

LIVING WITH THE “WAR ON TERROR”:
FEAR, LOSS, AND INSECURITY IN IAN MCEWAN’S *SATURDAY* (2005)
AND GRAHAM SWIFT’S *WISH YOU WERE HERE* (2011)

MICHAEL C. FRANK

1. Introduction: From 9/11 Fiction to “War on Terror” Fiction

Only strikingly few texts by authors from the UK have become part of the canon of 9/11 fiction, much of which can be more narrowly defined as “Ground Zero fiction” (Däwes 2011) due to its specific focus on the World Trade Center attacks. One notorious example is Martin Amis’s deliberately controversial “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” which did not fail to elicit a broad scholarly response (see, e.g., Versluys 2009: 156–63; Däwes 2011: 253–57; Randall 2011: 46–52; Gauthier 2015: 135–38). Originally published in *The New Yorker* on 24 April 2006, Amis’s short story imagines the final hours of the suicide pilot and suspected coordinator of the terrorist operation, Mohammed Atta. The directness (some would say bluntness) with which Amis fictionalizes a real person involved in the events of 11 September 2001 remained unrivalled in English-language fiction until the publication of Turkish-American writer Jarett Kobek’s *ATTA* in August 2011. When considered in the context of *British* writing of the mid-2000s, Amis’s narrative seems even more singular, since texts by authors from the UK that potentially qualify as 9/11 novels do not, for the most part, concentrate on the events of 11 September themselves. Rather, they reflect the political aftermath of 9/11. For instance, *City of Tiny Lights* by Patrick Neate (June 2005) and *Incendiary* by Chris Cleave (July 2005) imagine terrorist attacks on the British capital, in an ambivalent attempt to critique post-9/11 counter-terrorist policies and the surrounding culture of fear (see Frank 2011; 2012). Both novels proved popular enough to be made into films but are not mentioned in any of the major monographs on literature after 9/11 – for the likely reason that they do not fit the dominant research questions brought to bear on this type of fiction.

By contrast, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (January 2005) occupies a relatively prominent place in studies of post-9/11 literature (from Versluys 2009: 188–93 to Michael 2014: 195–235), owing to the canonical status of its author, even though the novel makes only allusive references to the World Trade Center attacks. The bombings are evoked in the famous opening passage in which protagonist Henry Perowne observes a burning plane above London; yet, from that point onwards, the novel’s focus shifts to Perowne’s concerns about the possibility of another attack *here*, in his home town, as well as to his uncertainties regarding the legitimacy of the impending war in Iraq. Accordingly, the present chapter argues that *Saturday* – like several other British novels

about the post-9/11 condition – is not so much a 9/11 narrative as it is a “War on Terror” narrative, in accordance with Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie’s differentiation between these two types of story: “It may seem just a semantic difference – but to talk about a ‘War on Terror’ novel is to really talk about the consequences of the decisions made by various governments (including those of the US and Pakistan [and, one may add, the UK]), rather than to place the terrorists of 9/11 at the centre of the narrative” (qtd. in Filgate: n.p.).

To draw such a distinction does not mean to deny important overlaps between both sorts of novel. It merely means to emphasize differences in thematic scope, at least as far as the best-known representatives of the first wave of 9/11 fiction from the US are concerned. These novels characteristically portray survivors, relatives of victims, or other residents of New York City whose lives have been irrevocably altered – in one way or another – by the events of 11 September 2001. Notable examples are Paul West’s *The Immensity of the Here and Now: A Novel of 9/11* (January 2003), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (April 2005), Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall* (May 2005), Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (January 2006), Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to This Country: A Novel* (July 2006), Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s New Children* (August 2006), and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (May 2007). In each of these novels, the destruction of the World Trade Center constitutes a starting point, or point of rupture, for the protagonists, leading to a new life in a different world. “War on Terror” fiction, on the other hand, shifts the focus from the immediate impact of 9/11 on America and Americans to the ensuing cycle of violence and counter-violence that has affected (and continues to affect) societies across the globe, including the UK, not least because of the drastic measures taken by many governments throughout the world in the name of countering terrorism.

Up until the early to mid-2010s, scholarship on 9/11 fiction mainly devoted itself to New York novels by US writers (with the pioneering exception of Cara Cilano’s 2009 volume on 9/11 literature and film “from outside the US”). In so doing, it initially aligned itself with the dominant reading of 9/11 as a sudden, entirely unexpected, and therefore traumatic break with the past. In 2009, Kristiaan Versluys’ *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* opened the debate by postulating that “[i]n a time of globalized witnessing and shared vicarious experience, an event like 9/11 is a rupture for everybody” (4) – a statement that is remarkably sweeping in its assertion that the whole of humanity shared the same experience of 9/11, namely one of radical discontinuity. The editors of *Literature after 9/11* (published one year before Versluys’s book), choose a more cautious approach. In their Introduction, Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn explain that the articles compiled in their volume “refuse to interpret 9/11 *either* as a rupture with the past *or* as continuous with [...] earlier historical events,” because the works analyzed do not allow such an unequivocal interpretation:

[W]hile the initial experience of 9/11 seemed unprecedented and cataclysmic, the experience of incommensurability generated a culture-wide need for explanatory narra-

tives, not simply as a means for countering the trauma, but as a means for refusing incommensurability, prompting attempts to place 9/11 into an historical framework. (2008: 3)

It is helpful in this context to distinguish between two views on the topic, which Alan Gibbs (2014: 120) characterizes as the “historicising” and the “decontextualising position,” respectively. From the trauma-theoretical perspective of such scholars as Kristiaan Versluys, 9/11 was a “traumatic event” for hundreds of millions of television viewers across the world (qtd. in Athitakis 2009). This universal (and ultimately indiscriminate) application of the trauma concept to a world-wide audience extrapolates a “global trauma” (ibid.) from the locally specific experience of New Yorkers, or Americans more generally. It does so without considering the problems and limitations of such a one-dimensional reading of the attacks, which certainly did not happen “out of the blue” (Versluys 2009) in the sense that they had a prehistory, and which were many things besides a trauma, especially when considered within a global framework. If we approach the event from the perspective of political history, we realize that it was the culmination of a longer series of anti-US attacks, which were, in turn, rooted in earlier political conflicts. In the words of David Holloway (2008: 2), “9/11 was long in the making, and the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 worlds were broadly continuous not discontinuous.”

In recent years, the interpretation of 9/11 as moment of caesura has been reassessed not only with regard to what came *before* the event, but also with regard to what came *after*. From the vantage of a decade later, the 11 September 2001 attacks appear as the starting point of an epoch-defining conflict – still popularly known as the “War on Terror” – which has gradually superseded the memory of 9/11 as an isolated, almost monolithic event (see Redfield 2009: 15). Due to the promptness with which the Bush administration retaliated militarily to what it conceived, from the start, as an “act of war” (rather than a crime that could be prosecuted within the framework of international law), the so-called “War on Terror” was already in full swing when the first novels responding to 9/11 began to appear in the early to mid-2000s. Yet, critics did not initially look at these texts in terms of their engagement (or non-engagement) with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; instead, they were interested chiefly in “the ways that literature has participated in the larger cultural process of representing and interpreting the events of September 11, 2001” (Keniston/Quinn 2008: 2). Richard Gray’s *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* broadly dismisses works by writers as diverse as Jay McInerney, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, and Don DeLillo for offering “a response to crisis that is eerily analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream American media after 9/11: a desperate retreat into old sureties” (2011: 16). Gray is more appreciative of works that take an intercultural approach to the US, 9/11, and the “War on Terror,” an approach pioneered by Pakistani writer (and former resident of New York) Mohsin Hamid in his much-discussed *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* of March 2007. Gray’s preference for novels that open up a transnational perspective on the post-9/11 world is shared by Georgiana Banita, Tim

Gauthier, and Daniel O’Gorman, whose respective studies explore the ethical ramifications of this “more overtly globalized understanding of the 9/11 events” (Banita 2012: 1) by arguing that post-9/11 literature has the potential to raise awareness and encourage an empathetic understanding of otherness (see Gauthier 2015: 1–2; O’Gorman 2015: 175).

If the recent publication of studies like *Literature, Migration and the “War on Terror”* (Tolan et al. 2012), *Transatlantic Fictions of 9/11 and the War on Terror* (Araújo 2015), and *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel* (O’Gorman 2015) is anything to go by, then we are currently witnessing a shift of focus. Whereas previous scholarship on 9/11 fiction tended to concentrate on how fictional texts have attempted to “‘understand’ the meaning of 9/11” (Randall 2011: 4), critics now increasingly pay attention to literary works that adopt a more (spatially and temporally) distanced point of view, providing transnational perspectives on the long-term global consequences of the ensuing “War on Terror.” Concurrently, since the late 2000s, the body of “Ground Zero fiction” has been complemented by novels that move away from “Ground Zero” to focus on the effects of the “War on Terror” both inside and, crucially, outside the US. Thus, Kamila Shamsie has repeatedly described her April 2009 novel *Burnt Shadows* as a “War on Terror novel” rather than a “9/11 novel” (qtd. in Lee-Potter 2017: 154; see also Filgate n.p.), criticizing US writers Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Claire Messud for having radically limited the historical and geographical scope of their narratives: “In fiction, with pitifully few exceptions, the 9/11 novel looks at 9/11 the day itself, in New York,” to which Shamsie adds: “just as the day itself is only one part of the genre of 9/11 nonfiction books, so it should be with fiction” (Shamsie 2012: n.p.).

Novels by Anglophone South Asian writers such as Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie have undoubtedly done much to diversify the genre of 9/11 fiction by opening up vistas on the hitherto sorely neglected global South. It should be remembered, however, that even before this felicitous development, the 9/11 novel was never an exclusively American form, and that even before Shamsie coined the phrase “‘War on Terror’ novel,” that type of fiction already existed, albeit from the pen of Western writers. As Susana Araújo (2015: 4) reminds us, “the majority of so-called 9/11 novels were also written during [...] the military ‘interventions’ in Afghanistan and Iraq,” and some of these 9/11 novels are simultaneously War on Terror novels “forcing us to confront violent realities promoted, not only by the US government at the time, but also by its political and military allies, particularly those in Europe” (ibid.: 5). Against this background, the following sections discuss British novels written during the first ten years following the 11 September 2001 attacks. They juxtapose Ian McEwan’s widely discussed *Saturday* with Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here* (June 2011), a novel that has thus far flown largely under the radar of literary scholarship, at least as far as studies of post-9/11 fiction go. The two works may initially appear to have little in common: the one is an urban novel following the examples of *Ulysses* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), whereas the other is modelled on the tradi-

tion of the rural novel from Thomas Hardy to E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910). Yet, *Saturday* and *Wish You Were Here* share the theme of the “War on Terror,” or more precisely, Britain’s involvement in that war as the Bush administration’s most stalwart ally. McEwan and Swift use their protagonists to illustrate how the global conflict precipitated by 9/11 and the political response thereto affects the lives of individuals and families locally, both in London (McEwan) and in the English countryside (Swift), where it intersects and resonates with other political, social, and economic issues and crises.

2. “At a time of terror”: Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

The publication of *Saturday* was eagerly anticipated due to Ian McEwan’s standing as one of the UK’s most acclaimed writers. On 23 January 2005, one day before the novel’s official release, Robert McCrum of the *Observer* (2005: n.p.) paid tribute to McEwan as the prime chronicler and analyst of present-day Britain. “Whatever the critical reception [of *Saturday*], there is no doubt that the international voice of contemporary English fiction is McEwan’s. In 2105, readers will turn to his work to understand Britain’s painful years of post-imperial transition.” Two months later, *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani (2005: n.p.) confirmed this premature assessment in an enthusiastic review: “Mr. McEwan has not only produced one of the most powerful pieces of post-9/11 fiction yet published, but also fulfilled that very primal mission of the novel: to show how we – a privileged few of us, anyway – live today.” The attention that *Saturday* garnered upon its release immediately raised it above its peers as a post-9/11 novel by a great author – though not necessarily a great post-9/11 novel (see, e.g., Banville 2005, which dismisses *Saturday* as a “dismayingly bad book” on both aesthetic and ideological grounds).

Formally and in terms of narrative technique, *Saturday* follows the example of Virginia Woolf’s classic of high modernism, *Mrs Dalloway*, with which it also shares several key themes and motifs (on these much-noted parallels, see, e.g., Adams 2012). Like *Mrs Dalloway*, *Saturday* provides a meticulous account of one day in the life of an upper-middle-class (in this case, male rather than female) Londoner, whose experience is rendered through third-person limited (or, figural) narration. In *Saturday*, a family reunion and dinner at the protagonist’s home takes the place of the much larger social gathering hosted by Clarissa Dalloway at the climactic conclusion of Woolf’s novel. While both novels can be described as “domestic,” as Magali Cornier Michael (2014: 199) notes, they employ the conventions of domestic fiction only to emphasize the “impossibility of any clear demarcation between the domestic and public spheres.” Thus, Virginia Woolf turns the carefully crafted party sequence into a kind of social parable, in which London’s elite engages in an act of collective escapism: like the heroine and hostess Clarissa herself, her guests (which include the Prime Minister of Britain) repress all thoughts of the crisis caused by the First World War and try to carry on as if nothing had happened, clinging on to a severely shattered and outdated

social order. When a newly arrived guest mentions the violent suicide of a shell-shocked war veteran which happened earlier that day, this disturbing piece of news acts as a literal return of the repressed – an unwelcome reminder of an uncomfortable social reality (marked by the after-effects of war) “out there,” in the streets of London. A similar, albeit far more physical and concrete intrusion of the public into the domestic sphere occurs in McEwan’s novel, when the invasion of the protagonist’s beautiful eighteenth-century home in London’s posh Fitzrovia neighbourhood ends in a veritable showdown (on which more later).

Saturday, too, demonstrates “how and to what extent [the protagonist’s] private utopia is put under pressure by public events” (Versluys 2009: 189). McEwan is very specific about the temporal setting of his narrative, which plays against the background of the world-wide protests against the impending War in Iraq. On Saturday, 15 February 2003, between 750,000 and 2 million people gathered in London’s Hyde Park, making the demonstration “the biggest in the UK capital’s political history” (BBC News 2003: n.p.). This was the pivotal moment when the “War on Terror” was about to enter its second phase, targeting a country that was not linked to al-Qaeda, but that was (wrongly) accused of harbouring weapons of mass destruction that could fall into the hands of terrorists. The planned invasion of Iraq famously split America’s allies into supporters of the war – the “coalition of the willing,” as US President George W. Bush unabashedly called it (qtd. in NATO 2002: n.p.) – and opponents of the war, most notably, France and Germany. More importantly, from a British perspective, the Blair government’s decision to continue its policy of unquestioning support for the US and to join the war campaign divided public opinion in the UK. As an overview of British opinion polls on the Iraq War shows, support for the war had sunk to an unprecedented low at the time of the London protest. In a survey conducted by ICM Research between 14 and 16 February 2003 (involving interviews with 1,003 adults from across the country), only 29 per cent of respondents were in favour of a military attack on Iraq. The *Guardian*’s commentary on the poll emphasizes that opposition to the war – which had risen to a total of 52 per cent at that point – was particularly strong among women, namely 59 per cent (see Travis/Black 2003: n.p.).

This situation is reflected in *Saturday* when middle-aged neurosurgeon Henry Perowne engages in a heated debate with his daughter Daisy, a soon-to-be-published poet who has participated in the anti-war rally at Hyde Park (see *Saturday*: 185–92). Early on in the novel, the narrator informs us that “[e]ver since he treated an Iraqi professor of ancient history for an aneurysm, saw his torture scars and listened to his stories, Perowne has had ambivalent or confused and shifting ideas about this coming invasion [of Iraq]” (62). The professor in question, Miri Taleb, told Perowne that “it’s only terror that holds the [Iraqi] nation together, the whole system runs on fear, and no one know how to stop it” (64). In the months following his encounter with Miri Taleb, “Perowne drifted into some compulsive reading up on the regime” (72), and he found confirmation of the professor’s account in the literature that he consulted: “He concluded that viciousness had rarely been more inventive or systematic or widespread.

Miri was right, it really was a republic of fear. [...] It seemed clear, Saddam’s organising principle was terror” (73). In these passages, Saddam Hussein’s rule is unequivocally identified as a reign of terror, and the classification of his regime as state terrorism provides a further legitimization of the imminent invasion of Iraq: regardless of whether Hussein has connections to the terrorist network of al-Qaeda or not, he himself is a terrorist – as one of his torture victims confirms. What is more, Miri Taleb also claims that in Iraq, no resistance is possible, which implies the necessity of external intervention. It is not difficult to see through McEwan’s strategy of incorporating a first-hand witness of Iraqi state violence into his novel in order to explain – and, to some extent, justify – his protagonist’s inclination to support the war.

Although he has not quite made up his mind on the issue yet, Perowne thinks that a military invasion of Iraq will have at least one positive outcome: “It’ll be the end of Saddam and one of the most odious regimes ever known, and I’ll be glad,” he tells Daisy, who is appalled by her father’s “pro-war views” (189). Because the scene – like the whole novel – is focalized through Perowne (in contrast to the multi-perspectivism of *Mrs Dalloway*, where different major and minor characters serve as focalizers), Daisy’s passionate arguments against the war are patronizingly disparaged as a mere “collation of everything she heard in the park” (186). Contrary to Perowne (and McEwan at the time of writing), however, post-7/7 readers of *Saturday* know that Daisy is right when she says that the Iraq War will lead to further terrorism – including an attack on London (189–90), which happened on 7 July 2005, a little less than six months after the novel’s publication. Daisy’s explanation “I’m against the war because I think terrible things are going to happen” (188) links the leitmotif of the impending invasion of Iraq to another recurring theme: the fear of further terrorist operations. There are several moments in which Perowne’s thoughts turn to his concerns about possible future attacks, which he significantly views as certainties rather than probabilities. For him, the question is that not *if* the terrorists will strike again, but only *when* and *where* they will do so: “There are people around the planet, well-connected and organized, who would like to kill him and his family and friends to make a point. The scale of death contemplated is no longer at issue. There’ll be more deaths on a similar scale, probably in this city” (81). In passages such as this one, it becomes obvious that what troubles Perowne is not only the question of the legitimacy of the War in Iraq, but also his own safety (as well as that of his “family and friends”) *here*, in his very hometown.

Like other works by the author from *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) to *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* may be described as a novel of ideas (see Seaboyer 2006). Because McEwan makes his protagonist a positivist who has the habit of analyzing his own behaviour and attitude, the author has ample room to insert essayistic digressions. Some of these explore the nature and causes of Perowne’s fear:

The government’s counsel – that an attack in a European or American city is an inevitability – isn’t only a disclaimer of responsibility, it’s a heady promise. Everyone fears it, but there’s also a darker longing in the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a blasphemous curiosity. Just as the hospitals have their crisis plans, so the televi-

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

Due to McEwan's sustained use of free indirect discourse, the voice of the narrator frequently merges with the consciousness of the protagonist. At times, it is difficult to say where the one ends and the other begins – an effect enhanced by the use of the present tense, which makes the narrator's descriptions and commentaries blend seamlessly with the protagonist's thoughts. As we follow the thoughts of McEwan's protagonist, we are constantly made aware that his concerns about security (which are coupled with a voyeuristic desire to witness disaster) are the result of an unholy alliance between terrorist networks, government officials acting in the name of counter-terrorism, and the mass media – all of which target the same audience, namely, citizens like Perowne, producing a “community of anxiety” (176) across the Western world.

On several occasions, Perowne's meditations read like echoes and elaborations of observations made by the author in post-9/11 essays and interviews. In a *Guardian* piece published one day after the attacks, McEwan (2001: n.p.) recounts how the non-stop live broadcast from New York turned him into an “information junkie” craving for facts and images. In *Saturday*, Henry Perowne undergoes a similar metamorphosis after having woken up in the early hours of the morning and observed a burning aircraft through his bedroom window. Throughout the day, Perowne tunes in to news programmes whenever he has the opportunity to do so (to his relief and disappointment, the incident eventually turns out to be entirely unrelated to Islamist terrorism). In a moment of self-scrutiny, it seems to Perowne that he has turned into a passive consumer of pre-selected information and pre-fabricated opinions, in danger of losing his ability to think autonomously and critically: “He suspects he's becoming a dupe, the willing, febrile consumer of news fodder, opinion, speculation and all of the crumbs the authorities let fall. He's a docile citizen, watching Leviathan grow stronger while he creeps under its shadow for protection” (*Saturday*: 180). Wondering to what extent the media influence or even determine his thoughts and emotions, he asks himself whether his mind can still roam freely. This, the author emphasizes, is part of the “condition of the times,” the “new order” (176, 180) heralded by the 9/11 attacks and the political response to them: the vast public interest in terrorism and the “War on Terror” – which is perfectly in line with current political priorities and interests – amounts to “a consensus of a kind, an orthodoxy of attention, a mild subjugation in itself” (181). Collective fear increases the power of the state (“Leviathan” – the nod to Hobbes is deliberate), which is portrayed here as controlling information.

Despite such moments of critical reflection on the interplay (and debilitating effects) of counter-terrorist policy-making, media discourse, and the fear of terrorism, McEwan's novel ultimately makes no attempt to break that cycle. Instead of seeking to move beyond the current culture of fear, *Saturday* demonstrates that Henry Perowne has every reason to be afraid. As several critics have noticed, the novel's climax – the

invasion of the protagonist’s tightly secured Regency home, the breaking of his father-in-law’s nose, the threatening of his wife at knifepoint, and the near-rape of his pregnant daughter Daisy by a street thug named Baxter – reads like a parable of terrorism (see in particular Fortin-Tournès 2009, which takes this allegorical decoding of the novel to an extreme). It is not quite accurate, however, to state that *Saturday* suggests that “[a]s a result of 9/11, no life, no matter how secure at the security at the surface, is safe anymore” (Versluys 2009: 188), which is an overly reductive (and somewhat paranoid) reading of the novel – since McEwan is far from insinuating such simple mono-causality. Rather, the novel forges a connection between the threat of urban crime (which is entirely unrelated to, and precedes, the events of 9/11) and the threat of global terrorism. Perowne’s general desire for security becomes most obvious in the way he attempts to protect the safety of his property from the dangers of London by literally locking himself and his family up in their luxurious home:

On his way to the main stairs, he pauses by the double front doors. They give straight on to the pavement, on to the street that leads into the square, and in his exhaustion they suddenly loom before him strangely with their accretions – three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the Entryphone system, the red panic button, the alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits. Such defences, such mundane embattlement: beware of the city’s poor, the drug-addicted, the downright bad. (*Saturday*: 36–37)

The story of the invasion of Perowne’s fortified home illustrates the impossibility of total protection. It begins with a minor car accident. On the way to a squash game in his expensive Mercedes S500, Perowne is permitted by a police officer to drive through a closed road, a possible sign of his socially privileged position. In the subsequent confrontation with Baxter – whose series five BMW is said to indicate “criminality” and “drug-dealing” (79, 83) – Perowne uses his medical expertise to escape a beating. Having correctly diagnosed Baxter with Huntington’s Disease, Perowne perplexes his attacker by confronting him with his diagnosis in front of two members of his gang, just as one of them raises his fist to hit him. With the help of his superior knowledge, Perowne manages to hold Baxter at bay. This strategy leads to short-term success, allowing Perowne to walk away unscathed while Baxter is deserted by his men, but it proves unwise in the long run; as Perowne realizes when it is too late, “[h]e used or misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse” (211).

In his book *Evading Class in Contemporary British Literature*, Lawrence Driscoll (2009: 47) makes the deliberately provocative claim that “[i]n *Saturday*, the real issue [...] is not Iraq, or terrorism [...]. These are just diversions or screens, that in some way are necessary to cover over what the novel really wants to deal with which is the troubling problem of class.” This statement is intended as a corrective to the many readings of *Saturday* which limit their focus to the novel’s engagement with “terrorism and the specter of September 11” (ibid.: 46). Although valuable, Driscoll’s intervention is just as one-sided as the readings that it rightly criticizes. To assert that

“the ‘terrorism’ at the heart of the novel comes not from the forces of Islamic jihad but simply from one white working-class man: Baxter” (ibid.) means to ignore the fact that *Saturday* addresses *both* threats – jihadism *and* working-class violence – *at the same time*. Accordingly, the Baxter episode can be read both literally and allegorically.

On a literal level, Baxter’s revenge constitutes an escalation of the latent class conflict in British society, even if that theme remains underdeveloped: Perowne’s recognition that he “possesses so much,” whereas Baxter “has so little” is as far as the novel’s exploration of the socio-economic background of the conflict goes (*Saturday*: 227, 228). On a metaphorical level, Baxter’s home invasion is an act of quasi-terroristic retaliation. Baxter’s acts of violence (which randomly target innocent members of Perowne’s family) are partially explained by a sense of humiliation and wounded pride. Perowne understands that Baxter has come “to rescue his reputation” and “to assert his dignity,” and he acknowledges that “[t]he responsibility is his” (210, 211). If we read the episode as an allegory of terrorism, this fact may be said to imply (at least some degree of) responsibility on the part of the West for the rise of anti-Western hatred and violence (see Fortin-Tournès 2009: 26; see also Michael 2014: 219–20). At the same time, however, Baxter’s erratic behaviour is shown to be the result of a pathological disposition – a hereditary, degenerative brain disorder – which adds a problematical edge to McEwan’s (potential) allegory of terrorism. Baxter, whose uncontrolled mood swings, “general simian air,” and “vaguely ape-like features” (*Saturday*: 88, 97) make him a literary ancestor of Mr Hyde, cannot be reasonably negotiated with. Perowne lures Baxter upstairs into his office under the false pretence that he will enable him to participate in the clinical trial of a (made-up) new treatment of Huntington’s Disease – a rather cruel lie. The tension rises as Perowne is unable to produce the promised evidence for the trial and Baxter’s invitation to join the test group. At that moment, Perowne’s son Theo comes to his father’s rescue and the two men shove the intruder down the stairs. At the end of the day, this is the only way to effectively neutralize the invader, who was still armed with a knife. For Perowne, to take responsibility for his actions eventually means conducting surgery on Baxter, who sustained a serious head injury in the fall – and to thus take total control over his antagonist.

Even after the successful defence of his family home against the quasi-terrorist Baxter, Perowne continues to feel that his existence is under imminent threat. He remains convinced throughout that an attack on a European capital is only a question of time:

London, his small part of it, lies wide open, impossible to defend, waiting for its bomb, like a hundred other cities. Rush hour will be a convenient time. It might resemble the Paddington crash – twisted rails, buckled, upraised commuter coaches, stretchers handed out through broken windows, the hospital’s Emergency Plan in action. Berlin, Paris, Lisbon. The authorities agree, an attack’s inevitable. (276)

London, Berlin, Paris, or Lisbon – this list of potential targets does not mention Madrid. The Madrid train bombings of 11 March 2004 are nonetheless present in McEwan’s novel. Whenever *Saturday* mentions the possibility of a terrorist attack on a European

city, the Madrid bombings serve as a subtextual reminder that Perowne’s premonitions are justified. McEwan wrote the novel with the benefit of hindsight. By setting it one year before the Madrid bombings (which, at the time of publication, lay one year in the past), he amplified the inevitability of terrorist attacks. This sheds a different light on Perowne’s unquestioning acceptance of government warnings. Why should he be critical of the authorities’ caution that “an attack’s inevitable,” given that this prediction was later proven to be right?

In a passage dealing with the protagonist’s attitude towards the impending invasion of Iraq, the narrator explains: “The one thing Perowne thinks he knows about this war is that it’s going to happen. With or without the UN. The troops are in place, they’ll have to fight” (62). On the last pages of *Saturday*, it seems that Perowne feels the same way about terrorism: that the one thing that is certain about terrorism is that the next attack is going to happen, that with or without the War in Iraq, al-Qaeda’s jihadists are in place and determined to fight. This is precisely Perowne’s argument in his dispute with Daisy. When his daughter tells him that anger about the Iraq War will drive many young Muslims into terrorist training camps, Perowne retorts that it is too late to worry about that, since one hundred thousand have already attended such camps in Afghanistan (189). One could argue that Perowne’s passive acquiescence in government policies is intended as a critique of this very attitude. Yet, *Saturday* does little to actively challenge the prevailing discourse of the “War on Terror.” Although the novel questions the “general conformity” (181) in the Western public resulting from the media-fuelled fear of terrorism, it ends with a fatalistic acceptance of that state, without attempting to establish an alternative frame of reference.

3. “What might this mean for Tom?” Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here*

Richard Gray’s study *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* argues that many US novels dealing with the impact of 11 September echo the assumption that “[e]verything has changed” (2011: 25). In this way, they reinforce the almost instantaneous interpretation of the terrorist attacks as “one of those moments in which history splits, and we define the world as ‘before’ and ‘after,’” as the *New York Times* (2001: n.p.) phrased it as early as the day after the event. Like the *New York Times* editorial, many 9/11 or “Ground Zero” novels adopt the point of view of the city most devastatingly affected by the attacks. For New Yorkers who had lost family or friends, or who had been present on the scene of the disaster and witnessed death and destruction first hand, life was indeed fractured into a “before” and an “after,” as Don DeLillo illustrates in *Falling Man* (2008 [2007]: 215), where the point is hammered home by the frequent reiteration of the phrase “after the planes” throughout the novel (8, 34, 69, 129, 170, 229). Although located on the other side of the Atlantic, in a city far removed from the site of the disaster, *Saturday* is also quite explicitly set “after the planes.” McEwan’s novel supports the reading of 9/11 as a historical turning point, only in this case, the notion that “everything has changed” is not primarily associated

with the attacks on the US homeland, but rather with their political aftermath. *Saturday* makes the point that 9/11 and the ensuing conflicts have engendered (or, in Henry Perowne's case, exacerbated) a pervasive sense of insecurity in Western cities.

Graham Swift's 2011 novel *Wish You Were Here* opens up yet another perspective on the world-wide aftershocks of 9/11 – one that is not only non-American, but also non-metropolitan. The main focalizer of the novel is Jack Luxton, the middle-aged son of a dairy farmer from the English West Country. Together with his wife Ellie Merrick, the daughter of a neighbouring (and rivalling) dairyman, Jack has turned his back on his native north Devon. The couple runs a caravan park on the Isle of Wight that Ellie has inherited from her runaway mother. It is here that the novel opens – in the middle of a marriage spat, on what turns out to be a fateful November day in the year 2006. While looking out of his bedroom window with his father's old shotgun by his side ("Lookout" is the fitting name of Jack and Ellie's cottage above the eponymous caravan site), Jack is simultaneously looking back in time. Meanwhile, only a short distance away, Ellie is looking through the windscreen of the couple's Cherokee; caught in a rainstorm, she, too, is remembering her past. Consequently, the novel alternates between the narrative present (Jack's apparent preparations for suicide, or possibly murder-suicide, and Ellie's delayed return home, building towards the novel's anticlimactic denouement) and various earlier events. The novel's constant shifting back and forth between temporal settings results in a series of vignettes, which are partially related in the past perfect to indicate narrative retrospection, and which the reader must fit together like the pieces of a puzzle. Swift's conspicuous use of the past perfect makes explicit what Hywel Dix (2016: 66) describes as the "implicit pluperfect narrative structure" of many of the author's novels, including *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders* (1996), "whereby what happens is understood mainly through a parallel portrayal of what *had* already happened to cause it."

Wish You Were Here sets in with a radical re-contextualization of the events of 11 September 2001 from the subjective point of view of Jack Luxton. In a flashback, it is revealed that Jack did not experience the attacks as an isolated event that single-handedly changed the course of history (and his own life). Instead, the "astonishing sequences" (*Wish You Were Here*: 4) on television immediately evoked other media representations. More precisely, Jack was reminded of burning carcasses in the British countryside, first during the BSE (or, "mad cow disease") crisis of the 1990s, and then again during the foot-and-mouth outbreak of early 2001:

BSE, then foot-and-mouth. What would have been the odds? Those TV pictures had looked like scenes from hell. Flames leaping up into the night. Even so, cattle aren't people. Just a few months later Jack had turned on the telly once again and called to Ellie to come back and look, as people must have been calling out, all over the world, to whoever was in the next room, "Drop what you're doing and come and look at this." (3)

This passage confirms the status of 9/11 as a global event, and it suggests that throughout the world, people have reacted in similar ways to the television images from New York City. Yet, the passage also shows that for Jack Luxton, these images had a

palimpsest-like quality: they were superimposed over previous images and hence indirectly linked to earlier events. Consequently, from Jack’s personal perspective, the fires at Ground Zero signified not something wholly unprecedented, but simply “[m]ore smoke” (ibid.). The smoking towers brought to his mind the foot-and-mouth epidemic that had broken out earlier that year, when cremation pyres with “[t]housands of stacked-up cattle” (ibid.) burned day and night in some of England’s most picturesque areas (including Jack’s native Devon); by the end of 2001, at least six million animals had been slaughtered and incinerated.

For Jack Luxton, these apocalyptic images are, in turn, associated with the loss of his family’s entire herd of Holstein Friesians during the “mad cow disease” crisis of the 1990s. The crisis began in 1986, when the first case of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) was officially diagnosed in the UK. At first, only BSE-infected herds were culled. Then, in March 1996, experts announced the possibility of a link between BSE, which was now rampant among British cattle, and a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), a rare human neurodegenerative disorder with similar symptoms. The European Union responded by banning all exports of British beef. In what was popularly known at the time as the “beef war,” the conservative government of John Major eventually gave in to pressure from its European partners, ordering the culling of all cattle over the age of 30 months (more than 4 million cows all in all) to ensure that no potential carrier of the disease could enter the human or animal food chain (see BBC News 2005: n.p.). From the chronology of events in Swift’s novel it becomes clear that the Luxtons lost their livestock before the peak of the BSE crisis and the ensuing “beef war.” The “rushed-through culling order” brought “ruin” to the family (*Wish You Were Here*: 1, 2), and it accelerated the deterioration of the already ailing relationship between the stern and taciturn widower Michael Luxton and his two estranged sons, Jack and Tom. A short reconstruction of this phase of the Luxtons’ family history is required before we can turn to the question of how “Swift’s novel puts a contemporary crisis of farming into a global context” (Head 2013: 130).

After the loss of his wife Vera to cancer in 1989, Michael Luxton grows increasingly gloomy. He pressures his sons to take on more responsibility without paying any attention to their intellectual and emotional needs – for instance, he takes Tom out of school at the age of sixteen in order to bind him more tightly to the farm, “to be a prisoner with his brother” (*Wish You Were Here*: 137). The alienation and tension between father and sons are crystallized in one of the novel’s expertly executed set pieces, when Michael not only forces Tom to witness the shooting of the sick family dog (which had recently become Tom’s dog), but also orders him to pull the trigger himself (142), possibly hoping to provoke a violent response on Tom’s part (208) – a potential foreshadowing of Michael’s suicide, at the same spot and with the same weapon, a couple of years later. Tom, who is eight years Jack’s junior, escapes from the farm in the early hours of his eighteenth birthday in December 1993, joins the army, and disappears without a trace from Jack’s life. After Michael’s suicide in November 1994 and the subsequent death of Ellie’s alcoholic father, Jack is persuaded by his future

wife that they should sell their respective properties and start a new life on the Isle of Wight.

If McEwan's urban novel draws on modernist models, Swift revisits the rural England of Victorian writers such as Thomas Hardy, whose *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) was the first in a string of novels to be set in the semi-fictional county of "Wessex" in southwest England. Hardy's Wessex novels famously depict and bemoan the irreversible decline of traditional country life – characterized by harmony between humans, animals, and environment – under the pressures of industrialization and modernization. In a similar vein, Swift uses "centuries-old patterns of agriculture in decline" (Tonkin 2011: n.p.) as the background to his story. The Luxtons have been in the agricultural business for centuries – the first farmhouse on the family's land on Jebb Hill was built in 1614 – and when Jack is still in his youth, he is given to understand that he will one day have to continue this tradition, since the Luxton farm is his "birthright": "Since it meant something, if you were born, as he was, on a farm: the name. The generations going back and forwards, like the hills, whichever way you looked, around them" (*Wish You Were Here*: 22). Due to the aforementioned series of misfortunes, however, this birthright soon turns out to be more of a burden than a privilege. Jack is a "slave" to his father's farm (47), and the only periods of unadulterated happiness that he can remember are two short holidays spent with his mother and brother in a caravan in Brigwell Bay, Dorset (64–68). In no way does Swift romanticize Jack's past farm life, including the period before the onset of the BSE crisis: although we understand Jack is not "in his proper place" (3) on the Isle of Wight – his new-found freedom and relative prosperity have come at the cost of uprootedness – it is also true that Jack's lost home in Devon was never a place of personal fulfilment. Yet, Dominic Head (2015: 22) certainly has a point when he argues that *Wish You Were Here* instils a sense of "nostalgia for a rural ideal: sustainable activity, productive of community, and invulnerable to international events" – as opposed to the "modernity" displayed in the novel "in the form of intensive farming methods and international warfare, [which] threaten the very basis of human subsistence."

After over ten years of "tending a herd of caravans" (*Wish You Were Here*: 26), Jack is suddenly confronted with his troubled past. In November 2006, his long-lost brother bursts back into his life, albeit posthumously – first in the form of a death notification informing Jack that Tom has been "killed 'on active duty' in Iraq, in the Basra region of operations" (78); then in the form of Tom's "repatriated" remains, which Jack must collect at an airbase in Oxfordshire; and finally in the form of a ghostly presence that repeatedly appears to Jack on his road trip to Devon, where Tom is to be buried. The bulk of the novel's second half consists of a detailed account of Jack's solitary journey to the funeral, unaccompanied by his wife, who wants to make a clean cut with the past and fears that Tom's "return" after an absence of almost thirteen years will undermine their relationship: "[...] Tom wasn't coming back, yet he *was* coming back. So far as Jack was concerned, he was coming back big-time. He was coming to bloody haunt them" (116–17).

The “haunting” mentioned here is a resonant theme in *Wish You Were Here*. On the one hand, it refers to the specific situation of Jack and Ellie, “happily cut off from the land of their past” – or so Ellie likes to believe – until “it all came back, [...] by way of Iraq, their old, left behind life” (210, 212). On the other hand, Tom’s post-humous homecoming illustrates the impact of the seemingly distant War in Iraq on Britain more generally. The word “repatriation,” which is reiterated on several occasions throughout the narrative, is of particular significance in that respect. Meaning “to restore or return to the country of origin, allegiance, or citizenship” (Merriam-Webster n.p.), the verb “repatriate” suggests that through the return of dead soldiers to their places of birth, the *patria* – Latin for “homeland,” or, literally, “fatherland” – is directly affected by the consequences of the actions of its “sons” and “daughters” in the Middle East. This point is made explicit in the narrative segments featuring Major Richards, an army officer assigned to pay a condolence visit to Jack and Ellie on the Isle of Wight. Major Richards has the emotionally daunting task of conveying news of soldiers’ deaths to their families at home. In this capacity,

he had, in recent months, been an intimate witness to some immediate consequences of what was happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had, as it were, been present at several scenes of devastation, enough to know that such scenes were proliferating and increasingly pockmarking the land (though they were as nothing, he understood, to the frequency of such scenes in Iraq or Afghanistan). (*Wish You Were Here*: 96)

As becomes obvious here, the burning of carcasses in the British countryside during the BSE and FMD crises has its equivalent in the metaphorical scars left by a very different kind of crisis (or disease): the “War on Terror,” which causes emotional “devastation” across the country – even if this damage does not compare to the destruction inflicted on Afghanistan and Iraq. The notion of a Britain increasingly “pockmarked” by the fatalities of the “War on Terror” is reinforced in a later scene, when Jack stops at a service station near Launton. Looking at the other customers in the cafeteria, he wonders “how many of those around him – or how many of those would pass through here today – would have some link, no matter how remote (a cousin, a brother-in-law) with someone in Iraq” (218). What this suggests is that many people in Britain are connected in one way or another to service personnel deployed in Iraq, which is why events that happen “over there” have strong and immediate reverberations *here*, in the homeland. As Jack realizes during the “Ceremony of Repatriation” at the army airbase, he is not the only person to grieve the loss of a relative, and the scene in the service station implies that many more people will be bereaved of someone close to them as long as the conflict continues.

4. Conclusion

Wish You Were Here is the rare post-9/11 novel that deals with the human costs of the “War on Terror” (albeit from an exclusively Western perspective). This distinguishes it not only from the first wave of American 9/11 novels, which have a different thematic

focus, but also from the other British “War on Terror” novel discussed in this chapter. The protagonist of Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* is mainly concerned with the moral and political costs of the “War on Terror.” While Henry Perowne’s wealth makes him feel vulnerable to all kinds of crime, it also protects him and his family from being drawn into the military conflicts that followed the events of 11 September 2001. At one point, Perowne regrets that his eighteen-year-old son Theo has grown up into a world of uncertainty: “International terror, security cordons, preparations for war – these represent the steady state, the weather. Emerging into adult consciousness, this is the world he finds” (*Saturday*: 36). Yet, Theo Perowne still finds himself in a rather comfortable position in comparison to Tom Luxton. The son of an impoverished dairyman (effectively thrown out of business by the BSE crisis), Tom begins his military career at eighteen, only to be killed thirteen years later, when his armoured vehicle is hit by an “exceptionally lethal roadside bomb” (*Wish You Were Here*: 91). For Perowne’s gifted and privileged children – Theo is an accomplished blues guitarist, his sister Daisy has managed to land her first collection of poems with the prestigious publishing house Faber and Faber – the “War on Terror” is a remote occurrence (even if it genuinely troubles Daisy), as it is for most people from their social background. (Once again, *Saturday* echoes the situation in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, where the guests at Clarissa’s party are not among the many people who lost sons, brothers, or fathers in World War I.)

In sum, *Saturday* and *Wish You Were Here* emphasize different ways in which people in the UK can be affected by the “War on Terror.” The Perownes’ preoccupation with the war revolves around ethical and security issues, and it is closely related to their fear of another terrorist attack. By contrast, Jack Luxton does not think of himself as a potential target for al-Qaeda. After having witnessed how “a couple of planes had flown into a couple of buildings – another TV picture to remember” (*Wish You Were Here*: 203), Jack tells himself that it is highly unlikely that “terrorists – Islamic terrorists” will ever attack a “holiday facility on the Isle of Wight” (61). A few years later, he is puzzled by the official discourse on the “War on Terror” (“the general story”); he considers the phrase “war on terror” a misnomer (and a revealing one at that): “Jack knew that terror was a thing that you felt inside, so what could a war on terror be, in the end, but a war against yourself?” (60). He also realizes that, although he knows “terror,” and has experienced that emotion repeatedly throughout his life, he does not feel terror in relation to the threat of terrorism – which he believes to be “a matter of who and where, of geography” (61), that is, a threat that does not concern him personally. However, Jack is immediately concerned about the safety of his brother: “What might this mean for Tom?” (4).

Whereas *Saturday* is set in 2003, shortly before the beginning of the War in Iraq, the main narrative of *Wish You Were Here* begins three years later. By the time of Tom Luxton’s death (on 4 November 2006), 120 British service personnel had lost their lives in Iraq. Besides this difference in historical perspective, the two novels are distinguished by the regional and social background of their protagonists and focalizers.

This difference becomes particularly salient at the end of Swift’s novel, when Jack Luxton attempts to visit the farmland that he sold to a couple from Richmond, London, ten years earlier. Jack ends up in front of a newly installed, massive, high-tech security gate which puts even the Perownes’ tightly secured front door in Fitzrovia Square to shame (290). Jack remembers that when he first showed the property to the future owners, an investment banker and his wife wishing to purchase a holiday home, they asked myriad questions about “security” (291, 311). This incident prompts a long meditation on the concept of “security.” As Jack comes to understand, the term implies something radically different for the Richardsons from Richmond than it does for himself: not security “in the broad sense – security of incomes, of livelihoods” (which he and many other farmers lost in the course of the BSE and FMD crises), but “the kind of security that might prevent the possession and enjoyment of their new property from ever being impaired or violated” (312, 314). To some extent, the Richardsons’ understanding of security echoes that of Henry Perowne in McEwan’s novel: Perowne, too, is even more afraid of burglars than he is of terrorists. As in *Saturday*, the widening income gap and concomitant self-isolation of the rich in Britain (as elsewhere in the world) is an important socio-economic backdrop to the story. Clare Richardson, who can sense “something sinister in the global atmosphere,” is delighted that after “those planes hit the towers that September,” she no longer needs to leave the country during the holidays, since she now owns “this retreat, this place of green safety” in England (320, 319). In this way, Swift suggests that the post-9/11 desire for security (in the sense of security from terrorism, security of one’s life) overlaps with and reinforces an already existing desire for a different kind of security – security of one’s property. At the same time, he demonstrates that both desires are confined to those who do not have to fear for other kinds of security, who do not “know the real meaning of loss” (315), and who do not have to fight in questionable wars against a vaguely defined enemy, namely “terror.”

At one point, Jack Luxton asks himself: “What kind of war, exactly, had [Tom] even been fighting [...]?” (178). Despite their many differences, both *Saturday* and *Wish You Were Here* suggest that this uncertainty about the so-called “War on Terror” is an integral part of the present age of insecurity. In the years to come, it will be fascinating to see whether further British novelists will contribute to the emerging genre of “‘War on Terror’ fiction” – and what other literary traditions, besides turn-of-the-century rural fiction and the modernist city novel, they will resuscitate in order to convey a sense of the local impact of this epoch-defining global conflict.

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