. Iraq, the plane ablaze, the tortured professor, Baxter tortured by Huntington's Disease, are all signs. We can try to imagine love and happiness. All we can get for now – in the Desperado age – is fear.

Since it is the death of the future that Desperadoes are concerned with, McEwan feels he has to explain his violent protagonist in that respect: "Baxter is a special case – a man who believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences" (217). The cause of this death of Baxter's literary future – which inevitably leaves the narrative insufficient and the reader agape, is also combined with another Desperado obsession, this time a continuation (and a drastic change of perspective) of modernism: the mind. Henry Perowne is a healer of brains. He realizes he has not got the faintest idea how the substance of the brain translates into real thoughts, personality, sensibility. But he thinks the world of man's progress in operating on the brain, he worships his power over the brain. Modernists worshipped the activity, Desperadoes take refuge in the unfathomable organ and try to ignore its function, which will always be a mystery (a future). They are futureless, disillusioned materialists. Baxter is a Desperado of the mind in the real sense of the word. He is about to kill because his brain and his future are taken away from him, because:

at some point he'll find himself writhing and hallucinating on a bed he'll never leave, in a long-term psychiatric ward, probably friendless, certainly

Henry cannot feel anything but pity for his victimizer, and even feels guilty for having used his medical knowledge to first avoid being beaten, and later to avoid his wife's being killed. After Baxter's attack on Rosalind is thwarted, Henry imagines Baxter looks at him with eyes filled with the "sorrowful accusation of betrayal" because Henry "possesses so much...and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less" (236).

This common trick among authors of thrillers to create empathy for the criminal originates in the stream of consciousness, where there was no right or wrong, no positive or negative hero, no good or bad any more as there was in fairy-tales – Homer, Fielding, Dickens, and nearly all literature before the great modernist change. Among Desperadoes, few expect the reader to read morally. The criminal is a victim (of his own body), the self-centered father-in-law is another victim (of his own age, again – since he is closer to death than all the others present at the family reunion in this novel). A moral author or a moral reader would have blamed them, but McEwan does something which has become commonplace in our moral-less Desperado time: he un-blames the murderer while still holding him accountable for his actions. The new plot has found a new momentum: the reader is no longer expected to punish the culprit, but instead is allowed to join him and defy the old conventions of morality, which expected the reader to both sympathise and identify with the hero over the wrongdoer.

This – both existential and narrative – death of the future (the hopelessness of a race which self-destructs) could not fail to infuse the text (technically) with a 'myriad' devices to portray a sensibility besieged by fear, the same as the brain (the organ) results in a halo of thought and emotion which is the true substance of what we (unknowingly) call 'life'. Once we have detected the organ (man's so often dealt with certainty that he may not have his world in the future), we can only guess at the effect: literature *without* a future is as elusive as literature *with* a future. We can only attempt a theory and wait and see whether life proves or disproves it. As Ian McEwan himself approximates it, "[Henry is] no social theorist...this is still his Saturday...And from here, from the top of his day, he can see far ahead, before the descent begins. Sunday doesn't ring with the same

promise and vigour as the day before. The square below him, deserted and still, *gives no clues to the future*" (282, emphasis mine).

The novelist's refuge here – quite unlike most Desperado authors – is the joy of the couple. This refuge seasons all the other obsessions of the novel: time as a topic for fiction, the certainty that Henry does not want the Sunday that comes after his Saturday because that is only reason for fear, the terror of time's impossibility to stand still, the death of a desirable future. Unexpected for a Desperado – and also announcing a new development. Perowne ends his day in bed, with a wife he loves, telling himself over and over again, "there's only this" (289).

A great Romanian novelist, Marin Preda, ended his novel *The Most Beloved on Earth* in the late eighties in a similar way: "If love is not, nothing is." And while Ishiguro, Barnes, Swift, Lodge, Bradbury, Gray, Byatt, Tremain and so many others have only misgivings about love (the stuff of fairy-tales alongside violence), some writers today look back. They see themselves as the inheritors – since modernism – of a recent tradition of fear, because only violence (the past) has been kept, only the dragon of the fairy-tale has survived. Are they bringing the prince and princess back? The feeling of a safe present, supported by a convenient naivety about past and future? Is naivety as to terror, the terror that the future is dead in both life and literature, going to find more strength? McEwan's *Saturday* probes ahead. We shall have to wait and see if the cozy couple can kill the fear we have lived with since the advent of modernism. We must watch what the Desperado is turning into as we speak.

Works Cited

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