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“THERE’S ONLY THIS”: ATHEISM AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN IAN  
MCEWAN’S FICTION

By  
Olivia Hope Davis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2017

Approved by

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Advisor: Professor Daniel Stout

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Reader: Professor Ian Whittington

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Reader: Professor John Samonds

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## Abstract

Olivia Hope Davis: “There’s Only This”: Atheism and the Search for Meaning in Ian  
McEwan’s Fiction  
(Under The Direction Of Dr. Daniel Stout)

In this thesis, I offer readings of Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*, *Saturday*, and *The Children Act* to study the relationship between meaning and faith. This is an important question because some New Atheists have pointed to McEwan’s work as proof that meaning is possible in the absence of God. In this thesis I suggest that while McEwan makes a strong case for the possibility of meaning through aesthetic experiences, he also complicates meaning by suggesting that it is only achievable in the context of belief in the irreducibility of ideas like love, beauty, and wonder.

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## Introduction

Our science mocks magic and the human heart,  
Our knowledge is the brutal mastery of the known,  
But science could become a force for good:  
The planet does not turn for us alone.  
Science is a form of wonder, knowledge a form of love.  
Are we too late to love ourselves?  
Shall we change or shall we die?  
--- Ian McEwan, *Or Shall We Die*

In his essay “Literature, Science, and Human Nature,” Ian McEwan draws parallels between literature and science, suggesting that each explores our “common nature” (19). We can read writers from “a time remote from our own, or from a culture that was profoundly different from our own,” because we share a “common emotional ground” with those authors (11). In the same way, science “binds” us together; our DNA proves our common origin (19). “If there are such human universals that transcend culture,” then looking at literature might reveal our common desires, revealing which questions are most innate to human nature (12). Both of these subjects – literature and science – help us define what it means to be human.

Even though literature and science explore our common nature, they provide different, but not conflicting, insights about ourselves. McEwan’s understanding of humanity requires both disciplines. He says that these two methods of inquiry are “two noble and distinct forms of investigation into our condition” (19). Literature is not

subservient or reliant upon science, and vice versa. We can read other writers because we share a “common emotional ground, some deep reservoir of assumptions” with them; any assumption – especially about something emotional – is necessarily unscientific. It is not automatically irrational (“common sense” does not seem irrational), but it is beyond the empirically verifiable. Because they deal with different domains of ideas, both literature and science are necessary for a complete understanding of our common nature.

Because he suggests that science is only one aspect of human nature, it follows that McEwan believes that there is something more to life than that which is describable by science. Empirical explanations cannot give a full account of what human nature is if human nature includes ideas that do not have empirical grounding. Instead, if McEwan’s suggestion that both literature and science are essential to understanding who we are is correct, our common nature is something that includes scientific explanations but is not bound by them. A full understanding of what it means to be human includes both the empirical facts of our biology and the irreducible – they are irreducible because they cannot be broken down scientifically – parts of our existence that literature reveals, such as things like love, beauty, and wonder. These things, which are not rationally justifiable, unify us as a species with a common nature, suggesting that there is something more to our lives than that for which purely physical explanations can account.

This combination – science and literature – allows for meaning because meaning is not something that can be explained rationally. The impulse we have to find meaning cannot be reduced to chemical reactions, the result of natural selection, or a peculiar accident in our genetic lineage. If it is reduced to any of these things, meaning becomes a mechanistic process, and when this happens, it itself becomes meaningless. As a product



of mere random vibrations of atomic particles, it signifies nothing. The idea of meaning cannot exist in a purely scientific worldview because such a view allows for nothing that cannot be empirically tested; the concept of meaning is rejected because it demands another way of being understood. McEwan solves this problem by not taking a rational, empirically based viewpoint, and instead suggesting that meaning, while unexplained scientifically, can be explored through literature.

For McEwan, the nonphysical parts of our nature are just as real as those that are physical and the question of meaning is a universal expression of our common nature. The question of meaning is just as important as mapping the human genome when it comes to understanding what it means to be human. In his 2014 novel *The Children Act*, Jehovah's Witness Adam Henry receives a life-saving blood transfusion and then loses his faith. When he confronts Fiona, the judge who ordered the transfusion that violated his religious convictions, she realizes that "[Adam] came to find her, wanting what everyone wanted...Meaning" (220). The universality of the problem of meaning — Adam wants what "everyone wanted" — suggests that there is something about it that transcends the individual. Raising the question of meaning becomes an expression of our own common nature; the question of what makes life worth living — where is its value? — connects all of us.

Throughout his novels, McEwan features characters that answer this question with their religions. Adam Henry's faith brought him meaning even when his death, at the age of 17, seemed inevitable. Adam says that an elder at his church told him that if Adam died, "it would have a fantastic effect on everyone...It would fill our church with love" (113). The infinite meaning that religion gives — promising a purpose in death —

makes Adam willing to give up his life. A similar idea is expressed in *Enduring Love*. Parry, a Christian who stalks Joe, the protagonist of the novel, thinks that Joe's rejection of religion leads to meaninglessness: "Somewhere in among your protestations about God is a plea to be rescued from the traps of your own logic...you'll be glad to say, Deliver me from meaninglessness" (146). Parry does not think that meaning is possible in the absence of God, and finds meaning through his religion. For both of these characters, belief in the supernatural gives them meaning through a cosmic connection with the divine that lasts after death.

Indeed, the universal desire for meaning may be best evidenced by the abundance of religions and, for some, their billions of adherents. The ideas of McEwan's characters are mirrored in nonfiction writing from Christians. In C. S. Lewis' essay "Is Theology Poetry?" he writes, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else" (140). Religion provides a lens through which Lewis makes sense of the world; it gives an elucidating order to all of experience. While religions cannot be evaluated for truthfulness by the depths of meaning they provide (even if Christianity's explanatory power was a catalyst to belief for Lewis), the emergence of supernatural mythologies — and the vigor of belief present today — indicates this universal desire for meaning. If meaninglessness is the problem, and supernatural order in the universe is the solution, theistic texts like the Bible or Torah or Quran may be read as a sort of literature that "exemplifies" the universal desire for meaning.

However, because this desire for meaning is universal, it necessarily affects even those who do not believe in the supernatural. Atheism originated because people desired

a more orderly and meaningful conception of the world than that provided by ancient Greek myth. Hesiod's *Theogony*, which portrays gods as impersonal beings who do not influence natural laws, presented a more orderly universe than the earlier epics of Homer that depict mercurial gods and corresponding chaos. In her book *The First Philosophers*, Robin Waterfield suggests that Hesiod's *Theogony* marks a “paradigm shift” in thinking, suggesting that instead of Homer's capricious deities and chaos, “there is order in the world. And it is precisely because it is ordered that it can be comprehended by the human mind” (xxiii). The more orderly a world is —intelligible natural laws replace gods — the more meaningful it becomes because we are able to understand more about it. In *Western Atheism*, James Thrower suggests that Hesiod's emphasis on order marked the beginning of an ontological divergence, later recognized by Aristotle, who says that Hesiod's writing was a forerunner to naturalism that assumed the nonexistence of gods (40). Atheism originated from a desire for more meaning (and, thus, order) in the universe.

However, naturalism (which is atheistic) was later criticized because in contrast to religious mythologies, it could not give reasons *why* something existed, but only descriptions. Plato's *Phaedo* is one of the first articulations of this idea. In this piece,

“Socrates [suggests] that a causal explanation along the lines offered by the physical philosophers is a limited explanation and does nothing to ratify those who are asking other and different questions; who are asking for an explanation in terms of meaning and purpose.” (Thrower 28)

Naturalism alone was unable to answer the question of meaning. Because reconciling meaning and naturalism seemed impossible, some found that without god, nihilism was inevitable.

While this critique – that without God, rationality leads to meaninglessness – is as ancient as atheism itself, different solutions have been offered to reconcile a naturalistic

outlook with religion. Such reconciliations attempt to preserve meaning, allowing humans to be free to study science without submitting to a mechanistic and meaningless view of the world. Aquinas' *De Veritate*, for example, suggests that science and faith are different types of knowledge that do not contradict (Q. 14). While such solutions allow for meaningfulness by preserving both the idea of a god and the possibility of a lawful natural world, they can lead to contradictions between doctrine and empirical study. Several centuries later, the scientific challenge to religion culminated in Charles Darwin's discoveries, which challenged even his own faith. He writes in *Autobiography*, "The old argument from design in Nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered" (94). After Darwin, it became evident that meaningfulness – if we were to have it at all – must be rooted in something that could not contradict science.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who coined the term nihilism, recognized that creating meaning without any transcendent grounding would be a difficult undertaking. His famous parable "The Madman," from *The Gay Science*, shows this:

"I seek God!...Where is God gone?...*We have killed him*, — you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, dark and darker?...God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."

Like Socrates two millennia before, Nietzsche realizes that without a god, there is nothing to answer the question of ultimate meaning; the physical order says nothing about it. In *Meaninglessness*, W. A. Casey suggests that this godless state "confronts [the

madman] with the inherent meaninglessness of the earth, and realization that the transcendent order that makes human life meaningful is an illusion. The crucial concomitant to this is the collapse of absolute value” (26). Without a god, there is no “transcendent order,” and life is ultimately meaningless. It is important that what “collapses” for Nietzsche is “absolute value,” instead of values in general, and it is assumed that a “transcendent order” is the only one that can make a life “meaningful.” If meaningfulness can exist only on a transcendent scale, then naturalism does preclude its existence. However, what dies with God seems not to be meaningfulness itself, but instead the adjectives associated with him: *ultimate*, *absolute*, *infinite*, and *transcendent*. Meaning does not have to be *ultimate* by definition (Nietzsche recognizes this and suggests that accepting the inherent nihilism in the universe, and yet “not [collapsing] under it” is the ideal way to live (*The Will to Power* 9)). What Nietzsche describes in his parable is the need for a new framework for meaning without supernatural – or ultimate, or absolute, or infinite, or transcendent – recourses.

Nihilism seems to be less the result of God’s death as much as a reaction to this newfound disorder – the elimination of all absolutes – left in his absence. Despite Nietzsche’s new framework, the absence of absolute order remained a major theme well into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and persists today. While God may have served a variety of purposes, giving absolute order to the universe seems to be among his most important functions. The disorder left after God is reflected in the literature written after Darwin. In a survey of five nineteenth-century literary writers entitled *The Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller suggests that without God, many writers experienced “disconnection.”

“[Our] situation is essentially one of disconnection: disconnection between man and nature, between man and man, even between man and himself.

Only if God would return or if we could somehow reach him might our broken world be unified again.” (2)

The desire is for “unity,” for the world to be ordered again so that it can be understood. Connections have been lost; there is no way to find a meaningful place for ourselves in this new, godless, world. In *Journey Through Despair*, a study of “Transformations in British Literary Culture” in the decades after Darwin, John A. Lester Jr. suggests that the new disorder might lead to meaninglessness. “After centuries of assurance, or glimpses, or intimations of a bond with some higher harmony, man is once more alone against a world either hostile or incomprehensible, or perhaps simply without meaning” (192). The absence of order — what was once a “higher harmony” — leads to a world that we cannot understand (“incomprehensible”), and nihilism ensues. Thus, in the wake of burgeoning science and declining religion, when we were understanding more and more about what physically binds us together (natural selection, a common ancestor) we were less certain about how to respond to another aspect of our common nature — a desire for meaning.

However, stripped of the possibility of universal meaning, writers – eventually leading up to McEwan – began to suggest that the nonexistence of god did not negate other sources of meaning like beauty or love. If these things have inherent meaning, atheism did not inevitably lead to nihilism. Bertrand Russell suggests that these ideas can exist in a godless world in his essay, “A Free Man’s Worship:”

“Let us admit that, in the world we know, there are many things that would be better otherwise, and that the ideals to which we do and must adhere are not realized in the realm of matter. Let us preserve our respect for truth, for beauty, for the ideal of perfection which life does not permit us to attain, though none of these things meet with the approval of the unconscious universe.”

The lack of “approval of the unconscious universe” does not make our lives less meaningful. We do not need any transcendent sources for meaning; we are able to value and enjoy truth, beauty, and the “ideal of perfection” without the supernatural.

While this question – what meaning, if any, is there for the atheist? – is ancient, McEwan’s novels respond to it at a particularly pivotal time in history. The current “rise of secularism,” which [is] more widespread and pervasive than [it] has ever [been],” adds new urgency to the question (Thrower 2). The New Atheist movement — consisting of a group of public intellectuals who deny the existence of god — has gained momentum in the last decade. It is known for its vehement renunciation of all theistic religions, especially Christianity and Islam, and Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate suggest in *The New Atheist Novel* that it can be viewed as a response to religiously motivated terrorism (5). The New Atheist movement has a wide audience and has led to the publication of many books espousing their ideas, including Richard Dawkin’s *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith*, and Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. These books have topped bestseller lists and testify to a renewed vigor in atheism, making the search for secular meaning – which McEwan’s novels explore – very timely.

Because New Atheism seeks to change religious people’s belief systems — Richard Dawkins writes in the preface to *The God Delusion*, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” — it is important for the movement to characterize atheism as not only true but also something that retains many of the positive things religion gives, including meaning (Dawkins 28). As a result, the New Atheists suggest that meaning is possible — and possibly even more

sustainable — within an atheistic framework. However, as McEwan suggests in his lecture “Literature, Science, and Common Nature,” this meaning is not found rationally. There is no rational route to meaning, and the New Atheists recognize this, finding meaning in subjective experiences of things like art. As Christopher Hitchens writes in *God Is Not Great*,

“[Atheists] are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and – since there is no other metaphor – also the soul.” (5)

Hitchens connects meaning to the “lure of wonder and mystery and awe,” and because these things can be experienced without belief in a god, he suggests that meaning is fully possible within an atheistic framework. The arts can satisfy our desire for wonder, mystery, and awe and lead to moral reflection – domains that are not, the New Atheists argue, limited to a supernatural sphere. Thus, while they do challenge the possibility of anything transcendent, New Atheists try to show that meaning does not need a transcendent framework at all, and point to the arts – especially literature – to prove their point. The New Atheists find meaning by going beyond that which is purely scientific and into the domains of beauty and wonder. They do not connect these experiences to god, but instead suggest that they have inherent value.

The New Atheist movement has given particular attention to the novels of Ian McEwan. McEwan contributed an essay, “End of the World Blues,” to Hitchens’ anthology *The Portable Atheist*, and wrote *Sweet Tooth* in Hitchens’ honor. Christopher Hitchens wrote in the acknowledgements of his *God Is Not Great*: “[McEwan’s] body of fiction shows an extraordinary ability to elucidate the numinous without conceding



anything to the supernatural. He has subtly demonstrated that the natural is wondrous enough for anyone” (5). Hitchens suggests that McEwan’s work shows that we can have experiences that are awe-inspiring without any recourse to religiosity. His use of the word “enough” indicates that we have a need to experience the wonderful; it is, evidently, possible that something is not “wondrous enough.” A godless framework allows for a satisfying experience of wonder, making the supernatural – whether or not it exists – superfluous. The attention that these prominent atheists have given to McEwan’s work, and what Hitchens claims that McEwan’s work provides – an experience of “secular transcendence” — suggests that McEwan’s fiction offers an uncommonly acute glimpse at meaning in New Atheism (*Saturday* 140). McEwan’s novels show that the “numinous” – Hitchens’ word, first defined as “indicating the presence of a divinity” – has become possible without the divine (*OED*). Thus, if we want a literary proof that atheism – particularly atheism in the twenty-first century – is not inevitably nihilistic, we should begin with McEwan’s novels, in which the problems of meaning considered by Hesiod, Nietzsche, and writers after Darwin continue to be explored.

However, McEwan’s work is not a mere continuation of these ideas but a new development in them (otherwise, New Atheists could merely point back to Hesiod). He shows how what once led to nihilism — science — can give meaning by providing an aesthetic experience that is fully grounded in the natural world. In his novels, McEwan emphasizes that science can provide an aesthetic experience in itself by becoming beautiful and inciting wonder. Thus, while previous writers might have worked against the grain of the empirical, insisting that meaning exists in spite of mechanistic scientific understandings, McEwan uses science to create meaning. McEwan’s novels highlight

aesthetic experiences in the music and literature in addition to the sciences. These experiences in the natural world point to immaterial things like love, beauty, and wonder, and they make the world appear orderly without any supernatural grounding. Each of the aesthetic experiences begins at the level of sensory perception and each is a catalyst for meaning. McEwan's use of both science and the arts to create meaning distinguishes him from the writers before him.

McEwan is able to argue that meaning still exists within an atheistic framework because he is not a materialist. His atheism does not lead to a belief that everything is reducible to scientific explanations or that all that exists is made of matter. As Bradley and Tate argue in *The New Atheist Novel*, "To McEwan's eyes, a title like 'Atheist' does not begin to cover his own position precisely because it defines him according to what he does not believe as opposed to what he does" (16). They cite an interview McEwan did for *The New Republic* in 2008, in which he says,

"...it is crucial that people who do not have a sky god and don't have a set of supernatural beliefs assert their belief in moral values and in love and in the transcendence that they might experience in landscape or art or music or sculpture or whatever. Since they do not believe in an afterlife, it makes them give more valence to life itself. The little spark that we do have becomes all the more valuable when you can't be trading off any moments for eternity."

It is essential that McEwan uses the term *belief*; moral values and love are not scientific facts but things that we choose to believe in. Because these things are inherently meaningful, even in the absence of a god, he chooses not to reduce them to mere products of chemical reactions. This aligns with his idea that literature and science explore different aspects of our common nature; the possibility of meaning is not a scientific theory because it is not an empirically testable hypothesis. McEwan is able to draw

meaning from aesthetic experiences – from science, music, and literature – precisely because he thinks that matter is not all that exists. Aesthetic experiences, while beginning in the natural world, point to immaterial – and meaningful – ideas in which we choose to believe.

However, while McEwan does show that meaning is possible without belief in God, he complicates the possibility of meaning in a number of ways. He explores the problem of arbitrarily deciding to “believe” in something – the difficulty of proving that *anything* is irreducible. This comes to light in *Enduring Love* (1997), in which the protagonist Joe chooses only to recognize certain types of love as legitimate. In *Saturday* (2005), aesthetic experiences provide meaning that is temporal, lasting only as long as a piece of music. Such experiences are also highly subjective, so that even if they are personally meaningful, such meaning does not translate collectively. *The Children Act* tells the story of Adam, who finds nothing worth living for when he loses his faith in God even though he has had a number of powerful aesthetic experiences. While McEwan is largely successful at showing how meaning is found within an atheistic framework – so successful that Hitchens points to him to prove the possibility of meaning without God – he also shows that there are significant challenges to finding meaning.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that while McEwan shows that meaning is accessible within an atheistic framework, it can be found only in the context of belief in the irreducibility of ideas of love, beauty, and morality. McEwan can live a meaningful life as an atheist – but he cannot experience meaning as a total rationalist. Meaning requires that one arbitrarily assent to immaterial ideas because meaning is an immaterial idea itself, and this can lead to a number of complications because the arbitrary nature of

belief leads to subjective meaning that may not, it seems, satisfy everyone. But McEwan – who suggests that there is an entire non-empirical side to our common nature – sees no paradox. Within these confines – disbelief in God, but a belief in beauty – he gives a complex portrait of the modern atheist and the search for meaning. The New Atheists, it seems, are right to point toward McEwan – so long as they too are willing to assent to having faith, if not in God, then in love, beauty, and, ultimately, the possibility of a meaningful life. Without this sort of secular faith, McEwan's novels show, nihilism is an inevitable outcome of atheism.

## Chapter I

### Love

“Finally he spoke the three simple words that no amount of bad art or bad faith can ever quite cheapen. She repeated them, with exactly the same slight emphasis on the second word, as though she had been the one to say them first. He had no religious belief, but it was impossible not to think of an invisible presence or witness in the room, and that these words spoken aloud were like signatures on an unseen contract.” – Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

One of the most profound sources of meaning in McEwan’s novels is love. Even characters that are reductive in their thinking and tend to explain most emotional experiences through biological processes find meaning in love, especially when they experience grief. McEwan’s novels show that love has inherent, unjustified, and unexplained meaning for even the most rational and reductively minded characters. However, his novels also complicate the meaningfulness found in love by exposing a level of arbitrariness involved in the decision that love is meaningful.

Henry Perowne, the neurosurgeon protagonist of *Saturday*, tries to understand everything biologically. He considers himself a “professional reductionist” (281). Being a “professional” at taking a reductive viewpoint suggests that he has made a habit of looking at things materialistically, understanding them by their physical processes. At the beginning of *Saturday*, he awakens early in the morning. He thinks the pre-dawn euphoria he experiences might be the result of “a chemical accident while he slept—

something like a spilled tray of drinks, prompting dopamine-like receptors to initiate a kindly cascade of intracellular events” (4). He sees a scientific cause for everything, including his own emotions. His reductionism extends to his thoughts about love as well. He thinks it is a “stroke of luck, that the woman he loves is also his wife” and an “accident of character” that he is not interested in other women, suggesting that love arises from random instances or luck – accidents that easily could have had different outcomes (39, 41). Such minimal and mechanical explanations reveal a reductive way of thinking about the world that would seem to limit the possibility for Perowne to appreciate love in a way that leads to meaning, which would require an assent to something that is inherently nonphysical and beyond scientific explanations.

However, when Perowne experiences grief, he does not look at love materialistically. When surgeries fail, he must confront his patients’ families with bad news. Such conversations are meaningful to Perowne because they are “a fundamental human exchange, as elemental in its way as love” (86). Even though Perowne touches brains “regularly,” he feels that they alone do not define what it means to be human. His use of the word “elemental” is significant; elements — carbon, oxygen, etc. — are the building blocks of all physical objects. In his textbook *Chemistry*, Kenneth Witten gives a helpful definition of *element*: “a substance that cannot be decomposed into simpler substances by chemical changes” (14). By suggesting that love and “fundamental human exchange[s]” are *elemental*, Perowne is comparing them to substances that are indivisible. Love cannot be reduced into something else or divided into smaller components. If we reduce love to a set of processes, a calculated movement of neurons, we are no longer talking about *love*, in the same way that if we talk about protons —

which make up carbon — we are no longer talking about carbon, but parts of it that could also be parts of any other element. Love is a combination of other elements (like a carbon atom, which is made up of atomic particles), but the moment that it is reduced to chemical reactions or a byproduct of natural selection, it ceases to be love anymore. Further analysis of love is not possible. There is a point when Perowne — the “professional reductionist” — stops reducing. Love is irreducible because it is *elemental*. Because it forms such an essential part of our common nature, it is inherently meaningful, and he does not question its meaningfulness further because he chooses to “believe” in it. By giving love “elemental” status, Perowne suggests that love cannot be reduced any further.

For Joe Rose in *Enduring Love*, a commitment to reductionism more deeply complicates meaning found in love than it does for Perowne. Joe’s ideas about love initially show a higher degree of reductionism than Perowne’s, but Joe thinks that reducing things can lead to greater meaning. In a discussion about why babies smile with his longtime partner Clarissa Mellon, a professor studying Keats, they disagree about how reducing something to biological processes affects its overall meaning. Joe thinks that understanding the analytical makeup of something makes it more interesting. “If we value a baby’s smile, why not contemplate its source?...That smile must be hard-wired, and for good evolutionary reasons” (75). He suggests that the smile was an evolutionary adaptation; smiling “babies who could not yet speak got more [love] for themselves” (75). Clarissa critiques his position, saying his ideas are “rationalism gone berserk” and “the new fundamentalism” (74). The result of Joe’s neo-Darwinism is that “[e]verything was being stripped down...and some larger meaning was lost” (75). Even if Joe were to

discover new evolutionary adaptations, Clarissa does not think that Joe's scientific explanations lead to more meaning. Instead, she believes that "[t]he truth of that smile was in the eye and heart of the parent, and in the unfolding love that only had meaning though time" (75). Clarissa thinks that love can have meaning only when it is not reduced; breaking it down into biological processes like Joe does destroys it.

However, Clarissa does not seem to be opposed to using science to understand things. Instead, her disagreement emerges when science alone is used to explain something. Similarly to Socrates as he is described in the *Phaedo*, she thinks that natural understandings alone eliminate the possibility of meaning. Clarissa thinks that Joe's reductionism loses important meaning, saying that "There was nothing wrong in analyzing the bits, but it was easy to lose sight of the whole" (75). The bits cannot make the whole – the analytical relationships of the things that make up love will never *be* love. Clarissa, like Perowne, thinks of love as something *elemental*.

Joe responds by suggesting that wonder makes his position more meaningful. He thinks that Clarissa has taken the viewpoint of Keats, who was an "obscurantist, who thought science was robbing the world of wonder when the opposite was the case" (75). Jonathan Greenberg in his article "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry?" suggests that Keats' position is "most famously articulated in 'Lamia:'"

"Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine —  
Unweave a rainbow." (Keats 924)

Joe, finding meaning in reductive explanations, would disagree with Keats' poem. For him, if the rainbow is "unwoven," its unweaving leads to more wonder. In the debate between Joe and Clarissa, the "unweaving" is, of course, not about rainbow but an



“infant’s smile.” For Clarissa, the “truth” of the smile is in the relationship that it signifies — infant and parent — and the relationship is founded in irreducible love. Joe seeks wonder in its evolutionary lineage; Clarissa seeks love. Even if Joe is not a total materialist – he does not try to think about why the evolutionary history of the smile leads to wonder, but enjoys the experience of wonder without breaking it down further – he does reduce love so that he is no longer talking about love, missing the larger meaning that Clarissa seeks.

McEwan complicates meaning rooted in love by making the conflict in *Enduring Love* center around a man, Parry, who falls in love with Joe and begins to stalk him. In this situation, Joe reduces and then delegitimizes Parry’s love. After several unnerving situations with Parry, Joe realizes that he suffers from de Clerambault’s syndrome (in which Parry is obsessed with Joe, thinking that Joe is in love with him). Being able to give a mechanistic explanation for Parry’s love comforts Joe, who thinks, “There was research to follow through now, and I knew exactly where to start. A syndrome was a framework of prediction, and it offered a kind of comfort” (134). Parry’s love for Joe is not considered legitimate by anyone in the novel because of its pathological nature. In their study, “Erotomania Revisited,” Dr. Harold W. Jordan *et al.* name different possible causes for the syndrome, including “a neuroscientific basis, in which the disorder is actually a form of schizophrenia with a neurochemical imbalance,” genetics, psychodynamic formulations, and other “environmental, psychological, pharmacological and physiological factors” (788). Parry’s love is reduced to its biological factors, and when it is reduced, it no longer is considered meaningful. Reducing Parry’s love brings Joe comfort; Joe thinks that if he understands the pathology, he will be able to make

Parry stop stalking him.

Joe reduces Parry's love to biology for a different reason than that for which he reduces the baby's smile. When Joe thinks about the smile, a layered understanding including its evolutionary history makes the smile and its relationship to the concept of love more interesting and wonderful to him. When Joe thinks about Parry's love, the reductive explanations relieve him. Reductive explanations make Parry's love less meaningful – he is suffering from a mental illness, not experiencing real love. When love is most clearly the result of biochemical processes, Joe discounts it as real love. For the baby's smile, scientific explanations make it more meaningful; for Parry's love, they do the opposite. However, there seems to be no definite way to ascertain which sort of love is pathological and which is real (and deserves a response) other than external contexts for it. Joe thinks about the psychologist who named de Clerambault syndrome after encountering a patient with it:

“It was a simple idea, really, but a man who had a theory about pathological love and who had given his name to it, like a bridegroom at the altar, must surely reveal, even if unwittingly, the nature of love itself. For there to be a pathology, there had to be a lurking concept of health. De Clerambault's syndrome was a dark, distorting mirror that reflected and parodied a brighter world of lovers whose reckless abandon to their cause was sane...” (137).

If the love is reciprocated (*lovers* is plural), then it is acceptable. Perhaps if Joe had felt the same way about Parry, what might be read as a symptom in Parry would instead be regarded as a natural affection. The distinction between love and a mental illness is vague because an illness would be a reduction of the initial feeling of love, turning it into something else. Here, a materialistic account of love does not bring more meaning in the same way that “unweaving the rainbow” brought wonder. Instead, reducing it makes it

meaningless.

This arbitrariness is compounded by the fact that, occasionally, Joe chooses not to reduce love. He muses on Parry's condition to think more clearly about his own problems in his relationship with Clarissa: "...what could I learn about Parry that would restore me to Clarissa?" (137). Even as Joe is confronted with the fact that love can be a mere biological process – a biological process that can go wrong – he does not reduce his own feelings about Clarissa to chemical mechanisms. He thinks about Parry's love – which he designates a pathology – to understand his love for Clarissa. At the same time, his love for Clarissa is being unreciprocated (partially because of Joe's "obsession" with Parry), and this could easily turn into a sort of pathological problem. In fact, Joe goes through Clarissa's things, searching for some evidence of her unfaithfulness when there is none. Joe does not analyze his feelings for Clarissa how he looked at a baby's smile or Parry. Instead, he responds to them solely on how they make him feel, turning away from his reductive tendencies to focus instead on emotion.

Another limit to Joe's reductionism comes to light when he sees Jean, the widow of John Logan, a man who died while trying to save a boy in a hot air balloon accident. In her home with her two children, he is confronted with her grief. Like Perowne telling his patients' families bad news, an experience with the finitude of life makes him realize what its essential, irreducible elements are:

"What I saw in Jean's grief reduced my own situation to uncomplicated elements, to a periodic table of simple good sense: when it's gone, you'll know what a gift love was. You'll suffer like this. So go back and fight to keep it. Everything else, Parry included, is irrelevant." (122)

For all of his reductionism, an encounter with someone who is experiencing loss makes Joe think that love is one of the most elemental parts of life. It forms a part of the

“periodic table of simple good sense” – it needs no more justification than that it belongs on the periodic table, as irreducible and indispensable to life as the element carbon. It is elemental for Joe in the same way that it is for Perowne: irreducible.

These two novels show that a level of arbitrariness – belief – is involved in understanding love. There is no definite line between love as a pathology and love as a meaningful emotion, and reducing love can lead to both more meaning and meaninglessness. The concept of love is complicated consistently until these characters experience death. When they are confronted with grief, love immediately becomes something real. It becomes an elemental, irreducible part of existence, and the transformation from an object of study to an object of belief is so immediate that neither character notices it. When it reaches this elemental status – when we no longer reduce it further – it becomes meaningful, not because it leads to wonder, is connected to god, or is an interesting object of study: It simply has inherent, unquestioned meaning. But the process of deciding that love is elemental, and when it is elemental, is arbitrary and can complicate the meaning that love produces because when love is meaningful is not always mutually agreed upon. There is no absolute standard for understanding when love counts and when it does not, and because of this, the meaning produced from the experience of love must be believed in – there must be some arbitrary decision that a certain instance of love is valuable and meaningful.

## Chapter II

### Beauty in Art

“Music,” George said with a large gesture of his arm, “is a sacred art.” –  
Ian McEwan, “Psychopolis”

Beauty, like love, has inherent meaning for many of McEwan’s characters. It can be experienced in a variety of ways – literature, music, and visual art – and, like love, it does not have to be analyzed any further. An experience of beauty through art remains just that: a meaningful encounter unreduced by evolutionary explanations or biochemical processes. However, McEwan’s novels also complicate, as they do for love, how beauty can give meaning by suggesting that there is a level of arbitrariness involved in aesthetic perception and by drawing on scientific understandings of our reactions to beauty.

In *Saturday*, when Baxter, a man suffering from Huntington’s disease, intrudes into Perowne’s home and threatens to rape his daughter, Daisy, the beauty of a poem catalyzes a change of heart. Daisy recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” and Baxter transforms from a “lord of terror to [an] amazed admirer” (232). Affected by the poem, he tells Daisy to get dressed “as though her nakedness was her own strange idea” (232). The poem alienates Baxter from his previous plans and ideas so that they seem “strange” even to himself. Baxter transforms from being nihilistic – thinking that hurting someone else does not matter – to having hope. Beauty is especially powerful because it allows

Baxter to hope in spite of his genetic disease and his (presumed) lack of religion.

Baxter's disease would seem to lead to hopelessness. His genetic mutation — “significantly more than forty CAG repeats in the middle of an obscure gene on chromosome four” — prescribes for him an early and painful death (93). Baxter's fate is not going to be changed by “love, drugs, Bible classes or prison sentencing” (217). There is nothing that can “shift him from his course. It's spelled out in fragile proteins, but it could be carved in stone, or tempered steel” (217). This is, as Perowne remarks, “biological determinism in its purest form,” reminding Perowne of the Biblical phrase “It is written” (93). Nothing can change the fact that Huntington's disease will lead to his early death. Thus, the scientific advances that allow Baxter to understand his condition are the same ones that force him to recognize the hopelessness of his own condition. He is ineluctably bound to the genes that will lead to his early death.

The poem that Baxter listens to, “Dover Beach,” suggests that the decline of religion is another cause for hopelessness. This aspect of the poem is relevant to Baxter because *Saturday* portrays a world in which at least part of the poem is true: faith has “retreated.” Baxter does not seem to be religious in any way, Perowne “balks at the mention of a sea of faith,” and his son Theo is a part of a “sincerely godless generation” in which “[t]here's no entity for him to doubt” (221, 32). Published eight years after Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1867, “Dover Beach” describes what religion used to be like:

“The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.”

Religion was profuse and “full,” but now, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, the

speaker says:

“But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.”

Faith has “withdrawn” — religion has declined. God has been replaced by natural selection and other natural laws. The poem suggests that without a god, while gaining a scientific understanding of ourselves, we have lost something:

“As, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain...”

Without faith the world only “seems” to be “so various, so beautiful, so new.” These things are illusions; in this faithless new world, there is no “joy, nor love, nor light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” Without faith, the speaker does not know how these things will continue to exist. He looks to his “love” and wants them, as a couple, to “be true/To one another!” despite this new vision of the world. Perhaps he sees individual, personalized relationships as giving meaning in this new world, but how this is possible without love is uncertain. His vision for the future remains bleak, even if interpersonal relationships continue:

“And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

The poem directly ties the loss of faith to the loss of hope. Now, all that remains is an “eternal note of sadness,” “a darkling plain” filled with “ignorant armies.” Perowne thinks that “[t]he plea to be true to one another sounds hopeless” (230). Even the hope

that might remain in human connections is undermined by the conditions of the world that the speaker attributes to the world's newfound faithlessness.

However, Baxter's experience with the poem suggests that beauty overcomes the hopelessness of his genetics and godlessness by giving meaning through aesthetic experience. He responds to the poem — which suggests that the world only seems to have beauty — by exclaiming, "It's beautiful!" and he "appears suddenly elated" (230). Perowne thinks that the poem "reminded [Baxter] how much he wanted to live" and "touched off in Baxter a yearning he could barely begin to describe" (288). An experience of beauty effected a change in Baxter because it made him think that his life — if he could experience such beauty — could be meaningful. In her article "Fact and Artefact," Deryn Rees-Jones writes, "Arnold's poem, it appears, has done all that Arnold wants a poem to do. It has a kind of moral force. In McEwan's novel it performs an 'awakening,' albeit an awakening of a mind in a state of deterioration, which it temporarily chastens, calms and satisfies" (335). It is the beauty that "awakens" Baxter, turning him away from nihilism.

Beauty stops Baxter's nihilistic intentions (planning to rape Daisy) by "awakening" him to hope that allows him to envision the possibility of another, less painful, future for himself. In her article "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty," Kathleen Wall writes, "Daisy's recitation of 'Dover Beach'...reveals how beauty can disarm anger and incite hope" (761). This is not a naïve hope; Baxter does not suddenly believe for miraculous recoding of his genes; the poem has not made him forget or question that his Huntington's disease will progress. Instead, he expresses a hope in something that Perowne can help him achieve: an easier, less painful death. Because this



is what Baxter puts hope in — instead of miraculous healing — his hope is not naïve or due to ephemeral forgetfulness of his condition. He is fully cognizant of both of these things and still chooses to have hope.

The planning that Baxter did to intrude into Perowne's home suggests that the poem alone was responsible for giving Baxter hope. The poem and its beauty created hope. Asking Perowne about going on a clinical trial that might prolong his life was not Baxter's original intention for coming to Perowne's home; he had probably not intended to rape his daughter and then ask for medical help. While Baxter's initial confrontation with Perowne — they meet in the morning when Perowne's car collides with Baxter's — does suggest that he has the capacity for some hope, this hope is short lived compared to the effect of the poem. When he gets out of his car to speak to Baxter after the accident, Perowne recognizes "a muscular restlessness" in his face and, to avoid "a thorough beating" by Baxter and his friends, questions Baxter about his father (facial tremors are a symptom of Huntington's disease, which is genetic) (93). This disarms Baxter; after making his friends leave him alone with Perowne, his "agitated features [display] a sudden avidity, a hunger for information, or hope" (97). When Perowne offers to help Baxter — more out of self-interest in avoiding a beating than genuine concern — he begins to ask questions and express hope, not necessarily of a cure, but of his death being "easier" (97). This initial expression of hope, however, does not last. He decides to get back at Perowne that night; his intrusion was not a spur of the moment plan (Perowne thinks that he sees Baxter's red car following him throughout the day). Nigel, Baxter's accomplice, complains when Baxter changes his mind that "[he and Baxter] gone to all this trouble," suggesting that they had intentionally planned to come to Perowne's home

(231). Thus, any residual hope Perowne provided Baxter at their initial confrontation disintegrated before Baxter entered his home. It was beauty, and not a predisposition for hope, that led to Baxter's change of heart.

In this situation, beauty became a conduit for meaning. Baxter's response to thinking that his life was meaningful was to hope. "Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live" (288). The fleeting experience of beauty makes the world appear orderly, giving Baxter a basis for hope. *Hope* is, according to the *OED*, "the expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation." Order is essential to hope because hope implies, as the *OED* suggests, that something can be expected. Expectations are not random but built on previous experience. Hope would be irrational in a chaotic universe. In an orderly one, however, it would make sense to have hope for some things because orderliness in the universe would suggest that some hopes would be realized. Baxter experiences beauty, and he hopes. This happens without any acknowledgement of God, suggesting that atheism does not have to lead to nihilism.

Even though it seems like the experience of beauty is what gives Baxter meaning, Perowne complicates the idea by repeatedly expressing incredulity that a "mere" poem could bring about a reaction. As Daisy reads the poem, Perowne thinks, "Could it happen, is it within the bounds of the real, that a mere poem of Daisy's could precipitate a mood swing?" (229). Perowne immediately qualifies his statement with "is it within the bounds of the real?" (229). He grounds himself first in what he can know empirically; he wants an explanation that makes sense to him. He, once called a "gradgrind" by Daisy, calls "Dover Beach" a "mere poem" (299). The *OED* defines *mere* as "having no greater

extent, range, value, power or importance than the designation implies; that is barely or only what it is said to be.” Perowne uses the adjective reductively, not expecting the poem to have any function. However, he realizes that poetry did serve a purpose, at least for them: “Who would have thought that learning poems by heart for pocket money would turn out to be so useful?” (241). Perowne concedes that the poem “[threw] the switch on a sudden mood change” (288). He seems to have decided that it was the poem that altered Baxter’s mood, or, at least, that Baxter’s mood would not have been altered without the poem. However, the “spell” is cast only on “one man” (288). Perowne is unaffected by the poem; the experience of beauty is subjective. Indeed, “Baxter heard what Henry never has, and probably never will, despite all Daisy’s attempts to educate him” (288). Perowne’s suspicion that the poem might not be a source of transformative beauty suggests that Baxter’s experience is very subjective.

Perowne’s incredulity about the poem leads him to suggest that Baxter’s reaction has a biochemical explanation that complicates the meaning found in beauty. The disease that Baxter is trying to have hope against provides the broken mechanism – a mood swing – that allows him to have hope in the first place. The poem only “precipitates a mood swing” (229). The mood swing Baxter has could have also made him more violent, and other things cause mood swings for Baxter in the novel. At their first confrontation, Baxter’s mood changes when he realizes Perowne has “cheated [him] of a little violence and the exercise of a little power” (99). Baxter switches from having hope to concentrating on revenge. Perowne realizes that Baxter’s instability complicates the idea that the poem alone could have brought out a change in Baxter because of his predisposition to swift mood changes. While Perowne does not think that the poem could

be solely responsible for saving Daisy, it might have hastened the coming of a mood swing – but that is all that it does. Even if it is possible for beauty to be so meaningful that it catalyzes a total transformation, there are so many confounding variables in Baxter's situation that Perowne does not give the poem's beauty much of the credit for changing Baxter's mood.

Because of the instability of moods that is a symptom of Huntington's disease, Perowne also worries about the transience of the mood swing, further questioning the power of beauty to give lasting meaning. "Henry worries that a prompt from Nigel, a reminder of the purpose of the visit, could effect another mood swing, a revision" (230). Perowne knows how volatile the mood swings are; this too makes the effect of the poem seem less powerful because it does not last very long. "[Baxter's] state of mind is so deliberately poised, easily disturbed" (231). Baxter's state of mind is so fragile that "even a mere poem" could affect it. However, when Nigel reminds Baxter of his purpose – "I'll take the knife while you do the business" – Baxter is still thinking about the poem. Even when Nigel persists – "Don't be a cunt," he says, and then, "I can't believe it! We gone to all this trouble!" Baxter remains transfixed (231). There has been time for his mood to change and Nigel tries to convince Baxter to return to the plan, but Baxter does not revert to his original state. Even if Perowne does not yet recognize it, the poem might have had a more profound effect on Baxter than merely "precipitating a mood swing" (230). However, Perowne continues to describe Baxter in clinical terms. When Baxter gets excited about the poem, Perowne observes, "[h]e's becoming manic" (232). Perowne sees Baxter's prolonged euphoria not as a result of the poem's beauty, but instead a symptom of Baxter's disease. His behavior is typical and expected in light of how Huntington's

disease damages the brain. “Powerful feelings have obliterated the memory. In the sudden emotional rush of his mood swing, he inhabits the confining bright spotlight or the present” (232). Perowne does not deny that the poem incited a “sudden emotional rush,” but he also suggests that these feelings persist because of a biochemical error. Perowne consistently undermines the power of beauty, suggesting that Baxter’s response was mechanistic.

In this example, beauty works in a similar way that love did. An experience of beauty leads to meaning for Baxter; in his case, beauty gives him hope. But beauty becomes meaningless if Baxter’s perception of it and reaction afterward can be reduced to a mechanism. Perowne reduces Baxter’s response to beauty to the symptom of an illness. If Perowne is right, the disease that destines Baxter to a terrible death is the same one that allows him to experience hope. Beauty becomes meaningless. However, if Baxter’s response is something more than a symptom of an illness, beauty must have inherent value that gave him meaning. If beauty is irreducible – like love – its value becomes infinite because it suggests that life is meaningful in spite of both our finitude (Baxter’s genetics) and the absence of a god or transcendent order.

While Perowne does try to reductively explain away Baxter’s reaction to the beauty of the poem, his reaction may be less in response to beauty itself as to the source of beauty – literature. His appreciation of beauty in other things seems to indicate that he does see beauty as a powerful, inherently meaningful idea, even if he does not experience it through literature. He is convinced that “that fiction is too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzlingly achieved” (67). While he thinks that

literature is “too humanly flawed,” other things can give an experience of beauty, of “the impossible dazzlingly achieved.” Things immediately associated with humans are flawed; Perowne thinks, “Work that you cannot begin to imagine achieving yourself, that displays a ruthless, nearly inhuman element of self-enclosed perfection—this is his idea of genius” (177). Perowne is stressing the distance from humanity required to meet his standard of great art: an “inhuman” element. Because he has decided that literature does not meet this standard – and it does seem impossible for an art form that reveals our “common nature” as humans, as McEwan says that it does, to be inhuman – he does not see how Baxter could perceive beauty through it.

However, Perowne does have experiences of beauty – moments that “inspire uncomplicated wonder” and seem “inhuman” – that suggest that he can find inherent meaning in beauty (67). He does not reduce or explain away his experience of beauty as he does with Baxter and the poem, but instead feels like it has inherent meaning. He mentions Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, as “the usual suspects,” composers whose music gives this experience (68). However, Perowne does question whether listening to the blues can be a meaningful experience: “...is there a lifetime’s satisfaction in twelve bars of three obvious chords?” (27). This musical structure of the blues might be “a microcosm giving you the whole world,” because its variations – “the deviation, the unexpected turn against the grain” – make it interesting, but Perowne wonders about “the limits of the form” (27). That Perowne distinguishes “Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert” from hundreds of other musicians and composers suggests that their music has something different about it, allowing for such a distinction. He does not see music itself as inherently beautiful (otherwise, all music would be), but certain characteristics about it

can lead to beauty that is inherently meaningful.

Perowne doubts that the blues will give the same experience as classical music; however, he has a meaningful aesthetic experience when he listens to his son Theo play. When he visits Theo's practice for his band *Blue Rider*, he initially is resistant, wishing to instead "be at home with a Mozart trio on the hi-fi, and a glass of icy white wine" (170). He does not expect to hear anything different in the music; he is not expecting a moment of beauty or great emotion. However, Perowne experiences beauty in an unexpected way when he watches Theo's band because the music, like that of Bach, has an inhuman element to it. He is surprised when he finds the blues to be beautiful, having the level of "self-enclosed perfection" that leads to meaning. Perowne's initial resistance "doesn't hold out for long" because the song begins to use uncommon variations. As the musicians' "exuberance and expertise" wins him over, Perowne discovers that "the song is not in the usual pattern of a twelve-bar blues" (170). Previously, Perowne thought that variations within the form made a song interesting. This experience is different: There is variation of the form itself, which produces "pleasure," revealing "the world in a grain of sand" (26). The musicians "touch something sweeter than they're ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond merely collaborative or technically proficient, [and] their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love" (176). What the "touch" is something like beauty; it cannot be reduced to "collaboration" or technical "proficiency," and is only described as something "beyond" both of these things.

Perowne appreciates Theo's music because, surprising Perowne, it has an "inhuman" element to it. Instead of showing something new about the world, providing a variation on a common theme, the melody is "unworldly" as it "rises and falls in

semitones” (175). Like the music of Bach or Mozart that Perowne appreciates, there is something inhuman – “unworldly” – about Theo’s Blues, and it draws Perowne in. The unfamiliarity makes their piece interesting. Theo and his band member Chas sing in “a close, strange harmony” (170). At the end, “Theo and Chas drift back to centre stage to sing their unearthly chorus” (177). The chorus – like the melody – is “unearthly,” suggesting that it reveals something beyond the world itself about it. The effect on Perowne is remarkable: “he feels lifted up, right high across the counter. He doesn’t want the song to end” (177). The piece has something about it that is “unworldly” and “unearthly” and because of this, against Perowne’s expectations, it becomes meaningful.

For Perowne, this experience of something “inhuman” – a character of something “dazzlingly achieved” – is an encounter with beauty. The beauty of the music makes the world appear orderly, but this happens only when the music itself uses “unworldly” melodies. Music gives Perowne an experience of “a coherent world, everything fitting at last.” Like the effect of the poem on Baxter, an experience of order – “a coherent world” – leads to hope. The music gives him hope for community in the same way that it gave Baxter hope for his future: “...only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it’s tantalizingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes” (176). It gives him a vision of something better, a hopeful idea of what the future might be like.

While the hope that Perowne finds in music leads him to the conclusion that “at the heart of the blues is...a strange and worldly joy,” meaning is complicated by its transience and subjectivity (28). Like Baxter’s response to the poem in which “one man” heard its magic, when music unifies people, “no one can ever agree when it’s



happening.” The sense of community that music gives is only “tantalizingly conjured,” ending when the music does. But the transience of it seems not to negate its profound effect on Perowne. The beauty of the music – when everything comes together – leads to meaning for Perowne that he does not reduce, as he does for Baxter’s encounter, to chemical reactions.

In *The Children Act*, when Fiona accompanies her coworker Mark, a tenor, at a party, they experience the “inhuman beauty” of music that Theo’s band does in *Saturday*. They experience the same transient meaning during their performance of Berlioz’s setting of “Villanelle.” “The tenor’s entry was perfect, and within a few bars they were locked into a unity of purpose they had rarely touched in rehearsal, no longer concentrating on simply getting things right, but able to dissolve into the music without effort” (205). They have a “unity of purpose,” that matches what happens when Theo’s band plays. There is something beyond the physical that these groups achieve. Fiona and Mark’s performance comes naturally: “It was as if she and Mark were being borne easily downstream on a current of notes” (206). The ease of performance, as it did for *Blue Rider*, allows them to make music that, like Schubert or Beethoven’s, becomes otherworldly. “Together, she and Mark entered the horizonless hyperspace of music-making, beyond time and purpose. She was only faintly aware that something waited for her in return, for it lay far below her, an alien speck on a familiar landscape” (206). The world itself seems less real than the music. This is especially significant because what is “waiting for her in return” is the news of Adam’s death, which someone tells her about moments before she walks onstage. She is shocked, but music is so powerful that it removes her from this situation. The inhuman beauty that it provided overshadowed even Adam’s death.

These encounters with poetry and music suggest that meaning can come through experiences of beauty. However, McEwan does not naively point to art as a solution for meaninglessness. The transience of meaning in art and questions of why we respond to it in the first place (are our responses meaningful if they are mechanized?) force us to recognize the same thread of arbitrariness runs through our responses to love. Some responses to beauty are reduced to biochemical processes (as Perowne does to Baxter's reaction to the poem) and some are not (such as Perowne's experience with the blues). However, the experiences of beauty do seem to be inherently meaningful to the characters. They are able to achieve meaningfulness without any recourse to the divine; such meaning appears to be satisfying for Perowne, Joe, and Fiona.

### Chapter III

#### Wonder in Science

The world is also full of wonders, which is why I'm foolishly in love with it. – Ian McEwan, *Nutshell*

Wonder in the natural world is accompanied by the same feelings of inherent meaning that characterize love and beauty. Ideas like the complexity and fragility of the brain, the progression of natural selection, and the intricacy of DNA have the most meaning not in light of their veracity, but the wonder that they inspire. Each of these — and other scientific ideas — adds meaning to characters' lives because they suggest that the world is orderly.

However, as we have seen for love and beauty in art, using science to create meaning has its own set of difficulties. Finding wonder in science can be subject to, as Jonathan Greenberg has noted, “recursivity.” In a discussion of motivations in *Enduring Love*, he suggests, “[The protagonist’s] Darwinism...reduces human motives to an unconscious and biological calculus” (Greenberg 100, 102). If our motives are predetermined, then our actions and feelings might also be determined by the series of chemical reactions that preceded them. If Darwinism does lead to a sort of biological reductionism, as Greenberg suggests, then we can only be awed by science while being reminded that it is because of chemical reactions — a “biological calculus” — that we

have emotional responses at all. Any feeling of meaningfulness, and the impulse that drives us to seek meaning, would be a purely mechanistic process. Thus, scientific knowledge, while enabling feelings of meaningfulness, also brings into question whether or not meaning exists as anything other than a product of inflexible genetic pre-programming. Such circularity complicates the idea of using science as a foundation for meaningful aesthetic experience. As McEwan writes in his essay “End of the World Blues,” which was anthologized in Christopher Hitchens’ *The Portable Atheist*,

“I would argue that [scientific] knowledge has a beauty of its own and it can be terrifying. We are barely beginning to grasp the implications of what we have relatively recently learned...Among other things we have learned that our planet is a minute speck in an inconceivably vast cosmos; that our species has existed for a tiny fraction of the history of the earth; that humans are primates; that the mind is the activity of an organ than runs by physiological processes....” (364)

Science can be beautiful and incite wonder, but it is the same source of beauty that reminds us of how we fit into an overall, materialistic order that, while testifying to our uniqueness, reminds us of our common origins with the rest of the universe and the mechanistic processes from which everything — including ourselves — emerged.

Even though Perowne continually claims to be a reductionist, descriptions of his work suggest that he is deeply invested in the wonder that science allows him to experience. When Perowne says that he “regularly penetrates the skull,” the adverb reduces his job — which requires years of training and has been met with “modest success” only recently — to something routine, almost mundane (281). His referring to the “skull,” instead of the brain, is also reductive. The brain, not the skull, is the “most complex object in the known universe” (86). By emphasizing his work on the less complex organ — bone — Perowne makes his work seem less remarkable than it actually

is. He has “chosen brains because they were more interesting than bladders or knee knots,” a reductive reason for his choice of profession; however, whenever he experienced the beauty of neurosurgery, “his ambition became a matter of deep desire” (46). He tells the story of a patient, his future wife, and her operation that struck him as beautiful — “[the patient’s] particularly beautiful face was reassembled without a single disfiguring mark.” That something so complicated could be done to the brain – she has a tumor removed from her pituitary gland – without leaving any outward mark left Perowne with “excitement about the future and impatient to acquire the skills” (46). Such excitement seems to have lasted him throughout his career. “[O]perating never wearies him...absorbed by the vivid foreshortening of the operating microscope as he follows a corridor to a desired site, he experiences a superhuman capacity, more like a craving, for work” (10). Instead of seeing his job as a neurosurgeon as a means to an end — making money, “drilling” into the skull — he sees it as something that adds meaning to his life beyond its teleological purpose because it allows him to experience beauty — and do beautiful work — on a daily basis. Indeed, performing neurosurgery is so effective at satisfying Perowne that he “craves” it (10).

While Perowne finds surgical procedures beautiful for their swiftness and efficacy, he also sees great beauty in the brain because it is so fragile. He describes his work with the precise detail that we would expect from a consultant neurosurgeon, but he repeatedly emphasizes the beauty of the brain by giving florid descriptions of fragile brain structures in addition to their Latin anatomical terms. Despite his self-professed literary philistinism, Perowne uses figurative language when describing the brain, especially when remarking on its fragility (67). For example, the arachnoid is “that

gossamer covering of the brain through which he routinely cuts. The grandeur.” (55). Even though Perowne sees the arachnoid often — cutting it “routinely” — he has not been desensitized to its beauty. He calls it “gossamer,” a word first used to describe a “fine filmy substance, consisting of cobwebs, spun by small spiders, which is seen floating in the air in calm weather” (*OED*). The arachnoid is as fragile as the silky thread of a spider web. That something so fragile has evolved recalls to him the final lines of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, suggesting that the fragility of the structure contributes to “the grandeur;” the fragility itself testifies to its beauty. “There is grandeur in this view of life,” Darwin writes, “...from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being, evolved” (Darwin 478). The beauty of the arachnoid is a testament to the beautiful process that produced it, a reminder that there is “grandeur” in a view of life that relies not on a god speaking things into existence immediately, but a long and natural process of evolution.

In another operation, seeing the fragility of the tentorium makes Perowne describe it with figurative language, suggesting that it has so much meaning for Perowne that he cannot express what he feels without using art. Being able to identify the tentorium suffices for a neurosurgeon; no thoughts about its beauty are particularly important to completing an operation. However, Perowne describes it as “a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer, where the dura is gathered and parted again” (9). Perowne begins by calling the structure “pale” and “delicate” — ideas that are probably important for neurosurgeons to identify the thin, flesh-colored sheet of tissue — but then calls it a “structure of beauty.” Then Perowne makes an analogy to two previously unrelated things, much like a poet. He sees the tentorium as something in

motion (a dancer), and — perhaps most significantly — invokes a form of art (dance) in the description. In addition, he had already mentioned that the tentorium was “delicate,” but comparing it to a “veil,” “whirl[ing]” around a dancer emphasizes the fragility of the structure because veils are usually made of very thin, delicate, and translucent fabric. Even though there are naturalistic reasons why the arachnoid or tentorium had to take this form in order to function well, Perowne does not reduce their fragility by a naturalistic explanation. Instead, fragility is beautiful to Perowne because it shows how ordered the brain is; if something very tiny goes wrong, the brain will not function properly.

Near the end of the novel, the connection between beauty and fragility climaxes, showing that regardless of how fragile the brain is, Perowne will always find it beautiful. As he tries to distract Baxter after he has listened to the poem and become hopeful, Perowne tries to pass off a neurological research paper on a treatment for Parkinson’s disease as a clinical trial for patients with Huntington’s disease. “The *globus pallidus*, the pale globe, is a rather beautiful thing, deep in the basal ganglia, one of the oldest parts of the corpus striatum,” he says (235). Even though he is nervous — “[h]is voice quavers, as a liar’s might” — he does not lose his admiration for the beauty of brain, calling the basal ganglia a “rather beautiful thing” (235). Perowne’s response to beauty – wonder – seems almost innate; no amount of emotional distress can diminish it, and, importantly, neither can instances of its failure. The basal ganglia is a collection of structures that includes the corpus striatum, and the corpus striatum includes the *globus pallidus*. All of these structures work to enable movement and present abnormalities in patients with both Parkinson’s and Huntington’s disease. Huntington’s disease attacks neurons in the brain, and, as F. O. Walker, MD, a professor in the department of neurology at Wake Forest

University, observes, “Striatal medium spiny neurons are the most vulnerable” (219). These specific neurons are directly connected to the *globus pallidus*. When Perowne talks about the *globus pallidus*, he is referring to the specific part of the brain that is most vulnerable to Baxter’s disease. He even remarks on its beauty to Baxter, whose condition demonstrates “...how the brilliant machinery is undone by the tiniest of faulty cogs, the insidious whisper of ruin, a single bad idea lodged in every cell, on every chromosome four” (94). While the “machinery” is brilliant, it can be destroyed by something “tiny,” a “whisper” and a “single bad idea.” Its beauty does not save it from being extremely fragile. Even though Perowne knows this and has fragility of this specific brain part manifested in front of him —manifested and wielding a knife — he still finds the *globus pallidus* to be beautiful. A manifestation of its fragility does not make the brain any less beautiful for Perowne. Instead, the fragility testifies to the order of the brain, and such order is beautiful. The beauty of the brain becomes inherently meaningful; Perowne does not reduce it further and instead regards it with unmitigated wonder.

Perowne thinks that his work has an intrinsic artistic quality that allows for a nexus between science and art, suggesting that the two are similar because they both provide experiences of beauty. He calls Mr. Whaley, the consultant when Perowne was in medical school, a “maestro” after he finishes an operation, neurosurgery to orchestral conducting (36). He describes himself as “something of a master in the art” of “[clipping] the neck of a middle cerebral artery aneurysm” (6). Calling himself a “master” makes him sound like a virtuoso; when we think of “great masters,” usually painters like Michelangelo or Raphael or composers like Beethoven come to mind. The technical language — “middle cerebral artery aneurysm” — highlights the deep level of precision



required of his work, which is not unlike the exacting nature of realistic painting or composing a sonata. Later in the novel, he remarks on the “limits of the art...of neurosurgery as it stands today,” suggesting that neurosurgery itself is an art form (263). In another instance, Perowne compares poets to neurosurgeons. “But he understands how eminent poets, like senior consultants, live in a watchful, jealous world” (130). All of these suggest a connection between science and art that leads to wonder and meaning.

The final operation of the novel displays the deepest connection between science and art. In an interview with Zadie Smith for *The Believer*, McEwan called the moment when Perowne begins the surgery “a moment of artistic engagement.” While listening to a recording of the “Goldberg Variations,” Perowne

“...takes a sponge on a clamp and dips it in a bowl of Betadine solution. The tender, wistful Aria begins to unfold and spread, hesitantly at first, and makes the theatre seem even more spacious. At the very first stroke of sunflower yellow on pale skin, a familiar contentedness settles on Henry; it’s the pleasure of knowing precisely what’s he’s doing, of seeing the instruments arrayed on the trolley, of being with his firm in the muffled quiet of the theatre, the murmur of the air filtration, the sharper hiss of oxygen passing into the mask taped to Baxter’s face out of sight under the drapes, the clarity of the overhead lights.” (258)

Perowne sounds like an artist beginning a painting. The “sponge on a clamp” works like a paintbrush, and the Betadine solution is described as “sunflower yellow.” Such a description seems unusual for an antiseptic, but “sunflower yellow” is a common shade of oil paint and brings to mind Van Gogh’s series *Sunflowers*. When Perowne begins to prepare the antiseptic on Baxter’s skin — which is “pale” like a blank canvas — he makes a “stroke.” The word *stroke* recalls a brushstroke, instead of a smear of antiseptic. The operating room is called a “theatre,” which has the effect of making Perowne’s work seem like an artistic performance. Much like the studio of a painter, the operating room is

full of satisfying aesthetics. The “instruments arrayed on the trolley” and the “muffled quiet of the theatre” work together for Perowne to experience “a familiar contentedness.” All of these suggest that both artistic and scientific elements are working together to produce something deeply meaningful: an aesthetic experience of beauty.

Artistic and scientific elements combine in another art form in this scene, music. The multilayered connections of different types of aesthetic experiences give greater meaning to Perowne as he does the surgery. The music reflects how Perowne handles the operation; art is reflecting science. He chooses to listen to Bach’s set of *Goldberg Variations*, which was initially composed in 1741 for the clavichordist Goldberg to play for the Count Kaiserling when he had insomnia (Gordon 67). Just as the beauty of the variations had a healing effect then, helping the count overcome his insomnia, it helps Perowne (or, at least, makes operating more pleasurable) as he is mending Baxter’s skull. In addition, the music mirrors Perowne’s surgical procedures. The aria will “unfold and spread,” which is what Perowne is doing to the skin on Baxter’s scalp as he begins the operation (258). Baxter’s skin is “parted,” and “the long incision is stretched apart like a wide-open mouth” (258).

Even the recording that Perowne chooses reflects his intention to heal and emphasizes the strong connection between science and art. Perowne has many available options; “[i]t is difficult to name a well-known harpsichordist or a Bach-specialist pianist who has not recorded...the *Goldberg Variations*” (Davidson). Perowne chooses “Angela Hewitt’s wise and silky playing which includes all the repeats” (257). That Perowne choice of Hewitt’s playing over the “showy unorthodoxies of Glenn Gould” might suggest that Perowne is not going to do anything unusual in the operation. He will not do

anything “unorthodox” even though he is operating on someone who, hours before, threatened to rape his daughter. Before this scene, Perowne’s wife had warned Perowne not to take revenge on Baxter, and even though Perowne never seems to seriously consider doing that, it remains a possibility until Perowne cauterizes the clots in Baxter’s brain. When Perowne picks Angela Hewitt, he displays a sort of conservatism reflected in his decision to treat Baxter as he does all of his other patients. The beauty of the music parallels the beauty in surgery; in each one, beauty itself is preserving life (or at least making it more pleasant) by being able to heal.

In addition to wondering at the beauty of the brain, Perowne finds meaning in the beauty of natural selection and the origin of life and consciousness. These two sources of beauty can be understood as narratives, telling a story of order emerging from chaos. These stories require that we look at life reductively, examining only its biological processes, but such processes form a narrative that can be meaningful. “Just like the digital codes of replicated life held within DNA, the brain’s fundamental secret will be laid open one day. But even when it has, the wonder will remain, that mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought” (262). Perowne expects that consciousness will be explained empirically; “as long as the scientists and the institutions remain in place, the explanations will refine themselves into an irrefutable truth about consciousness” (255). Because the brain has a “secret,” it will be a constant source of curiosity until its “irrefutable truth” is discovered.

Even after our curiosity is exhausted, and we have found such an “irrefutable truth,” Perowne thinks that we will still have meaning because science will continue to produce wonder. Perowne compares the solution to consciousness to the “digital codes of

replicated life,” suggesting that how consciousness works is analogous to DNA in that it is a mechanistic process; the final result could — as DNA has been — be wholly digitized on a computer. DNA does not need any immaterial component to be understood; the same will apply to the present mystery of consciousness. We can learn everything about our consciousness, and even if what we learn also suggests that our thoughts are mechanized, we will still wonder at the brain because scientific progress will not change the meaningful narrative of contrasts. “Mere wet stuff” creates “this bright inward cinema of thought,” suggesting that it seems surprising that something so rudimentary — “mere wet stuff” — could result in our consciousness (254). The word “mere” contrasts with “bright,” and the word “stuff” seems dismissive when we consider that it is referring to the biological processes that allow for thought. This story — order emerging from chaos — will exist even if we are able to explain exactly how the brain works. Thus, even when consciousness is understood at the same level as DNA replication is, knowledge will not threaten the ability of science to produce wonder. Indeed, Perowne concludes, “That’s the only kind of faith he has” (262).

This peculiar profession of faith contrasts with Perowne’s previous commitments to rationalism and reductionism because it is not faith in science itself, but in the wonder — something non-empirical — that it inspires. As Graham Hillard has commented, “...Perowne’s confidence in science seems itself to be imbued with spiritual significance” (142). Science means more to Perowne than providing truth; it also provides something that can only be accessed “spiritually.” Larry Bouchard echoes Hillard when he suggests that Perowne “...does think of his materialism as a kind of faith” (451). Perowne’s “confidence” or “faith” in science seems to be that science will

always be a source of wonder. Earlier in the novel, Perowne thinks, “It isn’t an article of faith with him, he knows it for a quotidian fact, that the mind is what the brain, mere matter, performs” (66). Perowne does not have “faith” that the brain is a function of matter. His faith, instead, seems to be a declaration that science is wonderful and will always be wonderful. He extends faith in the progress of science as well as its ability to make his life meaningful by being a source of wonder. These are things that are not empirically provable — one points toward the future, which is always uncertain, and the other deals with meaning, which is not a scientific domain at all — and thus need a sort of faith to buttress them. It is this aspect that leads Perowne to regard science with religious-esqe belief.

This semi-religious faith is shown to be in the irreducible wonder that science gives, and not in science itself, when Perowne talks about natural selection with his daughter Daisy. They are discussing a line from Philip Larkin’s poem “Water,” which begins, “If I were called in / To construct a religion/ I should make use of water.”

Perowne says that if he were to make a religion, he would use evolution.

“What better creation myth? An unimaginable sweep of time, numberless generations spawning by infinitesimal steps complex living beauty out of inert matter, driven on by the blind furies of random mutation, natural selection and environmental change, with the tragedy of forms continually dying, and lately the wonder of minds emerging and with them for morality, love, art, cities— and the unprecedented bonus of the story happening to be demonstrably true.” (54)

Perowne suggests that natural selection makes a good creation myth because it forms a powerful narrative. He stresses the idea that we cannot imagine it ourselves; the unfathomability of the “myth” makes it a constant source of curiosity. The “sweep of time” is “unimaginable,” generations “numberless,” and steps “infinitesimal.” There is an

allure to something beyond which we can imagine, both infinitely smaller and larger than we could comprehend. The “sweep of time” also adds to the wonder; only “lately” has “the wonder of minds emerg[ed].” Like the idea of “mere wet stuff” producing thought, here “complex living beauty” comes from “inert matter” – another story of order coming from chaos (262). We have survived tragedy and lived on, despite great extinctions and deaths.

Perowne finds meaning in this narrative because in addition to order, beauty emerges from chaos. Beauty comes from the most improbable of sources and emerges from the most unlikely of instruments: “blind furies of random mutation, natural selection, and environmental change” (54). “Blind furies” is a reference to Milton’s poem “Lycidas.” A pastoral elegy for Edward King, a friend of Milton’s who died young, the poem considers the pain of grief (Arnold 581). He writes of his friend’s death:

“But the fair guerdon when we hope to find,  
And think to burst out into sudden blaze,  
Comes the blind Fury with th’abhorred shears,  
And slits the thin-spun life.” (Milton 73-6)

As soon as we expect to be rewarded, we die. “Th’abhorred shears” and “thin-spun life” is a reference to Atropos, a Moirai — which means *fate* in Ancient Greek literally and here refers to the three goddesses of fate — who held shears to cut “the thin-spun life.” This suggests that death comes randomly, at the whim of fate. Humans have survived the randomness of tragedy in our evolutionary path. This competition means that some forms are “continually dying,” which suggests that the human species has triumphed over less successful life forms. This adds to the overall aesthetic of the narrative by showing that the slow emergence of complexity from simplicity was not inevitable – organisms had to overcome incredible odds to eventually evolve into the human species.

The question of what Perowne would make a religion from is not raised as matter of truth at all, but begins as a question of aesthetics. Perowne's aim is not truth, but instead the meaningfulness inherent in the naturalistic narrative of our origins. He thinks that this myth is better than religious ones not because it makes a god unnecessary, but because it makes nature independent. This story links all organisms together, giving an order to the natural world that would be complicated by the existence of a god. Christina Root writes,

“The ‘brief privilege of consciousness’ that Henry believes is the ‘bracing consolation’ for the blind fury, war, famine and death that led to its emergence feels almost like a consolation not in the mature and stoic acceptance of that reality, but in moments in which awareness of separation within an isolated self disappears and a glimpse of the indivisible universe creates a brief sense of unity of self, others, and world” (73).

The story of our origin – and the lack of any supernatural intervention for our creation – leads to wonder for Perowne because it gives a “glimpse of the indivisible universe” which gives a “brief sense of unity”. Natural selection lets us see how all of us are connected, giving order to the universe of which we are all a part. It becomes a source of wonder because it tells a narrative of order coming from chaos that is both personal and universal; we are all a part of the overarching order. He paraphrases the conclusion to Darwin's work: “Endless and beautiful forms of life, such as you see in a common hedgerow, including exalted beings like ourselves, arose from physical laws, from war and nature, famine and death. This is the grandeur” (54). Without divine help, life had to overcome many obstacles to exist, and survival was never inevitable nor guaranteed. For Perowne, the story is better without a god because it connects all of life in the common struggle for survival.

However, Perowne knows that his explanation is blurring the lines between empirical truth and myth. Perowne only comments on the factuality of the “myth” at the end and some aspects of his “myth” are not “demonstrably true.” Perowne himself calls his recitation “not entirely facetious,” suggesting that some of it was facetious. As Robert Hazen, a research scientist and professor of earth science at George Mason University, writes in *Genesis*, “The epic history of life’s chemical origins is woefully incomplete. Daunting gaps exist in our knowledge, and much of what we have learned is hotly debated and subject to conflicting interpretations” (xiv). This does not mean that there is not a naturalistic explanation. It suggests only that there is no empirically confirmed explanation for the existence of life. Regardless, even if the myth is true, its veracity is not an essential part of the “myth,” but an “unprecedented bonus.” Because Perowne later says that “brain’s fundamental secret will be laid open one day” — meaning that the secret presently remains undiscovered — he must know that the full story is not yet “demonstrably true” (254). Perowne is conscious of his “myth” remaining what he calls it — a myth — and not something that is totally empirically verifiable.

Regardless of the myth’s total veracity, what is significant is that Perowne has found a beautiful and wholly naturalistic “creation myth” that does, as Daisy suggests, give meaning in the similar way to that of religious narratives. All throughout the novel Perowne reminds himself not of the truth of natural selection but of its “grandeur,” suggesting that the beauty of the natural world is a sort of religious-like anchor to meaning that he returns to again and again. After reading Darwin’s *Origin of Species* the night before, he awakens to the music of his wife’s shower radio. In his semi-wakeful state he hallucinates from the lyrics of the music a phrase from the final paragraph of



Darwin's book. "*There is grandeur in this view of life*, [the shower radio] says, over and over again" (53). Perowne "begins to sense a religious content as its significance swells" (53). The grandeur of the natural world inspires meaning on par with that of any religion – science has a "religious content."

Ian McEwan has written about the necessity of narrative to meaning and how we need something other than empirically verified truth — such as the beauty Perowne sees in science — to believe in. In his essay "End of the World Blues," he writes that rationalism has "yet to find an overarching narrative....to compete with the old stories that give meaning to people's lives." Naturalistic narratives of our origin might have an even larger purpose than giving a potentially factual origin story; like the science that makes the myth, the narratives become objects of beauty. As we have seen, undergirding almost every description of science that McEwan gives is an appreciation of beauty. The same applies to the narratives of science; they are meaningful not because they are true but because they are beautiful. McEwan writes in the same essay,

"Natural selection is a powerful elegant and economic explicator of life on earth in all its diversity and perhaps it contains the seeds of a rival creation myth that would have added power of being true but it awaits its inspired synthesizer, its poet, its Milton." (360).

What is lacking for McEwan is not the raw material – we do not need to refine the mythology; it is all there in the science – but a communicator to show how natural selection, as a creation myth, and, more broadly, a narrative built around rationalism, can give meaning to our lives. He thinks that beauty is more persuasive than truth.

Pointing to the beauty in science is a powerful argument that meaning is possible within a naturalistic framework because the beauty in science is not open only to naturalists. It becomes a compelling foundation for an argument because many people of

many different beliefs agree that the natural world is beautiful. C. S. Lewis sees the same beauty in science. Even though he himself believes “less than half of it,” he too is drawn to the naturalistic creation “myths.” In his essay “Is Theology Poetry?” — composed after his conversion to Christianity — he writes,

“Consider for a few moments the enormous aesthetic claim of [naturalism]. Is it not one of the finest myths which human imagination has yet produced? The play is preceded by the most austere of all preludes: the infinite void, and matter restlessly moving to bring forth it knows not what. Then, by the millionth millionth chance — what tragic irony — the conditions at one point of space and time bubble up into that tiny fermentation which is the beginning of life. Everything seems to be against the infant hero of our drama...But life somehow wins through...” (125-126)

Lewis, writing about eighty years after Darwin’s publication, recognizes that the theory of natural selection has many characteristics of a good story. He later suggests that even the end of the story — the inevitable death of our Sun — fills the myth with “grandeur.” “All ends in nothingness and universal darkness covers all. The pattern of the myth thus becomes one of the noblest we can conceive” (126). The narrative natural selection gives is not merely good, but “one of the noblest” that anyone could write. Lewis ends echoing almost exactly McEwan’s sentiments, sixty years before McEwan: “There is a beauty in this myth which well deserves better poetic handling than it has yet received; I hope some great genius will yet crystallize it...” (126). Thus, for Lewis, McEwan, and Perowne, there is a beauty to the creation myth that transcends its veracity.

However, the potential universality of the creation myth’s beauty forces the myth’s veracity into question. Lewis believes “less than half of it,” and Perowne, while he thinks that it is true, is more interested in how it gives him meaning. The argument for meaning from the beauty in science is effective because Perowne and Lewis value the

creation myth for the same reason. While they differ in regards its veracity, neither has truth as his foremost concern. They are more interested in beauty, and, by appealing to this common interest, the possibility for meaning through science exists for both because it does not require an empirical foundation. Perowne does not wonder at science because what is true happens to be beautiful and meaningful; he marvels at science because it gives beautiful and meaningful stories. Truth is merely a “bonus.”

The idea of submitting to an something because it is personally meaningful or beautiful, instead of because it is true, surfaces again in *Enduring Love*. There are instances in this novel in which scientific ideas are favored not because of their truth, but their “integral” beauty. In these situations, the wonder that science produces is more powerful than the truth of the science itself. This parallels Perowne’s affinity for natural selection, which he suggests would make a good “creation myth” not because of its truth, but for its narrative appeal. In *Enduring Love*, Joe gives the example of Einstein’s General Theory, “that gravitation was simply an effect caused by the curvature of space-time wrought by matter and energy” (52). The description of gravity as “simply an effect,” was beautiful because something previously thought to be chaotic became orderly. When it was tested empirically, “confirmation was flashed around the world, but inaccurate or inconvenient data were overlooked in the desire to embrace the theory.” The theory was “already in the textbooks” thirty years before there was “incontrovertible experimental verification.” There was a “desire” to “embrace” the idea before it was ever empirically proven because the theory was beautiful. Joe concludes, “its integral power was so great, it was too beautiful to resist” (53). People wanted to believe that Einstein’s General Theory was correct, and found meaning in it before it was empirically true. This

suggests that meaning, even if it is found in science, is not rooted primarily in rationality. We have a proclivity to accept things as true even if they are not proven to be true yet; our desire for beauty can lead us to compromise a commitment to total rationality.

The same idea surfaces later in the novel, in which, like Einstein's General Theory, the double helix structure of DNA is meaningful before it is proven true. At Clarissa's birthday party later in the novel, Joe tells the story of the discovery of DNA's structure to suggest that there is a connection between beauty and scientific truth. When Rosalind Franklin saw Crick and Watson's DNA model, "she said it was simply too beautiful not to be true..." (179). This is a perfect cue for Joe to give his gift to Clarissa, a first edition of Keats' first collection of poems. He quotes Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," saying, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty..." as he gives it to her (179). The beauty of the model was indicative of its truth for Franklin. Beauty becomes helpful in this instance because it highlights the intrinsic orderliness of the DNA molecules, leading to a true explanation of our genetic storage. While a desire to wonder at scientific beauty might lead us to believe things that are not empirically proven yet, beauty might also be a guide that helps us discover what can be proven true.

However, not all scientific theories are beautiful and not all that is beautiful is true. When this is the case, a desire for beauty and meaning can hinder scientific progress. Joe finds an example of a theory not accepted — a theory of quantum electrodynamics — and suggests that "the theory was unattractive, inelegant, it was a song sung out of tune. Acceptance withheld on grounds of ugliness" (53). If Joe's explanation is correct, the desire for beauty hindered the progress of science. This complicates the meaning that is found in scientific discoveries because it suggests that

instead of wondering at something that has the “unprecedented bonus of being demonstrably true,” we might be wondering at something that only has the appearance of being true. Instead of being grounded in truth, or empirical verifiability, meaning is found in what is beautiful, and the desire for beauty is so strong that it can lead to a compromise in truth.

By showing how Perowne finds wonder in the brain and in naturalistic explanations of our origins, McEwan shows how a naturalistic framework allows for meaning. The absence of God allows for a more compelling “creation myth” – instead of humans coming into existence immediately, there is a slow, long process that makes a compelling narrative of order emerging from chaos. However, McEwan also shows that a desire to experience wonder is often more powerful than the desire to understand something accurately. A desire for meaningful beauty can make us forget or ignore the boundary between fact and faith.

## Conclusion

### The Complication of the Convert

There wasn't really much else to do. Make something, and die. After the coffee he recrossed the room and remained standing, stooped over the keyboard in his overcoat, while he played with both hands by the exhausted afternoon light the notes as he had written them. Almost right, almost the truth. – Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*

While in the preceding chapters I have noted the occasional challenge to establishing meaning without any absolutes, the general idea has been that meaning is, in spite of some difficulties, achievable. However, in my conclusion, I want to show how in *The Children Act* McEwan complicates, possibly without the hope of any resolution, the challenge of finding meaning without God. In McEwan's work before *The Children Act*, problems of finding meaning without any absolutes – the problem of arbitrariness in deciding when love *matters*, the difficulty of understanding what a genuine response to beauty is, and the potential for a proclivity to wonder to obfuscate scientific progress – have not been terminal. While there are some difficulties, they do not pose insurmountable challenges, and most of his characters are satisfied with the meaning found in the natural world. However, *The Children Act* paints a very different picture, suggesting that when one is transitioning from a supernatural framework (in this case, that of a Jehovah's Witness) to an atheistic one, it is possible for all the previous

resources of meaning that McEwan has proposed – art, music, literature, education – to fail.

Fiona, the protagonist in *The Children Act*, feels as if life is meaningless whenever she considers the absence of any absolutes. Before she makes her decision in Adam's case – whether or not to force him to have a blood transfusion in violation of his faith – she visits him in the hospital and responds nihilistically to a poem that he reads her. He has written about how “Satan's hammer” (his leukemia) will “flatten his soul into a sheet of gold that reflects God's love on everyone” (113). The poem – essentially a consolation if Adam, refusing a transfusion, dies – leaves Fiona feeling “unpleasantly light-headed, emptied out, all meaning gone” (116). She falls briefly into nihilism:

“The blasphemous notion came to her that it didn't much matter either way whether the boy lived or died. Everything would be much the same. Profound sorrow, bitter regret perhaps, fond memories, then life would plunge on and all three would mean less and less as those who loved him aged and died, until they meant nothing at all.” (116)

The finitude of life, while giving meaning to Adam (who does not see it as finite to begin with) leads to meaninglessness for Fiona.

This is not unusual for Fiona; her experiences with other cases sometimes make her look at life from a wholly naturalistic perspective. When she recalls a case about conjoined twins, “She saw in the remembered pictures of Matthew and Mark a blind and purposeless nullity” (31). There is nothing meaningful behind the twins' lives. “No cruelty, nothing avenged, no ghost moving in mysterious ways,” she continues. “A process of natural wastage as indifferent as it was pointless. Which only brought into relief healthy, perfectly formed life, equally contingent, equally without purpose” (31). There is nothing more to life than that which is physical, and life is meaningless. Because

she feels like life is meaningless, when she encounters Adam, she does not feel like it is fair for her to be the judge of this situation. In the absence of all moral absolutes, it is not clear that she is morally right – or that there is any “morally right” thing – to force Adam to do anything. “Religions, moral systems, her own included, were like peaks in a dense mountain range seen from a great distance, none obvious higher, more important, truer than another. What was to judge?” (116). Her use of the word *what* suggests that she does not think that there is anyone who can judge. It also suggests that there is no higher standard – no absolute, no real, useful definition of *good* or *evil* – that could suggest that a certain action, such as Adam taking a blood transfusion to avoid death, is better than any other. Neither a person, nor any idea of goodness, could judge. As we saw previously in Nietzsche, the absence of absolutes leads to nihilism.

Whenever Fiona is about to leave, an aesthetic experience makes her feel meaning again. The aesthetic experience that she has is so powerful that it makes her feel that Adam’s life, and her own, have value. The sharp contrast that McEwan gives us – her nihilistic thoughts are detailed right before her experience with music – suggests that he is trying to emphasize how powerful and effective the aesthetic experience is for her. She sees a violin on Adam’s hospital bed and mentions it to “turn the conversation away from his condition” (118). As he plays Benjamin Britten’s setting of Yeats’ poem “Down by the Sally Gardens,” she is deeply moved:

“The melancholy tune and the manner in which it was played, so hopeful, so raw, expressed everything she was beginning to understand about the boy. She knew by heart the poet’s words of regret. *But I, being young and foolish...* hearing Adam play stirred her, even as it baffled her. To take up the violin or any instrument was an act of hope, it implied a future.” (119)

Again, as it was for Baxter when he heard Arnold’s poem and Perowne when he listens to



the blues, aesthetic experiences bring hope. His “performance, his look of straining dedication” and “the scratchy inexperienced sounds he made, so expressive of guileless longing,” move Fiona so deeply that “to contain the emotion she felt,” she mentions a mistake Adam made in reading the music (120). By pointing the incorrect note out to Adam, she reveals how overcome she is by Adam’s playing: she does not even know what to say, and almost tries to reduce her experience into the technical elements that produced it, making it less meaningful and easier for her to understand. She offers to sing with him and he accompanies her on his violin. As a result of the music, she becomes the opposite of nihilistic, believing now that her own moral peak is higher than the Jehovah’s Witnesses’. Her earlier thoughts questioning the value of his life, or the importance of her decision, are gone when she listens to him playing the violin and when she sings with him.

Adam is initially as receptive to the meaning that the experience gives him as Fiona is. Months after their initial encounter, Fiona receives a letter from Adam that talks about his loss of faith (he has symbolically put his Bible “out in the hall facedown on a chair”) and remembers their experience with music:

“I feel like you’ve brought me close to something else, something really beautiful and deep, but I don’t really know what it is. You never told me what you believed in, but I loved it when you came and sat with me and we did ‘The Sally Gardens.’” (145)

Adam had the same experience of meaning that Fiona did. Even if he cannot explain what the experience “brought [him] close to,” he knows that it is meaningful and is grateful to Fiona for saving his life. In the months after the transfusion, he continues to play the violin and read poetry. He boasts to Fiona in another letter, “I can almost get through this piece by Bach without a mistake. I can do the theme from *Coronation Street*. I’ve been

reading Berryman's *Dream Songs*. I'm going to be in a play, and I've got to do all my exams before Christmas. And thanks to you I'm full of Yeats!" (170). He is excited about his artistic endeavors, playing the violin, poetry, and acting. He is also progressing well in school, which suggests that he is most likely being exposed to, among other disciplines, science, which gives meaning to Perowne and Joe. All of these things fill Adam with hope – he is looking forward to a future full of aesthetic experiences that give meaning to him.

However, aesthetic experience gives meaning to Adam only transiently. He has all of the resources at his disposal that other characters in McEwan's novels have – literature, music, education – but, unlike them, he does not derive meaning from them. When the leukemia returns, Adam, now eighteen and allowed by law to make his own medical decisions, refuses a transfusion. His lungs fill with blood and he drowns. Whether or not Adam's death is a suicide or the result of actual religious convictions remains uncertain. Either case, though, would indicate that he could not establish meaning within a naturalistic framework that did not require interpretation; if he commits suicide, he is nihilistic, and if he has returned to his faith, he uses the supernatural to find meaning. Thus, even though Adam enjoys many aesthetic experiences as both an artist and an observer, he does not think that they alone give sufficient meaning to life.

It is only after Adam's death that Fiona realizes that his visit represented a crisis of meaning. Fiona thinks that his death is a suicide and attributes it to his inability to find meaning (218). He came to her in Newcastle "wanting what everyone wanted, and what only free-thinking people, not the supernatural, could give. Meaning" (220). But she does not give it to him: "Without faith, how open and beautiful and terrifying the world must

have seemed to him...Adam came looking for her and she offered nothing in religion's place, no protection" (220). While Fiona thinks that the supernatural could not give meaning, and that the world must have been "beautiful" (even if it is also terrifying) without religion, she does not explain how Adam could have experienced meaning without God. Even though she is convinced of the superiority of naturalism to give atheism meaning, she does not articulate her position – McEwan leaves uncertain whether this is because she lacks the ability or does not recognize its importance to Adam – when she most needs to.

However, Adam's inability to take Fiona's view – that something could be inherently meaningful without being connected to the transcendent – may have been due to the difficulties that come with changing his mind about what he believes. Instead of finding Fiona's view insufficient, Adam may have failed to find meaning because he realized that all sources of meaning are grounded in uncertainty. The act of conversion – deciding that previous beliefs were wrong – may lead to questions about the possibility of any interpretation being correct. We see this when he follows Fiona to Newcastle and tells her that he now recognizes the "foolishness" of his newly forsaken faith. However, he does not have anything to replace it. "...[O]nce you take a step back from the Witnesses, you might as well go all the way. Why replace one tooth fairy with another?" (171). No "tooth fairy" – belief – is better than any other. Adam, to some extent, becomes a postmodernist: Rejecting all meta-narratives, he questions everything and nothing has inherent value. As a result, he can find meaning in nothing. Nietzsche considers the difficulty of conversions and finding meaning in other ways in *The Will to Power*:

"The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism.

‘Everything lacks meaning’ (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false).” (7)

Once Adam questioned his own interpretation of the world, his “suspicion” was “awakened” that any other interpretation might be false. He could not establish meaning from a naturalistic standpoint because meaning – by its subjective nature – requires that he interpret something. Nietzsche seems to have been correct – the recognized “untenability” of an idea has the potential to lead to nihilism.

Without the possibility of an interpretation, and the sort of “suspension of disbelief” that is required to designate things as irreducible and inherently meaningful, nihilism seems to be the inevitable and logical result. Perowne, Joe, and Fiona find meaning precisely because they are willing, as McEwan has stated he is, to *believe* in certain ideas like love, beauty, and wonder. But whenever one submits to pure reason, whenever literature is removed from our “common nature,” leaving only logical explanations, nihilism results. When Adam suggests that he should not merely exchange his Jehovah’s Witness faith for another “tooth fairy,” Fiona replies, “Perhaps everyone needs tooth fairies” (171). We need some sort of belief to avoid nihilism, and when atheism allows for meaning, it calls upon more than logical explanations. The difference between atheism (that is not nihilistic) and theism becomes less of a matter of belief and more of a question of what we decide is irreducible. For the theist, reductionism ends at God; for the non-nihilistic atheist, it ends somewhere before we encounter the ultimate (because there is no ultimate). For both, there is some version of faith, some “suspension of disbelief” that opens up the non-empirical for us to find meaning. What Samuel Coleridge writes in his *Biographia Literaria* may apply not only to reading the poems he

contributed to his *Lyrical Ballads*, but to all of life:

“...my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.” (C. XIV)

For McEwan and all of the New Atheists who argue powerfully for meaning, it is not “persons and characters supernatural” written into poetry that they believe in. Instead, it is in love, in beauty, and in wonder experienced in their lives. Even though these things are not empirical and cannot be accounted for by logic or science, they bear to the New Atheists enough “semblance of truth” that a “willing suspension of disbelief” in their logical faculties allows them to experience meaning and seems not to contradict their commitments to rationality. If Adam had been able to suspend his disbelief, not in God, but in the meaningful beauty of music, perhaps his life would have been saved. The New Atheists, though – and McEwan’s Joe, Perowne, and Fiona with them – try to be rational and then proceed to have a “poetic faith,” not in God or life after death, but in the sated meaningfulness of our earthly pleasures: in love, in beauty, and in wonder. By this act of belief, the natural world – and not the supernatural – can be an abundant source of meaning.

However, this act of belief is complicated, bringing with it just as many questions and uncertainties as it solves. *Saturday* ends as Perowne lies down in bed at the end of a long day full of many of the things that make his life meaningful: He has made love to his wife, enjoyed the blues and classical music, and experienced the beauty of the brain firsthand. As he goes to sleep, he thinks, “There’s only this” (289). For Perowne, *this* is, in the words of Christopher Hitchens, “wondrous enough.” But McEwan knows that for

some of us – Adam, for example – *this* wholly natural world is not enough to give meaning. There is another level of arbitrariness introduced. While my previous chapters have suggested that we decide when love is real and when beauty matters, it seems like we also decide when these things are enough, when we have achieved or experienced enough love, beauty, or wonder to say that our lives are meaningful. Such a decision may not be totally voluntary, in the same way that Baxter’s response to the poem might have been as much a symptom of a disease as much as it was an effect of beauty. Some of us can lead lives that feel personally meaningful without the sort of transcendent meaning that belief in God gives, and some of us cannot.

Thus, while McEwan challenges the idea that atheism is inevitably nihilistic, he also brings into question the universality of the meaning that the natural world can provide. Nevertheless, we can bridge the gap between “only this” and meaning with belief. Such belief might be in God, love, beauty or wonder, but it will always be something that is beyond the empirically verifiable. Whatever we choose to believe, this leap beyond knowledge, into the realm of faith, brings with it its own challenges. In any case, it seems that regardless of what meets the criteria of “wondrous enough” for each of us, we might all agree that the conditions of belief are more bearable than the nihilism that exists in its absence.

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