

ture. Not coincidentally, the cultural debates, however attenuated, still conjure the ghosts of utopia by raising issues of personal autonomy, power, and the right to enjoy rather than slog through life. In telling contrast, the contemporary left has not posed class questions in these terms; on the contrary, it has ceded the language of freedom and pleasure, "opportunity" and "ownership," to the libertarian right.

Our culture of images notwithstanding, it cannot fairly be said that Americans' capacity for fantasy is impaired, even if it takes sectar-

ian and apocalyptic rather than utopian forms. If anxiety is the flip side of desire, perhaps what we need to do is start asking ourselves and our fellow citizens what we want. The answers might surprise us. ●

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A Queasy Agnosticism

Richard Rorty

SATURDAY

by Ian McEwan

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ONCE THEY COULD no longer believe in the immortality of the soul, many Westerners substituted the project of improving human life on Earth for that of getting to Heaven. Hoping for the achievement of Enlightenment ideals took the place of yearning to see the face of God. Spiritual life came to center around movements for social change, rather than around prayer or ritual.

Most of those who made that switch took for granted that the West would retain its hegemony long enough to bring liberty, equality, and fraternity to the rest of the planet. But that hegemony is over. The West has reached its acme; it is as rich and powerful as it is going to get. Even the United States of America can deploy military power only by risking bankruptcy. The American Century has ended, and the Chinese Century has begun. America, while in the saddle, did more good than harm. Nobody knows what China will do—least of all the Chinese.

Yet economic and military decline is not the only problem for the West. It may be frightened

into renouncing its ideals even before it loses its influence. Suppose a dirty nuclear bomb, hidden in the bowels of a container ship, were exploded in San Francisco Bay. Could a free press and an independent judiciary survive martial law? Would Germany remain a constitutional democracy if such a bomb went off at the Hamburg docks? The first terrorists to containerize a stolen nuclear warhead may be able to preen themselves on having demolished institutions that took two centuries to build.

In the course of those centuries, Western idealists swung back and forth between exuberance and desperation. The first is captured by Alfred Tennyson in "Locksley Hall":

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range.

Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.

Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day:

Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.

But when things go badly we reread Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach":

... we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In early 1914 it was still possible to be con-

fident that, given another fifty years of Europe, the world would be transformed, and greatly improved. But as the twentieth century piled up its catastrophes, more and more writers told us it would be foolish to hope. "It is closing time in the gardens of the West," Cyril Connolly wrote just before the Second World War, "and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair." But Connolly was wrong. The war turned out better than he had any reason to expect. Even Auschwitz did not stop successive postwar generations from thinking that the world might still, under Western guidance, sweep forward into a younger day.

But the postwar impetus has faltered, and the attacks of September 11, 2001, have made us realize how unlikely it is that the West will be able to determine the world's future. It is dawn-ing on non-Western nations that their fates will rest with Beijing rather than with Washington. How long Europeans and Americans have to stroll the gardens depends upon how long keeping them open remains in the interests of Cathay.

The tragedy of the modern West is that it exhausted its strength before being able to achieve its ideals. The spiritual life of secular-ist Westerners centered on hope for the realization of those ideals. As that hope diminishes, their life becomes smaller and meaner. Hope is restricted to little, private things—and is increasingly being replaced by fear.

THIS CHANGE is the topic of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, One of the characters—Theo, the eighteen-year-old son of Henry Perowne, the middle-aged neurosurgeon who is the novel's protagonist—says to his father,

When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in—you know, a girl I've just met, or this song we are doing with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto—think small.

John Banville, who, in the *New York Review of Books*, finds the novel a distressing failure, says that this "might also be the motto of McEwan's book." But thinking small is not the

novel's motto; it is its subject. McEwan is not urging us to think small. He is reminding us that we are increasingly tempted to do so. Banville is off the mark yet again when he says that "the politics of the book is banal." The book does not have a politics. It is about our inability to have one—to sketch a credible agenda for large-scale change.

Saturday has an epigraph from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* that speaks of "the late failure of radical hopes." McEwan's long quotation from one of Moses Herzog's soliloquies ends, "The beautiful supermachinery opening a new life for innumerable mankind. Would you deny them the right to exist? Would you ask them to labor and go hungry while you yourself enjoyed old-fashioned Values? You—you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot. There, Herzog, thought Herzog, since you ask for the instance, is the way it runs."

The problem for good-hearted Westerners like Henry Perowne is that they seem fated to live out their lives as idiots (in the old sense of "idiot," in which the term refers to a merely private person, one who has no part in public affairs). They are ingrates and dilettantes—ingrates because their affluence is made possible by the suffering of the poor and dilettantes because they are no longer able to relate thought to action. They cannot imagine how things could be made better.

But secular Western liberals would still like to think of themselves as brothers to all the rest. So when Henry encounters a man of his own age energetically sweeping the gutters near his home, he muses that "His vigor and thoroughness are uncomfortable to watch, a quiet indictment on a Saturday morning." But his only response to this indictment is to think,

How restful it must have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life. And not to see how the belief served your own prosperity . . . Now we think we do see, how do things stand? After the ruinous experiments of the recently deceased century, after so much vile behavior, so many deaths, a queasy agnosticism has settled around these matters of justice and redistributed wealth. No more big ideas. The world

must improve, if at all, by tiny steps. People mostly take an existential view—having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck. It's not a visionary age. The streets need to be clean. Let the unlucky enlist.

After the ruinous experiments, after the late failure of radical hopes, it has become hard to find inspiration in a vision of a just, free, global community. It remained a visionary age, and an intense spiritual life remained possible for secularized Westerners, only as long as it seemed possible to take more than tiny steps. Even if we have some middle-sized ideas about how to make things better—narrowing the income gap between gray-haired neurosurgeons and gray-haired gutter-sweepers, for example—we have no plausible ideas about how to alleviate “the political situation, global warming, world poverty.”

Even if we got some new big ideas, it seems unlikely that we would have time to implement them. For our cities are vulnerable. As the novel begins, Henry looks out his bedroom window and sees a jetliner in flames. It is flying along the Thames and may perhaps swerve and hit the old Post Office Tower. If the Tower falls, it will crush Henry and his family.

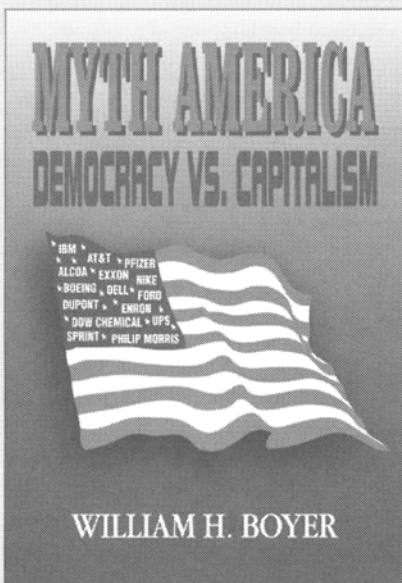
The plane turns out to be harmless, but later in the day Perowne thinks, “The

government's counsel—that an attack in a European or American city is an inevitability—isn't only a disclaimer of responsibility, it's a heady promise. Everyone fears it, but there's also a darker longing in the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a blasphemous curiosity.” We sicken for self-punishment because of the guilt that comes from being able to do little and being unable to imagine doing more, either for gutter-sweepers in London or for children in Guatemalan sweatshops. We feel that our world does not deserve to last, because it is so irredeemably unjust.

Perowne's reflections are embedded within a plot that turns on a chance, and potentially fatal, encounter with a thug named Baxter. Baxter, as it happens, is in the early stages of a devastating disease—Huntington's Chorea. Perowne recognizes the symptoms. He avoids being beaten senseless by telling Baxter, falsely, that he may be able to provide a cure. Later in the day, however, a freshly enraged Baxter invades Perowne's home, accompanied by a subordinate thug. The two force Perowne's daughter to strip naked and hold a knife to his wife's throat. The talented, decent, generous Perowne family is in deadly danger.

Then, manifesting the quirky mood-switch-

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ing whimsicality that is one of the symptoms of his disease, Baxter picks up the naked daughter's freshly published volume of poems from a table and orders her to recite one of them. Her grandfather, himself a distinguished poet, intervenes and tells her, in cryptic language, to recite "Dover Beach" instead. She does so, and, miraculously, it works. Baxter's mood switches again: he is overcome by the sheer beauty of Arnold's lines. Now he can once again be tricked into believing that Henry will help him find a cure.

Baxter's failure to get on with raping and murdering infuriates his knife-wielding henchman, who walks out in disgust. That makes it feasible for young Theo to tackle Baxter, overcome him, and send for the police. Order and peace return to the Perowne house, the front windows of which look out upon "the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden—an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fiber-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting."

The jet plane in flames turned out to be harmless, and Baxter to be vulnerable. But such luck is unlikely to last. There will be other planes and other thugs. The world outside the West is full of both. Some non-Western thugs may be fobbed off with the beauty of an eighteenth-century dream, but hardly all. The mood of some may change, but others will stay the course. So, within Theo's lifetime, cool fresh water may cease to run beneath London. "The future,"

Perowne meditates, "will look back on us as gods, certainly in this city, lucky gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended life-spans, wondrous machines." But not only affluence will vanish; so will hope.

At one point in the novel Perowne tries to overcome what he thinks of as "the source of his vague sense of shame or embarrassment—his readiness to be persuaded that the world has changed beyond recall, that harmless streets like this and the tolerant life they embody can be destroyed by the new enemy." He tries to convince himself that "the world has not fundamentally changed. Talk of a hundred-year crisis is an indulgence. There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate changes, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger, poverty and the rest."

Maybe it will, or maybe 9/11 will prove to have been the harbinger of far more terrible events. Maybe the gardens will stay open for quite a while, or maybe they will close much sooner than we think. McEwan has no more certainty about these matters than do the rest of us. But his novel helps bring us up-to-date about ourselves. It makes vivid both our uneasiness about the future and our queasy, debilitating agnosticism about matters of justice and redistributed wealth.

RICHARD RORTY is a professor of comparative literature at Stanford University. His most recent book is *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

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